

NayanTara Gurung Kakshapati

Being Nepali



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G44

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To See Nepal Anew



Manjushree Thapa

There are stories written on the body. If we're attentive we read them.

A fold in the neck, a strand of hair come loose, a spark of defiance in the eye.

On a face with a neutral expression: a sunspot, some moisture, a smear of vermilion, a nose ring.

Moles, wrinkles, stubble. Thinning hair and furrowed brows. A tattoo along the collarbone, the hint of a smile.

In "Being Nepali" NayanTara Gurung Kakshapati invites us to participate in reading these stories.

The subjects – Nepali men and women of diverse backgrounds – stare silently at the camera. The viewer fills in their stories, projecting his or her own experience of Nepal onto them: *Is this person from the far-west, is that woman from the north, this man reminds me of a schoolteacher I used to know.... Why is she angry? He looks exhausted. Don't I know her? Look at his weathered face. What daily activities, what habits of culture, formed that expression in her eyes?*

In creating these stories the viewer sees Nepal anew. This is a land of more than a hundred identity groups and languages, a land coursing with the intelligence of more than a hundred knowledge systems. It's impossible not to marvel at the many ways of being Nepali. The viewer becomes aware of the smallness, or partiality, of his or her own experience, and, humbled, wants to learn more.

Through photo.circle she has brought together photographers to produce collaborative projects and publications.

The invitation to observe, to feel wonder, to be open and to learn is key to NayanTara's larger body of work.

*Hamra Hajurama—Our Grandmothers—*encourages us to see women we often look past: the elderly. Combining texts and photographs, the book is a celebration of rich lives. Some of the women are well off, others not; some are from Kathmandu, others from the rest of the country. There are as many differences between the subjects as there are commonalities. The book concludes nothing but suggests much, evoking the past, asking the viewer to appreciate the personal histories that have led up to today.

The contemporary moment is the subject of another photo.circle publication, *Kathmandu: A Pocketful of Momos*. Here, photography students curated by photo.circle offer up small, fleeting moments of everyday life in Nepal's capital. The city they capture isn't one of power, but of fleeting moments and ephemera:

A shirt hangs out to dry in an empty yard.

Young men gather around a bonfire on a winter's night.

A pig trots down a brick lane.

None of these photographs speak, alone, to the whole, but collectively they portray the city as a sphere of many private activities, where people countenance everyday difficulties quietly, with dignity, mostly unseen.

The adeptness with which NayanTara has created a platform like photo.circle speaks to her larger passion: to build community. Photography is the medium through which she does so.

This is clearest in another photo.circle project: Nepal Picture Library. An archive of private photographs from Nepalis, this library resurrects the country's vanished past.

For all viewers, but especially for Nepali viewers, this archive is deeply educative. Nepal is not a country that knows itself too well. Communities who live in one part of the country can have little exposure to those who don't live in the immediate vicinity. For those cocooned in Kathmandu, the countryside can feel far away, remote. This is also a demographically young land, with more than half the population under the age of twenty. Collective memory is very short.

"The past," William Faulkner wrote, "is never dead. It's not even past."

Nepal stumbles repeatedly over its own history. Founded on the conquest of several pre-existing kingdoms in 1769, it is South Asia's oldest nation. In contemporary times the nature of the state has shifted restlessly, transitioning from an absolute monarchy to a parliamentary democracy in 1990, then undergoing a Maoist insurgency and brutal counterinsurgency, ending the monarchy, reluctantly accepting the need for social inclusion, and federating in 2015.

This has been an era of constant social unmaking and remaking for Nepal. The nation remains unmade still, with protests, blockades, closures and mass movements in response to inequality and injustice, which persist due to the feudal past.

The Nepal Picture Library revives an earlier era of nation-building, when the country ended its isolation and joined the modern world. It provides continuity between

the past and the present; and it captures the zeitgeist of a country that has tried – and is still trying – to shrug off feudalism and become truly democratic. For Nepalis, this period has proven painful to live through, especially in light of the land's geological volatility.

In April 2015, an earthquake claimed almost 9,000 lives, destroyed entire villages, and left more than 800,000 homes in rubble. NayanTara's latest initiative responded to this disaster with the Nepal Photo Project. A crowd-sourced initiative on Instagram, this project creates a platform to share photographs of the earthquake and its aftermath.

A young girl sits in front of corrugated zinc sheets at a camp for earthquake victims in Kathmandu.

A grandmother and granddaughter brush their teeth at another camp for the internally displaced in Rasuwa District.

NayanTara has, herself, paid attention to her society. In her own photographs and in the collective projects that she leads, she allows us to pay attention too.

Through seeing, the viewer gains understanding. The ultimate achievement of NayanTara's work is her ability to generate empathy.

A college student walks past a heap of rubble in the ancient town of Sankhu.

A labourer recycles bricks from a demolished home.

We see Nepal.

Cover image

NayanTara Gurung Kakshapati,
Machindranath, 2010

Right Image

Sanjay Sthapit Collection/
Nepal Picture Library

Poster image

NayanTara Gurung Kakshapati,
Untitled from the "Being
Nepali" series 2011-2015.

Gallery 44 and SAVAC have partnered to host a residency and solo exhibition by renowned Nepalese artist and curator NayanTara Gurung Kakshapati. Working with Nepali diasporic communities in Toronto, Kakshapati created new images for her "Being Nepali" series, which will be displayed alongside a curated selection from the Nepal Picture Library for the exhibition, *Being Nepali*, at Gallery 44 January 8 – February 6, 2015. The exhibition is Kakshapati's first in Canada.

We would like to acknowledge the generous support of Surenda Lawoti, Deepali Dewan, Manjushree Thapa, Indira Bhattarai and ASHA Toronto.

Gallery 44 Centre for Contemporary Photography is a non-profit artist-run centre committed to photography as a multi-faceted and ever-changing artform. Founded in 1979 to establish a supportive environment for the development of photography, Gallery 44's mandate is to provide a context for reflection and dialogue on contemporary photography and its related practices. Gallery 44 offers exhibition and publication opportunities to national and international artists, award-winning education programs and affordable production facilities for artists. Through its programs, Gallery 44 engaged in changing conceptions of the photographic image and its mode of production.

SAVAC (South Asian Visual Arts Centre) is the only non-profit, artist-run centre in Canada dedicated to supporting South Asian artists. For over two decades, SAVAC has increased the visibility of culturally diverse artists by curating and exhibiting their work, providing mentorship, and facilitating professional development. Focusing on programs that explore issues shaping the experiences of people from the region and its diasporas, SAVAC encourages work that is challenging, experimental, and engaged in critical discussions that offer new perspectives on the contemporary world. www.savac.net

NayanTara Gurung Kakshapati is a Nepal-based photographer and curator. She attended Mt Holyoke College, Massachusetts and the SALT Institute of Documentary Studies, Portland, Maine to study documentary photography. Her work seeks to embrace themes such as change, identity, gender, and history within the context of 'the New Nepal'. She enjoys working across platforms to connect visuals, sound, research, education, activism; using storytelling as an underlying approach.

In 2007 NayanTara co-founded photo.circle, a photography collective that has created a vibrant platform for emerging and professional photographers in Nepal. In 2010



photo.circle established the Nepal Picture Library, a digital photo archive containing over 55,000 images that contributes to the study of Nepali photography, and raises questions about memory, identity, and the history of the region through images. NayanTara's work has been exhibited internationally, including Photo Phnom Penh, Cambodia (2015), OBSCURA Festival of Photography, Malaysia (2013), Delhi Photo Festival, India (2013), International Human Rights Film Festival, Switzerland (2013), and Kirkkopuisto Photo Annual, Finland (2013).

Manjushree Thapa writes fiction and literary nonfiction about Nepal. Her fiction books include *Seasons of Flight*, *Tilled Earth* and *The Tutor of History*, and her nonfiction books include *The Lives We Have Lost*, *A Boy from Siklis* and *Forget Kathmandu*. She also translates Nepali literature into English. Her new novel, *All of Us in Our Own Lives*, is due in 2016. She lives in Toronto.

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Gallery 44 wishes to acknowledge the Exhibition Programming Committee: Lise Beaudry, Steven Beckly, Noa Bronstein, Caoimhe Morgan-Feir, Leila Timmins, Charlene Heath, Zoe Jaremus, Morris Lum, Eilyn Walker

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