

The idea of self portrait in the age of social media — A perfect picture



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The image and its capture have been at the centre of our fascination to discover ourselves and our surroundings. The urge to create and document has led us to design tools that have allowed us to capture images of our insides (medical imaging and scanning) and our outsides (digital photography, smart phone photography etc.) We have been able to transfer onto a substrate that which we can observe and cannot. We have traversed across scales recording the microscopic to the telescopic.

Our insatiable curiosity and the need to display and share our discoveries have led us to create networks where images are transferred and accessed across geographies. The internet has become the substrate upon which an integral part of our lives, behaviour and culture plays out; carving out a space where we operate and transition between the virtual and the physical.

We choose to share different aspects of our lives — our thoughts, emotions, opinions and indeed, our images with the world through social media. Different networks mediate our communication and all work towards communicating different aspects of our 'self', documenting and recording our stories. We spend a large part of our daily lives on these networks, sharing information about ourselves (So much so that now our devices hint at us "maybe it's a bit much?") The interfaces of these networks strike at our basic human urges, and compel us to live in these spaces as much as we can. Wherever we go, we stay connected to them sharing what we believe and feel. Even professionally, our digital lives play a part in judging our character. People have started living in and off of social media. It has therefore come to the point where we simply cannot be separated from these networks and, they have now come to define who we are.

Can we then, be defined as an amalgamation of sorts of who we are in the physical world, and who we choose to be in the digital? A favourite subject of science fiction, where the digital world facilitates our reconceptualisation. Worlds where new ideologies can be subscribed to, new frameworks that can be built all with the purpose of discovering new ways of living and escape. The digital realm adds new complexity to our character — some dark, some happy some highly personal and secretive. We can be anyone we choose to be, we can present ourselves as how we would like others to perceive ourselves to be.

Social media's influence on our characteristics and our way of living cannot be ignored, and must be visualised and reflected on to discover newer aspects of our identity. Numerous studies have already been conducted on understanding media, the internet, and its cultural impact. Many habits have been analysed visualised to understand how different people behave on social media and these findings have been presented in the form of reports and websites etc. But one medium that hasn't captured this aspect of our lives, is the medium that has been used since its inception to document our features, our discoveries, our emotions, and how we would like to be perceived — The camera and the photograph. There is a huge part of our character, our nuance and our being that has gone uncaptured by photography. How do we photograph our digital selves? What would the image look like? What would our digital portrait look like?

Why photography? 1 image 2 photographers

The principle of shutter and exposure, and the act of capturing the image, has been an intimate and deeply personal act. Its immediacy has a lasting effect on us and our visual perceptions and culture (as the saying goes a picture is worth a thousand words) As Roland Barthes says in Camera Lucida,

“ More than other arts, photography offers an immediate presence to the world”

Although many studies have been presented through graphic visualisations and analytics of data from social media, photography as a medium has not played a role in data analysis. The concepts of composition, and the moment in space and time, the

perception of the subject, and the various meanings and interpretations behind the image can have a crucial role to play in how we see our lives in the digital realm. Imagine a camera in a studio, aimed at a person. When photographed, the resulting image is not what is observed physically but a photographic composition based on the subject's behaviours and activities on social media. Imagine seeing a photo of yourself as perceived in social media. This digital portrait so to say would be a simulation, a reflection based on the life you have been leading but never visualised. This photographic dynamic and setup is already familiar to us in a way.

Take smart phone photography for example. It has changed the way we capture and distribute images. Every image now has two photographers working almost in tandem — the human and the algorithm. The role of the human is to aim, and the act of capturing and almost everything directly attached to it has become job of the algorithm. The function of the “shutter” button has almost been dislocated from the act capturing an image. Where earlier it would release the mechanism to record the image on the sensor or film according to the settings determined by the person, it now is a signal to the underlying algorithms to initiate. On pressing the “shutter” button, the software focuses the lens, adjusts the color and light, determines the subject, adds extra sharpness, blurs the background, corrects for any shakes, adds missing sections and performs thousands of other calculations before the photograph is actually taken. In fact in some models, the software has already taken initial photos before the shutter has even been pressed. We can therefore say that the image today is a construction of data, and corrected by software for a desired result. The image is not a capture of what is observed or simply perceived (though it might be in its framing) but is mostly a virtual simulation constructed by the camera for our pleasure and distribution.

An unlikely cultural connection

Photography has been a cultural artefact and the medium has been adopted by different cultures in their own unique ways. In his book “Instagram and the Contemporary Image” Lev Manovich also infers from his study, that instagram culture and aesthetic as well, which may look largely homogenous at first glance, “..is strongly influenced by social, cultural, and aesthetic values of a given location or demographic”. This connected very interestingly with the reading that I had been doing on a topic that has fascinated me for a long time now: The camera in India and how the medium was used by Indian Photographers.

Judith Gutman in her book “Through Indian Eyes” narrates a particularly striking interview with an artist, Hamchandra in the painting town of Nathdwara, Rajasthan. While conducting her research to understand the role of Photography, the Camera and the photograph in the hands of the Indian Photographer in the late 19th and early 20th Century, she becomes interested in the unsettling and “super-real” compositions created by these Artist/Photographers who use their firm conceptual foundations in Indian painting to compose photographs that seem to “Squeeze space” and create multiple “pockets of interest” sending the eye on a dizzying journey into the photograph, while still keeping the use of linear perspective to a minimum.

“Do you want to see my paintings?” He asked. I nodded, Hamchandra (the artist) sat down, cross-legged, right at his foot high lectern like table. Lifting the top of the table up, he reached in and came up with the dozens of paintings. “Copies,” he told me, “all copies of 17th and 18th-century nathdwara painting.” He was rather proud of them; he did not hide the fact that they were copying, nor did he try to pass them off as anything except what they were. “Everyone wants paintings from Nathdwara. No photographs.”

“Would you like to see one of the photographs I had with me?” I took out a sleeve of 35mm transparencies picked out the one of the landholder who loves music and gave it to him.’



Landowner who Loves Music ca. 1885; Albumen, opaque watercolour, 22kt Gold; 6×4 3/16; Photographer and

1/27/21, 3:27 PM

Painter Unknown; See Image Attributions [1]

‘... He scrutinised the photograph under a magnifying glass with the light coming in over his shoulder. He stayed like that for many minutes. He stood absolutely still; not even his eyes moved. As if he had suddenly grasped the tension with this trembling he stared at me and said “It’s not perfect”’

‘He had opened a Pandora’s box. Questions raced through my mind. Did he have any painted photographs? If he did, were they perfect? What did he mean by “perfect”?’

‘I turned to him and asked “Do you have a perfect one?”..His wife and children dragged a trunk out from under the bed. He slowly walked over and opened it. Out came a a group of cabinet size images. I saw a sweeping eye lash like the one Hamchandra had made in his painting earlier, a lash that had been handed down from generation to generation in this family. There was a difference, however, between these and and the painted music lover. In the one of the painted music lover, the photographic and painterly characteristics were separate, as if each were locked in its own box. In this they were meshed. Yet it was impossible to look at either photograph without seeing how painterly and photographic qualities jumped off the image, though a different combination of these qualities existed in each. The combination of a photographic look and a painted surface still tossed the viewer back and forth between one and the other; it told the viewer that each was essential. “who is he?” I asked. “the Priest,” he answered. “Did he look like that?” I asked. “Oh no,” he said. “He’s a priest.” I waited a minute, then asked “Is he perfect?” “Oh, yes,” was the instant answer.



Sri Nathdwara Goswami Acharya Gobardhanlal Ji ca. 1902; Gelatin/bromide, Opaque watercolour, 22kt Gold; 6 3/16 × 4 9/16; Ghosiram; See Image Attributions [2]

This account gives us a glimpse into the concepts of perfection and reality as perceived by the Indian photographer/artist. (So heavily did the photographers draw from painterly tradition, that they even considered themselves photographic artists.) “the Perfect picture” then was an idea of the person including the environment they were set in, and the way they were expected to look, the way they were conceived in the imagination of the viewers. People didn’t want to their likeness to be captured, but their concept. They wanted to be represented like the way they wanted to be perceived. (An almost mirrored social concept in today’s social media as well)

These similarities can be seen through out Indian art and culture, which never did concern itself with physicality. It was not until much later in its genealogy that physical representation started to appear and even when it did, it refused to be bound to this world; often looking to the allegorisation of the divine or the idealisation of the earthly.

As Ananda Coomaraswamy describes this kind of representation:

“We do not look at the king, as if in a moment of time; as if looking through a window, We look at a scene that lives beyond the limits of time. Gathered, as it were, from a lifetime, a person’s activities stretch right to the picture’s edge.” [2]

Possible Compositional and Aesthetic approach

These descriptions have a striking resemblance of how we could imagine and compose “the digital portrait”. Unreal portraits of people yet very real at the same time; its power to captivate coming from the composition of space, the embellishment of objects imbued with meaning, and the prolonged moment where the image is not simply a capture of a single moment but a narrative of a scene.

Photography was approached with a similar thought but Indian Photographers

leveraged the affordances of the camera to create fresh new interplays between the real and the fantastical. As Beth Citron describes in the book “Allegory and Illusion” *“One Significant and innovative way in which these painted photographs veer away from earlier approaches to portraiture and expectations of realism is in their use of painted backdrops and painted backgrounds this strategy imaginatively creates contexts for the sitters represented and in doing so reveals information that extends beyond what is captured in the photograph, challenging the naturalism expected of the medium.”* [3]

This approach to photography is still prevalent today at various degrees in many parts of India and we engage with these images on different levels from the informal to the spiritual. From collages of politicians and movie stars, to the moralistic narratives of gods, of sacrifice and myth. The worlds portrayed in these montages and photographs, used photography as the foundation, and drew from the arts to present ideas from the imagination, describing a narrative that satisfied the cultural desire for immediacy.

Let us Look at a few examples:



Embellished Photograph of man, Photographer and Artist Unknown, Jodhpur. Image Courtesy Shreya Toshniwal 2017

This portrait presents us a man of stature and respect. His fine with silk turban and shirt along with his bejewelled neck describe a man of wealth, and power. He stares into space and not directly at the viewer. but one cannot help but think what lies behind the filigree? Was he indeed as he presents himself, in the picture? or someone simpler?



Subhash Chandra Bose offering his head to Bharat Mata (Mother India) in presence of Krishna. Unknown Artists, c 1940s, Collage Created by a frame maker, 70 × 50 cm. Background painted by a Nathdwara artist. All the figures except that of Krishna are cut out from a print titled Subhash Balidan; the image of Krishna is from another print. See Image Attribution [4]

This collage although not a photograph per se, is particularly interesting for its narrative and composition. The space and time squeezed into it draws a lot from Indian photographic and artistic practices. For example Subhash chandra Bose, has sacrificed himself at the feet of Mother India, and his martyrdom is also chronicled and represented by his form ascending to heaven draped in white while Krishna plays the flute in the corner.

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 This portrait is especially interesting in how the figure of the lady blends and emerges from the washes of paint. It is almost ephemeral and reminiscent of the sort of traversing we do in :
 2. Dewari, Deepak. *Embellished Reality, Indian Painted Photographs*. Towards a
 out of our own imaginary worlds.
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As these examples show, there are immense possibilities in trying to capture our digital lives, imagine and reflect on the qualities and characteristics of ourselves that we display. There can be a great interplay between data, composition and aesthetic approaches that can create fresh new perspectives in how we see ourselves. As Walter Benjamin says in “Brief History of Photograph

Thanks to Nishita Gill

‘The illiterate of the future’, it has been said, ‘will not be

Photography | Selfie | Cameras | Identity | Learning | alphabet, but the one who

cannot take a photograph’.

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