

Empty Gallery
3 Yue Fung Street
18th & 19th Floor
Tin Wan, Hong Kong

Transcendence

Amit Desai

March 5 - August 15, 2015

In the aftermath of the 2008 financial crisis, Desai returned to his home in Valley Stream, New York after ten years on the road. He had completed his photographic treatise "America Sutra", a seven volume meditation on the American dream. After finishing this work, Desai vowed to give up photography.

As the effects of the crisis deepened, like so many middle class American families, Desai experienced the reality of collapse at home. His father found himself on the edge of bankruptcy, unable to pay his mortgage on a pill coating factory in New Jersey that he had purchased before the meltdown of the subprime market.

Although he had abandoned photography, Desai felt moved to create one final series of photographs. He wanted to make a work that could express the feelings of America's sudden failure. He also felt an urgency to make use of his father's wasted factory and transfigure the burden and stress it was causing his family through art. So, Desai gathered his circle of friends from all 5 boroughs of New York City for one final shoot.

On a cold winter day in December, 2010, a cast of souls crossed the Hudson River to New Jersey and made their way to a small pill coating factory on 580 Rahway Avenue. In a mirrored room, Desai set up a disco ball, colored lights, a boom box and a smoke machine. One by one, everyone danced in front of a large format Toyo camera with Desai acting as master of ceremonies. He exorcised the demons of his father's struggle as they danced away the pressures of the crisis.

Desai's final shoot was an act of defiance in the face of disaster. Like Wallace Hartley and his eight man orchestra that played as the RMS Titanic was sinking, Desai and his New York City tribe refused to go down without one last dance. Even though the dream was shattered, there was still the transcendent beauty of courage and survival to be found everywhere.

The 19 images in this show are the culmination of Desai's photography. They are the closest he came to capturing human energy on film. Desai did not touch the camera on set. To keep his vow, he had a camera operator click the shutter on his command. This allowed Desai to work in a new and more direct way with his subjects. Without any apparatus between them, he was able to fully orchestrate the energy in the room. Desai worked with each subject, instructing their movements until they were open enough to channel the full spectrum of their souls. When the moment was ready, he simply said "disco" and the operator would make an exposure.

(These photographic prints were made using the traditional C-print chemical process at Greiger Lab in Dusseldorf, Germany. Dusseldorf is home of the Becher school of photography that traces its roots back to the preeminent German photographer August Sander).