BOMBAY MIX
STREET PHOTOGRAPHS

KETAKI SHETH

INTRODUCTION BY SUKETU MEHTA

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THERE IS A HAUNTING PHOTOGRAPH OF TWO LITTLE GIRLS, ANGEL AND IMI, ON PAGE 27 OF THIS BOOK. THE GIRL IN THE CENTRE IS Gaudily Attired, Fair, Pristine; She Could Be Any of the Middle Class Children of the City, Coiffed, Pum-Pumpered. But She Is Sad, a Sad Angel. Behind Her Is Another Girl in a Shaggy Dress, Laughing Mockingly, Out of Focus, Dark, Cheaply Shod—the Excluded. The One Girl, Still Composed, Prescriptive; the Other Manic with Energy; and in the Background, an Older Lady Sitting on a Cot, Indifferent to Either One of Them. And There You Have the Whole Story: Mix of Bombay: The Fortunate, Lost in Contemplation; the Unfortunate, Whose Only Defence Is Laughter, and the Rest of the City, Choosing Not to See.

The Thrill of Bombay Is the Thrill of Contrast. The Streetscape of Bombay as Much Psychedelic as It Is Kaleidoscopic. There Is Great Danger Here for a Documentary Photographer; There Is So Much to See, It Can All Become Clutter. What Is Most Difficult to Discern Is Geometry, the Internal Order amidst the Clutter. Such as Sheth's Picture of the Dabawala Holding His Tray of Meals, Framed Against the Light Cut into Panels by a Large Window Covered in Grillwork. Or the Two Burqua-Covered Women Holding Two Babies. Sheth Can See Double as Few Other Photographers Do—as in Her Last Book, Twinning, a Haunting Study of Twins in the Patel Community. Bombay Mix Is an Exploration of the Symmetries of the Streetscape. The Symmetry Is Evident in the Most Intimate Settings, Such as the Image of a Couple Alone Under an Umbrella at the Beach, the Frame of the Dome of the Carousel Next to Them Magnifying the Shape of the Parasol.

The Two Main Ingredients of Sheth's Bombay Mix Are Faith and Children. A Mother Brings Her Injured Child to the Foot of a Bleeding Jesus. This Being Bombay, There Is a Plastic Water Bottle at His Feet, Underneath a String of Marigolds Dangling from the Savion's Foot. A Range of Religions Is Represented Here: Parsis Praying at the Seaside, Fishermen Praying to the Head of a Goddess in a Basket of Fish; a Girl Held Aloft to Compete with a Large Ganesh, an Evangelical Gathering Opening Their Arms to Receive the Lord, a Group of Jain Runs Walking Up Wardumbai Road; A Little Boy Dapping Himself in a Shia Parade. You Cannot Comprehend Bombay Without Understanding the Power of Prayer This Sheth Has Understood. It Is Not a Secular City.


Another Motif in Sheth's Work Is Manual Labour. From the Shipbreakers of Dandekar (Sheth Comes from a Leading Family in the Shipping Business) to a Young Man Sleeping Exhausted Next to a Load of Baskets Filled with Coals, to Women at Construction Sites, Sheth's Pictures Document a Pre-Technological Bombay, Far From the Care Centres and Financial Offices of the Publicly Advertised Face of India, But Nonetheless a Vastly More Present and Vital Reality Than the One Depicted in the Government's Investment Brochures.

While Sheth's Portraiture of the Labourers Is Animated by Compassion, She Avoids the Great Trap of Documentary Photography in a Poor Country: Pity. There Are Sympathetic Figures Here, But There Are No Victims. There Is a Child Sleeping on a Parapet by the Sea, Using Only His Arm as a Pillow. Next to Him, a Man Plays a Flute, Seeding His Dreams. It Is the Krishna Image, But Split Among Two Human Beings. In This Schizophrenic City, Everything Is Bifurcated, Almost Cubist. Sheth's Camera Is Alert to the Complexity of the Streets; It Does Not Present the Slums as Simply an Excessiveness. There Is a Profound Dignity in the Family Seated in Front of Their Shack: A Father, Children of Various Ages, and a Mother. All Looking Steadily at Us. They Are Poor, But They Are Not Alone.
