

The light and texture of memory



From *File Museum*, 2013

I had come across Dayanita Singh's photographs earlier, but I first met her in 2011, in India. During that first meeting, Dayanita took the time to show me some of her work. This was at the studio in her house – which was in a village she referred to as “my village in Goa” – an hour's car ride from the place I used to rent in Goa in January and February every year, and where I would go to write. Dayanita had only recently begun what she called her “archive work”. As we stood looking at her black-and-white photographs in that half-lit room, which I remember today as a kind of workshop, we could hear the hum of the small gathering Dayanita had organised, a dinner party (including Kiran Desai and Amitav Ghosh), which had spilled out onto the terrace at the back of the house. Earlier, the conversation had touched upon a crocodile which had been seen roaming around a swamp near the house. Outside, the night was dark and navy blue. Inside, as I studied those black-and-white photographs in the gloom, some very old and very familiar memories began to surface in my mind... But no: the word “memory” does not suffice. What was coming to life inside me was an emotion stirred by those memories, and it seemed as if those photographs had been taken precisely to capture that emotion.

I am writing this essay in order to describe that emotion, and I will begin by examining the reasons why some of Dayanita Singh's photographs evoke this sense of “memory” in me. In doing so, I will also discuss the photographer's sensibility and my own personal interests.

What has most drawn me to Singh's work are the photographs collected in her books *File Room* and *Museum of Chance*. In these volumes, we find black-and-white photographs of India's vast state archives, storerooms, and registry offices, and of various people, places, and moments that exist in harmony with the imaginings these places induce. As we leaf through these books, we become filled with an idea of poetic decrepitude and a sense of profundity: once upon a time, people slogged and toiled, they submitted countless requests, they sent petitions and filed lawsuits, they wrote about and classified each other's activities, and at the state's encouragement and behest, they kept an uninterrupted record of it all. Eventually all this vigorous activity came to an end, and what was left behind were these documents, these files, these bags, and the metal shelves and cabinets that hold and preserve them all. Singh's black-and-white images of those stacks of lead-grey folders, of metal, of old and faded papers – all of which seem to be covered in dust even when they were not – make me aware of the existence of what I would describe as the “texture of memory”.

What do I think of when I imagine the texture of memory? Whether we preserve old objects and stones and crockery, or commission full-colour paintings and hang them up somewhere in the belief that they are permanent, whether we painstakingly collect every scrap of paper we have ever written anything on (I am one of those people), or trust naively

in the endless capacity of photography and digital storage, the protection and preservation of the past is, in truth, an impossible endeavour. Even so, Dayanita Singh's photographs show us that when we seek to identify and remember *as they appear to us today* all the many things – the old artworks, papers, documents – which are the embodiment of our efforts to “preserve the past”, we become aware of how sincere and indeed how “sacred” our futile efforts are. (Although Singh's camera very rarely takes an interest in religious subjects or structures, there is nevertheless a religious and mystical dimension to the scenes she offers us). Memory never leaves us much to hold on to; but perhaps it is not the details within memories that appeal to us anyway, so much as that aura they possess of being somehow bottled inside the objects that populate our present. Inevitably, the aura which memories acquire from objects will elicit in us a kind of melancholy – just as occurs when we look at ancient Greek and Roman ruins and at abandoned monuments. The reason we find these dirty, dusty, colourless files to be so “beautiful” is that, thanks to Singh's skilful camera, they reveal the accumulated melancholy within us.

When this mood is captured in the same frame as the faces and shadows of some of the clerks who worked in these old storerooms, cellars, and archives, we begin to sense that the feeling of melancholy these archives evoke in us is, in fact, closely connected to a certain way of life. As well as that particular emotion that I have been seeking to identify, Dayanita Singh's photographs also convey a sense of humility in the face of life, of stepping back, of dignified resistance even when the passage of time makes everything meaningless.

Take, for example, the image of the clerk surrounded by files and folders – a photograph I have extracted from the volume *File Room*. The woman, who spends her life among heaps of yellowing documents, bundles of folders tied together with string, and shelves heaving with papers, is wearing an optimistic smile which gives us the feeling that there is something both logical and necessary in her Kafkaesque exertions. If Kafka's novels (*The Trial*, *The Castle*) are to be read primarily as allegories exploring the relationship between the individual and an inaccessible, incomprehensible state and government, then there is a Kafkaesque aspect to Dayanita Singh's photography too.

But alongside this poetic and allegorical sensibility, I also see a “realist” element in Singh's photographs. Those like me who are mesmerised by her images will find that they can smell the particular scent of those towering piles of ancient, yellowing papers stacked in archive rooms and in and on top of metal filing cabinets. In his essay on old, decaying archives and the photography of Dayanita Singh, Aveek Sen reminds us that the main source of that singular smell which pervades Indian state archives is the rice paste used in the production of paper. Invisible creatures known as house dust mites like to gobble this rice paste up, leaving holes in their wake, and eventually filling archive rooms with clouds of dust made of minuscule paper particles. The cooling breeze of a ceiling fan – that



From *File Room*,
published by Steidl, Göttingen, 2013



From *File Room*,
published by Steidl, Göttingen, 2013

quintessential emblem of the government office which we can usually spot somewhere near the top of Singh's shots of archive rooms – or even the force of a person's cough (for it is impossible not to cough in an archive), are enough to disintegrate what is left of these old papers, long since turned to dust by the ravages of mites and time.

Indian archives – places capable of turning even the healthiest person into an asthmatic – also acquire their characteristic scent from the flooding that follows in the wake of monsoon rains. Waterlogged folders, when left to their fate, will start spreading a peculiar smell of mushrooms and damp. If the files are taken out one by one (a near-impossible task) and put to dry in the sun, a smell we might describe as river-muck and fish-slime will soon materialise.

I am drawn to these sorts of details not just because they were the subject of debate among the palace miniaturists I wrote about in *My Name Is Red* (the Istanbul equivalent of rice paste is egg-based gum arabic, a favourite among mice), but also due to the similar scents I would smell as a child every time I accompanied my mother and brother to any government office.

I saw the same cabinets, the same enormous folders, the same mountains of envelopes and files in the Turkish government offices I visited in the 1960s with my mother and brother, whenever we had to collect vaccine records or property deeds, or register a birth. Even as a child, I could feel that the spell of that vast and monstrous entity we called the “state” exerted a far deeper pull in these places than it did at school, in military ceremonies, or during Republic Day celebrations. What primarily made the state a state were not its soldiers and police, but these folders, these records, these old documents and papers. Sometimes our lives would fail to align as we were told they should, with all the papers mouldering in those ageing buildings – when there was an error or a gap in my vaccine records, for example, or, as would happen in later years, in my file at the conscription office – and it was that which would prompt the police or the army to come and punish me. In other words, the true source of the power of the state was not soldiers and policemen, but these official records that had accumulated over hundreds of years. The stern, imperious tone most of the clerks in these government offices took with us, as well as the fact that nothing ever went smoothly, and that there always seemed to be something missing or some kind of mistake in our files, all heightened our perception that the state was powerful, and we were weak. Even though these records, these masses of documents, were destined to turn into dust within sixty or seventy years (like old newspapers printed on acidic paper), they were still stronger than we were. Perhaps that is why Singh's photographs felt so much like memories to me.

The aura contained in the photographs Dayanita Singh calls archival work seeps into her other shots too. We see this most clearly in the images Singh collected in *Museum*

Bhavan, a series of little booklets arranged in a box. All those old machines, cauldrons, storerooms, ovens, ancient printing presses, and tools whose function remained mostly obscure, were enveloped in the same aura that emanated from government archives. We can sense the presence of that aura in the clothiers, the pharmacies, and the hat shops, inside homes, among furniture, household items, framed photographs, and portraits, within walls, on tables, in the views that can be glimpsed outside the windows. When this aura joins with the soft, gentle light that is a kind of signature of Dayanita Singh's photography, the logic of the world as seen through her camera lens emerges with even greater force.

Like me, Dayanita Singh likes things that are framed, objects seen through panes of glass, museums, and vitrines. When I leaf through the twenty-six images of museums, vitrines, display cabinets, and framed objects collected in one of the booklets (the *Museum of Vitrines*) or in *Museum Bhavan*, it seems clear to me that there is something museum-like in Dayanita Singh's world. That soft light that comes from registries and archive rooms, as well as a particular style and manner of framing, are also coherent with the *Little Ladies Museum*, a series of portraits Singh took in the homes of Indian families, and in the photographs she has collected in the booklet *Museum of Men*. It is as if the way to fully absorb India's infinite crowds, its never-ending traffic jams and commotion, its mighty sunshine, and its distinctive history, is to withdraw to places whose atmosphere is the very opposite, to spaces protected by frosted glass, by tulle and curtains, by closed or half-open windows, by the night, and fog, and shadows. In these spaces – as in the old archive rooms which embody the history and the politics of a nation and the texture of its memory – we may not be able to see the actual cacophony of the world outside, its chaos and its quarrels, but what we do find are people and objects which, bathed in that strange light, are both detached from that world and remind us of it. The objects captured in these images seem to exude a kind of silence. But ultimately, what reminds us of the whole of India, as well as the whole of the past, and the halo and aura of archive rooms, is that special light which Dayanita Singh's camera deftly captures, and which is this great photographer's unmistakable signature.



From *File Room*,
published by Steidl, Göttingen, 2013



From *Little Ladies Museum*, 1961–ongoing, 2013