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Re-Imagining the Frame: Some reflections on contemporary photography in Spiti

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Fig. 1

I have been photographing in Spiti, a culturally Tibetan community in Himachal Pradesh, India, since 1993. A few years ago I was told that my reportage photographs were so awful that when I leave people tear them up and put them in the fire. This wonderful provocation launched a new body of work, which was subsequently exhibited at the Pitt Rivers Museum, University of Oxford[1] and led to a book co-authored with Tashi Tsering.[2]

But I was too respectful at the time to reply that I held similar feelings towards their idea of photography, especially the new genre of photographs that Spiti villagers were displaying on their walls. These computer modified images seemed heavily influenced by recent Indian studio photography: static, expressionless portraits layered upon generic internet-sourced domestic interiors or “landscapes” montaged together from separate images of non-Himalayan mountains, parks and dense flowerbeds.

But I started to examine the spectrum of photographic images displayed in prayer rooms and domestic spaces. This revealed quite an established history of modifying images and re-imagining the individual static photographic frame: images rephotographed and hand coloured; images montaged/collaged on to other images in a pre-Photoshop era; and especially images clustered and grouped together in a multitude of ways.

These images and image clusters challenge the limitations and stasis of straight photography. Unmodified photographs cannot express the subtleties of affiliation and association that Spiti people to desire from their photographic imagery.

As a documentary photographer, the specifics of the unmodified photograph are what I hold dear: descriptions of actual people in real places at particular moments in time. This is precisely what these modified Spiti photographs resist: by bringing people together within the frame who are separated by time, politics and geography; by expressing connections between ordinary humans, religious elites and deities; and by compressing or collapsing the past, present and future, Spiti photographs transcend the limitations of the straight unmanipulated document.



Fig. 2

I am returning to Spiti in 2019 to continue research on vernacular photographs within the community.

Footnotes

1. Dec 2010 to July 2011.

2. Sutherland, Patrick and Tsering, Tashi (2011) Disciples of a Crazy Saint: The Buchen of Spiti. Pitt Rivers Museum, University of Oxford, Oxford, UK. ISBN 9780902793514.