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# Fashion and identity in India

By **Purnima Ruanglertbutr** - April 30, 2015

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## ***RMIT hosts two different exhibitions on India this month***

The dichotomy between high fashion and the textiles worn by villagers in rural India is explored in two current exhibitions at RMIT Gallery: 'The Banaras Backs', a photography exhibition by Terry Burrows, and 'Unfolding: New Indian Textiles', curated by Maggie Baxter.

The exhibition, 'Unfolding: New Indian Textiles', displays an array of mesmerising, elegant and flamboyant textiles produced by artisans from homes, workshops, villages and factories across India. Director and Chief Curator of RMIT Gallery, Suzanne E. Davies, says the aim of the exhibition is to showcase the 21<sup>st</sup> century application of Indian craftsmanship to an international audience.

Australian artist, public art coordinator, and independent curator, Maggie Baxter developed the exhibition to coincide with her new book on contemporary Indian textiles. Baxter has spent more than two decades in India, working closely with traditional crafts in the Kutch region of North West India since 1990.

On display are stunning cashmere shawls and *duppatas*, *saris*, *bandhanis*, skirts and blouses among an array of other traditional Indian clothing that represents a highly innovative, fashion-conscious application of fabric that caters to the new and young generation of Indians. The works exude a celebration of colour that resonates with contemporary 21<sup>st</sup> century presentation of cloth. Davies proudly asserts that the pieces combine fine art objects and street craft based works, which reinforces the strength of the craftsmen's technical accomplishment and India's capacity for innovation. Notable designers featured in the exhibition include Monica Correa, Meera Mehta, Smallshop, Raw Mango, Akaaro and Kirit Dave among many more.

Whilst Indian textiles are often celebrated in the Western world as 'fine art', in India textiles are rarely considered as fine art objects. Rather, they are viewed as an ordinary part of culture – in fact, rarely does a buyer of a piece of cloth know the name of its creator. This exhibition highlights the symbiotic relationship between fashion and textiles. It is unique in that it shifts the focus from the wearers of textiles, to the makers themselves, emphasising the perfection and techniques of the craft that are essential to keeping India's inherited knowledge of textile formation alive.

"Indian textile designers are the envy of the rest of the world because they continue to have close, easy contact with all manner of hand production and crafts rarely available elsewhere," says Maggie Baxter.

The interrelation and juxtaposition between this exhibition and 'The Banaras Backs' is seamless. The pristine white walls in the 'The Banaras Backs' Gallery space instantaneously invites viewers to feel the pure, meditative and transient reverie experienced by the people sitting or squatting on the Ghats along the banks of the river Ganges in Varanasi.

At first sight, viewers may feel quite distanced by the lines of torsos in the photographs, as the subjects' backs are repeatedly turned towards the viewer. Indeed, as arts writer Anne Finegan describes, the mostly male portraits are "strangely impersonal". However, in the process of our deciphering the people as individuals, we can gauge the different aspects of identity suggested by their attire – culture, status, profession and religion – collectively, these conjure a kaleidoscope of cultural wealth, caste distinctions and socio-economic circumstances of those in contemporary India.

Modern India is represented in the concoction of bare backs, the traditional clothes of *sadhus*, turbans, intricate woven shawls, Muslim *topis*, and western-style dress such as knitted jumpers, bomber jackets and baseball caps. Undeniably, the uniting thread that weaves these photographs together is the blatant factor of poverty – the apparel of the poor are marked, soiled and ragged. Yet, we occasionally catch a glimpse of the better-off citizens within the sea of believers.

Additionally, the photographs highlight the numerous ways of sitting and contemplating. These pilgrims, locals, or tourists are all pictured gazing into the horizon of the river, suggesting that they are all free to sit and experience the sublime. Their posture expresses the vivid thoughts that could be lingering inside their minds. They breathe an intense devotional prayer, mediation, a focus on the activities of others, or a curious state regarding the future ahead. The contrast of traditional religious ritual amidst contemporary street life is fascinating and photographer Terry Burrows argues it is particularly portrayed within Hinduism.

A sense of calm and serenity reverberates in the Gallery space, yet, as viewers, we can't help but ponder upon the emotions of the people – are they feeling wonder, sadness, anger, distress? Or could they possibly feel the tranquility that the viewers do? In this largely male-dominated locale, we can't help but wonder where all the women are.

Since his first visit to the area in 2005, Terry Burrows has been fascinated by the domestic and religious activities along the Ghats of Varanasi – the city of Shiva, one of India's most revered sites of Hindu ritual. The large photographic prints in the exhibition have been selected from Burrows' series of 1,008 photographs featured in his catalogue, *The Banaras Back Book*. The photographs were captured during his five-month residency at the Kriti Gallery in Varanasi in 2010-11. A selection of the Banaras Back photographs have also been featured in Udarta/Kindness, an exhibition and publication celebrating 20 years of artistic and cultural exchange between Australia and India, launched at the Habitat Centre in Delhi, DFAT in Canberra and RMIT Gallery in Melbourne in 2012.

Burrows' trips to India have also influenced his artistic practice in Australia, resulting in a series of projects that have been exhibited in India, such as Ghat by Ghat, a series of paintings exhibited at the Kriti Gallery in Varanasi, and the Nandalal Bose Gallery in the Rabindranath Tagore Centre in Calcutta, in 2011, the latter being a collaboration between Kriti Gallery, the Australian High Commission in Delhi and the Indian Council for Cultural Relations. Other highlights in Australia include *Ganga Dancing*, a video work which featured at Parramasala, the South Asian arts and culture festival held in Parramatta, NSW. Terry Burrows has been working as a professional artist since 1978. He was founder and Director of Selenium, a prominent artists' project space in Sydney from 1990 to 1995 and is currently a Research Affiliate at Sydney College of the Arts, University of Sydney.

Collectively, the garments featured in these two exhibitions visually parade the division and unison that permeates different levels of society within contemporary India – a reality that is exquisitely told within the wider context of international art and fashion. As RMIT Gallery's Suzanne Davies says, "These are works of technical expertise made by the hands of traditional artisans, and these exhibitions just reinforces that there *is* a place for them in 21<sup>st</sup> century textiles fashion production."

***Unfolding: New Indian Textiles and The Banaras Backs are on display at RMIT Gallery from 20-30, May 2015. RMIT Gallery, 344 Swanston Street Melbourne, Victoria***

(Photos: Ssameer Sakhare)



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