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C O M M U N I Q U E

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In Advance of the Landing: Folk Concepts of Outer Space

Doug Curran



Ruth Norman heads the Unarius Educational Foundation, preparing Earth for the arrival of spaceships from the Intergalactic Confederation. El Cajon, California, Dec., 1980

ted. In Indian photography there are no traditions like that of the portrait, for example, which is dominated 19th century Western photography. Instead, there are some parallels to various conventions in Indian painting, especially in terms of the treatment of space. Outman reproduces some Indian miniature as comparative devices in this regard. Space is not perceived or represented in an Indian photograph in any necessarily direct relation to space in our physical and perceived world. It can look very flat, with no vanishing points. One of the most famous and striking examples embodying these characteristics is a photograph from 1881 of a charging elephant, viewed from behind, so that its body and the space around it are conflated.

Comparatively, says Outman, Indian photography tend to have no 'center', no focal point, but instead, our eyes jump among a multitude of points of interest throughout the picture. A strong example of the phenomenon is a photograph of a man standing beneath various stretched animal skins on a wall, which form Eucharist-like patterns all around him. At times, the author points out, one finds it impossible to see or take in the whole space of a photograph at once, and multiple viewpoints or perspectives seem to be in play. This is the case in a photograph from c. 1880 of the Palace of Salar Jung, in which one part of the picture must be viewed at a time in order to be able to see it at all. Sometimes images optically pop right out from the page and the eye has no path by which to travel back into them.

These photographs span the same period as Western historical photography: the first camera was brought to Calcutta in 1845, just seven months after Daguerre introduced photography to Paris in 1839. Most of the photographs reproduced in *Through India Eye* do not have a high art look to them, in Western

terms, due to all the lenses mentioned. This is most true of the photographs which have been printed. Several of these crude, grainy, ultimately frame works are reproduced in color in the center of the book.

Photography in India, one learns from Outman, has been far less a matter of reality than a tool for creating Hindu philosophy and metaphysics. As a body of work, historical photographs from India form a striking contrast to our own tradition, and, if only seen as bits of this, *Through India Eye* is well worth paging through.

Lo Wyle



A Certain Identity: 50 Portraits

San Yata,
Dennis Peltzman, Ottawa,
Ottawa, 1983, 72 pp.,
softcover, \$12.95

Unlike some of his colleagues-photographers, Montrealer San Yata never wastes his chosen profession. When he talks about portraits, he makes it sound new. "The main thing," he says, "is the rapport between the photographer and the sitter."

In his first book of portraits, *A Certain Identity*, it's evident that Yata has a knack for establishing a warm rapport with the Canadian artists, writers and other members of the nation's cultural community who are his favorite subjects — and who frequently become his friends as well.

As an critic Geoffrey James explains in his foreword to the book, Yata always takes the time to put the man and woman he's going to photograph at ease. He introduces them to his studio, gets tea, says stories about the place he's been, the character he's run into.

Then, when he does take out his camera, a Leica with a moderately wide-angle lens, he doesn't switch on his light or

back commands. As Yata himself puts it, "They're not circus performers, and I'm not a circus master. I shoot very lightly, very broadly. I will not put people into poses they're not used to."

That Leonard Cohen knew again the value of his back porch, Clark Blaise stands casually in his living room, a half-eaten apple in his hand. Maria Callas — who remarked to someone after the portrait session that Yata "was the most agreeable man I've met in years" — sits in an armchair in her Paris apartment.

Occasionally Yata highlights his subject by showing the background out of focus or leaving it in darkness. The style of portrait — seen in a friendly study of Irving Lerner — is effective in the original, but it suffers in the printing of *A Certain Identity*, which reduces subtle details that are areas to derive much meaning. For the most part, though, Yata focuses on fully delineated portraits, and these few better in reproduction.

Rather than isolating people from their familiar surroundings and the tools of their trade, Yata incorporates these into his portraits, just as the expressions on the subjects' faces, the stances they assume and the clothes they wear all reveal facets of their personalities, as do the paintings, books, plants and furniture around them. Yata frequently plays on juxtapositions to capture idiosyncrasies or irony. Bob Brian Moore's open face and his dog's nose suspiciously gaze unconsciously into images in a painting on the wall above the sofa they're sitting on, while a haggard, unshined looking Robert Frank seems unaware of a menacing hand on a power behind him.

At first glance, Yata's photographs seem quite simple, as unpretentious as the photographer himself. Yet they're subtly skilled in the way they strike a balance between the formal and the candid. The design is strong but rarely overpowering. The subjects

are relaxed, yet Yata has not reduced them to homely, identifiable commoners.

What's so refreshing about *A Certain Identity* — which has a crisp design by Austin Metz — is that Yata does not monumentalize or heroize his subjects the way other portraitists, like Yousuf Karsh, do. He presents them as entirely real people. "There has to be something about the portrait," Yata points out, "that makes you say that this is the man you know, that is the man as he appears to his friends." Yata's portraits achieve that with dignity and grace.

Louise Albert



Mario Giacomelli

The Friends of Photography,
Camel, California, 1983;
48 pp.; softcover, \$16 U.S.

Readers of this magazine will be familiar with Mario Giacomelli through the images from *Verrà la morte e avrà i tuoi occhi* (Death will come it will have your eyes) which were published in the Spring 1983 issue. Others may know his work from the occasional exhibition, article or reproduction that has appeared in the past few years, but generally he is known to photographic audiences more by reputation than through wide exposure. Recognition, particularly in North America, has come relatively late; thus the appearance of *Mario Giacomelli*, released by the Friends of Photography in California as number thirty-two in their continuing series of photographic publications, is most welcome.

This volume has a preface by James Alinder, an informative introduction by Stephen Brigidi and Claire V.C. Peeps and a chronology; it reproduces forty Giacomelli photographs, drawn from several of his major projects. Included are selections from the *Paesaggio* (Landscape), *La Buona Terra* (The Good Earth), *Pretini* (Little Priests), *La Gente del Sud*

(People of the South) and *Verrà la morte...* essays, which represent a good cross-section of his total output to date.

The work is usually interesting, often compelling, sometimes annoying, but always absolutely committed. The *Paesaggio* series, which has occupied Giacomelli's attention for longer than any of his other projects, is the strongest work here: these passionate, contrasty prints span an incredible range, from crude to subtle and from relatively 'straight' to highly manipulated. (In addition to making radical changes in tone value while printing, Giacomelli has taken to doing handwork on his negatives or on the landscape itself, plowing it with a tractor and sometimes photographing from the air). The results take the geometrical forms of Italian hills and farmlands through a remarkable transformation — this is a cubist landscape, rough around the edges, and vastly different from the Italy photographed by Paul Strand or Emmet Gowin.

La Buona Terra and *La Gente del Sud* are in some respects logical extensions of the *Paesaggio* work, as they deal with people in relation to the landscape and with lives dedicated to cultivation of the soil, but neither project is as successful. Some images — the famous "Scanno, 1959", (p. 42), a village scene with an out-of-focus figure staring toward the camera from the edge of the frame (p. 40) and two photographs of farming groups (pp. 33 and 46), one of women and children in the fields, the other of families passing by a haystack in late afternoon — are very powerful. Others are naive, trite or even banal, and this contrast weakens the work rather than contributing dramatic tension. These comments also apply to the reproductions from the *Pretini* series, which unfortunately come across badly in comparison with the best images from the other groupings.

It is also true that Giaco-

melli's work can be raw and primitive. Some may find these qualities objectionable, but the same criticisms can be made of many photographs by Robert Capa, Bill Brandt or Josef Koudelka; and rawness, when it serves an expressive purpose, is far preferable to mannerism or emotional sterility. In this computer age maybe it isn't so bad to be human, fallible or a less-than-

perfect artist. It does not seem that Giacomelli is trying to get away with casual technique or sloppy vision, and whether one responds to his emotionalism or not, his sincerity is never in question. Neither is his love for the earth and his feeling for the people who farm it, and given the ecological destructiveness now occurring on such a large scale, some excess in the service of a state-

ment about landscape can readily be forgiven.

One assumes that in due course Giacomelli's work will be made more accessible by publication of a major monograph; certainly his career appears headed in that direction. In the meantime, however, this book fills a big gap; and it does so at an entirely reasonable price.

Don Snyder ◀◀

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