



Ljubodrag Andric “India”

By Mona Zaidi, August 2019

Artist Ljubodrag Andric (right) and Art Critic Barry Schwabsky in conversation at Nicolas Metiver Gallery, Toronto, Canada. Photo by Mona Zaidi

My mother was born at the sacred confluence of the two great holy rivers of India, as was her mother before her. It is perhaps not surprising then, that when discussing Ljubodrag Andric’s “India” I would feel compelled to begin by establishing the context of our discussion, from the Indian perspective, by evoking the sacred image of water.

Let us conjure in the mind’s eye a vast pool, immeasurably deep, innumerable ripples moving across its shimmering surface. Moving closer, we are captivated by infinitesimal individual ripples rising and falling into the water. And now retreating back, further and further still, we find these tiny ripples disappearing into the greater pattern of the undulating water. Wave upon wave, one after another, reborn in endless cycle. Ever moving, ever changing. Ever birthed, ever dying.

Now imagine a great calm descending upon this selfsame pool. The surface becomes stilled, waves pacified, rippled surface smoothed. Suddenly, where just a moment ago there played a great pageant of rising and falling forms, we now find a still, transparent surface through which the mysterious depths that hitherto lay hidden are suddenly rendered visible - albeit through a glass, darkly.

With this image one may come to grasp something of the traditional Indian perspective on art: That, though the myriad, everchanging material forms of this visible world – human lives themselves mere ripples on surface of the pool – art is that great becalming through which we may peer into the unfathomable depths beyond the material plane; those depths from which all perceivable form arises and into which all form inevitably disappears.

Ultimately it is the aim of such art to *use form to point beyond form*; to that which lies beyond words, beyond the illusory confines of time and space, in order to open us to the experience of what Paramahansa Yogananda described as “a soundless state of breathless wonder”, or what James Joyce referred to as “aesthetic arrest”.

Thus, from the Indian perspective, art is not distinct from the great contemplative traditions of meditation and yoga, but rather it is a popular vehicle by which the numinous experiences of the meditative or yogic path may be communicated to even the uninitiated. In that function, it may serve as a means for the average individual to experience, if only for a moment, the elusive “intentional stopping of the mind” described in the Yoga Sutras of Patanjali over two thousand years ago.

With this characteristically Indian attitude towards art in mind, let us now draw our attention to the subject at hand.

Upon first encounter with Ljubodrag Andric’s “India”, one might be tempted to ask: Where is the India in this “India”? The images sit in serene repose, yet our ever-restless eye can find no easy subject upon which to settle its gaze; our ever-wandering mind no easy object upon which to cast its projection. Images devoid of the sarees, the bindis, the masses of people, the golden temples, the naked sadhus, the painted rickshaws. Or, in the language of Indian thought, images that are devoid of those myriad transient apparitions of form that render opaque the material plane of existence.



Ljubodrag Andric, "Jodhpur 1", 2019
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And where we had expected to find that great pageant of temporal forms, we find instead a conspicuously empty middle distance – a becalmed, transparent stillness through which we are invited to gaze.

Standing before the canvas: I, the observer, here. And there, at some measured distance from me, defining the limits of my gaze, I find a refined architectural structure, cast in such quintessentially earthly elements as stone and brick, composed with inference to the great classical traditions of Western art. A study in geometric balance, proportion, symmetry. In another time, such a composition would have been immediately recognizable as symbolic reference to the earthly and divine realms in balanced, harmonious accord. Significantly to this point, the light that illumines the images in Andric's "India" has no easily traceable source, lending the scene a preternaturally self-luminous, radiant quality. The effect is not a stopping of time, but rather a sense that we are no longer within the field of time: The artist presents a photograph captured within the field of eternity, so rendered as to seemingly hover in the air, colours and textures somehow more real than reality.

It is, in itself, quite a fascinatingly subversive use of the medium of photography - otherwise synonymous with the instantaneous capture of a *particular* moment of time at a *particular* position in space - to attempt to capture that which lies beyond both. It renders Andric's work transcendent of the social or political; these images do not propose a temporal relationship to the viewer, offering us instead a purely aesthetic one. Our senses are put into relationship with the colour, texture, visual harmony and radiance of the image itself. The artist uses form to free us from the fleeting, temporal, illusory concerns normally evoked by form. In India it would be said that such an artist has harnessed the great revealing power of Maya: Illusion rendered not to beguile or mislead, but instead, it is illusion rendered in the service of illumination - the highest form of artistic endeavor.

The effect of standing before the images immediately brings to mind the Bodhidharma.

According to legend, the revered 6th century Indian sage sat in silent meditation before a wall for nine years. For nine years, so it is said, his eyes remained open, gaze fixed upon that wall. And much like the great Buddha before him, the Bodhidharma remained fixed to his immovable spot, swayed by neither desire nor fear. In other words, he had removed from his own middle distance all the worldly forms that lead to desire for object, or fear of subject. All that remained was he, the great stillness of that empty expanse, and, at some measured distance, a wall.

And so we return to answer the question posed at the beginning of our discussion. Where is the India in Andric's "India"? From the perspective of the traditions of India, I would answer thus: As we allow the images to work upon us, we soon find ourselves standing before a still, empty middle distance, uncluttered by the transient forms of this world, and, at some measured distance, we find a multitude of luminous variations of the Bodhidharma's sublime wall. And through this work we are opened to the great realization that, whatever your *particular* position in material space at a *particular* moment in worldly time, you stand before eternity. In the words of great 15th century Indian mystic poet Kabir, "Wherever you are is the entry point".

Let us now linger before this image, before this great emptiness in the middle distance, bound ultimately by the wall of this mute, self-luminous, manmade structure of such earthly solidity. By defining the limits of our gaze, the artist seems to recognize that any rendering of that which lies within the realm of eternity has a limit beyond which our rational consciousness cannot penetrate, even as we conjecture an infinite horizon that lies just out of sight. The ultimate mystery remains a mystery that we may infinitely approach but never truly solve; The ultimate depths of that unfathomable pool into which we gaze remain obscure, even when the surface is made still and clear. So that, even when we see, we see but through a glass darkly, indeed.

Standing before Ljubodrag Andric's work, I find myself taking a step closer. And by some magic of colour and composition, as I move towards the image, the image seems also to move towards me. I am immediately reminded of sitting on my mother's knee so many years ago, and hearing it said that in India when you take one step toward the divine, the divinity answers by taking a hundred steps towards you.

Ljubodrag Andric is an internationally renowned photographic artist. For more information about the artist please visit: <http://www.ljubodrag-andric.com/>

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