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**VASANTHA
YOGANANTHAN:
A MYTH OF
TWO SOULS**

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VASANTHA YOGANANTHAN: A MYTH OF TWO SOULS

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The Crossing, 2014 from *A Myth of Two Souls*

Marking the first UK solo presentation of FOAM Talent 2017 winner, **Vasantha Yoganathan** (b.1985, France), *A Myth of Two Souls* (2013-2019) is an ambitious ongoing body of work inspired by the Indian legend of The Ramayana.

Familiar with the epic fable from a young age, having been read it by his Sri Lankan father, Vasantha traces a journey from north to south India, capturing the impact and pervasiveness of this omnipresent cultural myth on everyday Indian life.

Working exclusively in analogue, using large or medium format cameras that intentionally slow down the creative process, Vasantha's projects are generally developed over long periods of time and harness a distinctive colour palette based on natural light. *A Myth of Two Souls* continues his artistic and philosophical concerns. Juxtaposing colour and hand-painted photography, the series interweaves fictional and historical stories, old and new traditions and offers a lyrical photographic reimagining of a classic tale and sits somewhere between documentary, fiction, mythology and reality.

ARTIST BIOGRAPHY

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Vasantha Yoganathan was born in 1985 and lives and works in Paris, France. Along with his work as a photographer, he is the co-founder of independent Publishing House **Chose Commune**.

AWARDS & GRANTS

2017: Foam Talent (winner)
2017: ICP Infinity Award Emerging Photographer of the Year (winner)
2016: Prix Levallois (winner)
2015: Prix Roger Pic (winner)
2015: IdeasTap/Magnum Photos International Award (winner)
2014: Prix de Photographie de l'Académie des beaux-arts (selected)
2014: Prix Nadar (selected)
2014: Bourse SCAM Brouillon d'un Rêve (winner)
2014: Mack First Book Award (selected)
2014: Fonds d'aide à la Photographie contemporaine, CNAP (winner)
2014: Magnum Photos Top 30 Under 30 (winner)
2012: Bourse du Talent Espace (winner)

BOOKS

2017: Exile, text by Arshia Sattar
2017: The Promise, text by Arshia Sattar
2016: Early Times, text by Anjali Raghbeer
2014: Piémanson, essay by Rémi Coignet

EXHIBITIONS

2017: Illuminating India, Science Museum (London, UK)
2017: A Myth of Two Souls, Jörg Brockmann Gallery (Genève, CH)
2017: FOAM Talent, FOAM Museum (Amsterdam, NL)
2016: Early Times, Galerie de l'Escale (Levallois, FR)
2015: Interludes, SAGE Paris Gallery (Paris, FR)
2014: Piémanson, Maison de l'Image Documentaire (Sète, FR)
2013: Piémanson, Musée Albert-Kahn (Paris, FR)
2012: Piémanson, Bibliothèque Nationale de France (Paris, FR)

PUBLICATIONS & CRITIQUES

Exile, ASX (by Sunil Shah, UK)
Exile, British Journal of Photography (by Eoin Murray, UK)
The Promise, The Eyes (by Marc Feustel, FR)
The Promise, Collector Daily (by Olga Yatskevich, US)
The Promise, GUP (by Sharon Zelnick, UK)
The Promise, Paper Journal (by Darren Champion, UK)
Early Times, M Le Magazine du Monde (by Julien Bouissou, FR)
Early Times, Else (by Tatyana Franck, CH)
Early Times, British Journal of Photography (by Brennavan Sritharan, UK)
Piémanson, International Center of Photography (by Matthew Carson, US)
Piémanson, Lens Blog New York Times (by Laurence Butet-Roch, US)
Piémanson, The Telegraph (by Cheryl Newman, UK)
Piémanson, British Journal of Photography (by Diane Smyth, UK)
Piémanson, Libération (by Brigitte Ollier, FR)
Piémanson, L'Oeil de la Photographie (by Jonas Cuénil, US)

BJP, DOCUMENTARY, INTERVIEWS, PHOTOBOOKS, UNCATEGORIZED

Published on 12 January 2017

Vasantha Yoganathan on his epic series, *A Myth of Two Souls*

Written by Brennavan Sritharan

The ICP Infinity Award's Emerging Photographer on his ambitious, Ramayana-inspired photobook, in an interview first published in BJP in July 2016

When Vasantha Yoganathan was a child growing up in France his Sri Lankan father would tell him stories from the Hindu epic poem the Ramayana. Tales of heroism, filial duty and love full of magic, allegory and divinity, these stories were at the time just that – stories.

But when Yoganathan first visited India in 2013, he came face-to-face with the pervasiveness of myth and legend on the subcontinent. In a land steeped in ancient history, folklore and veracity are deeply intertwined, and attempting to disentangle the two can be futile. Eventually, Yoganathan decided to stop trying.



Disappearance, 2013, from *A Myth of Two Souls*

Historians and archaeologists estimate the composition of the Ramayana to the 4th century, and it is at once a foundation stone of Indian literature, one of Hinduism's key texts, and a model for familial relationships. It follows the journey of Prince Rama, who travels the length of the country to get his wife, Sita, back when she is abducted by the demon Ravana.

It's a complex story, and its characters have become embodiments of virtue and honour in Indian society, but the story touches on universal themes of violence, discrimination and, through whispers, infidelity.

It's a complex story, and its characters have become embodiments of virtue and honour in Indian society, but the story touches on universal themes of violence, discrimination and, through whispers, infidelity. This heady mix sparked *A Myth of Two Souls*, Yoganathan's epic series documenting the omnipresence of the Ramayana in everyday life in India.

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BJP, 12 JAN 2017

British Journal of Photography

It's an utterly ambitious project, comprising seven books (corresponding to the seven books of the Ramayana) to be published over three years. *Early Times* is just the first chapter, and in it Yoganathan uses a combination of colour and monochrome photography, illustration and vernacular material, as well as – most intriguingly – hand-tinting.

For the latter he shot large format black-and-white portraits, then had them coloured by a local Indian painter trained in the technically meticulous art; working without colour references, the painter added an extra layer of interpretation to a project already well-aware of the opacity of myth.

The colours, creamy and diffuse, match Yoganathan's palette, but some details seem a little off – oversaturated tones, purple skies, and luminous shades of skin. The unearthly sensation this creates intensifies the sense of invention, the blurring of the line between fabulation and realism.

This method, developed in the 19th century before the advent of colour film, hints at a kind of temporal rupture and the type of dialogue between eras that Yoganathan hoped to create. "When I started the project one of my main interests was the concept of a journey through time," he explains.



Young Warriors, 2015, hand painted c-type print

"I had that feeling, looking at such an old story, but in 2016, and in India. There is this feeling of going back and forth in time, different histories meeting together and mixing into a big masala."

The project blends dreamy, evocative landscapes with staged portraits of passersby acting out scenes from the saga. "During my third trip I got the idea of asking the locals, and the project shifted," Yoganathan says, adding that hand-tinted images also fed into this thinking. Poring over historical collections of such pictures, he noted they were all taken in photography studios, typically the preserve of the wealthy.

Yoganathan says he decided to cast from the street, encountering his "actors" outside the hand painter's studio. "I thought, 'What if the studio is the street? What if I take all the pictures outside, and the people I shoot come from every caste?' I decided to move the practice from the studio to the real world, with real people."

In doing so he discovered that, when it came to the Ramayana, there were multiple interpretations of both the text itself and the extent to which it is myth. "I have this question that I ask the people I photograph: 'Is the Ramayana a true story?'" he says. "People say very different things. The story occurs in real places – Ayodhya, Hampi, Adam's Bridge – and I was interested in the way the physical world interacts with the fictional."



Rama Combing His Hair, 2015, from *A Myth of Two Souls*

The Ramayana travels down the spine of India from its northernmost parts to the southern coast and the northern tip of Sri Lanka.

Yoganathan is retracing these steps and has made five trips so far, taking in Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, Madhya Pradesh, Maharashtra and Tamil Nadu. He plans to go five more times by 2019, when he'll finish the seventh chapter and publish his final book. "This story has been rewritten so often; in each place there was a different interpretation," he says.

Yoganathan started his project in Ayodhya, the birthplace of the epic's protagonist, Rama, and a city awash with temples, shrines and paintings alluding to the myth. "It's like going back hundreds of years," he says.

"People live inside crumbling former temples and they still talk about it. Being in the city that's supposed to be the kingdom of Rama, and hearing people talk about how the tale still impacts on their everyday lives, was the moment I understood I had a story."

In Bihar, the supposed home state of Rama's wife Sita, another story unfolds. Her role alternates between an object of desire, a passive character and a woman of agency; in her birthplace the female role is more nuanced than Yoganathan expected.

"I met a lot of different women and the way they see Sita in Bihar is very particular. I met very strong women who chose to not even marry, in a very conservative and patriarchal state."

"I got in touch with those writers, and I'm going to commission a different Indian writer for each chapter," he says. "The text I'm using isn't the traditional verse by Valmiki or an old version, it's completely contemporary. So far I'm working with three different women from different generations, giving the female perspective on what can be quite a macho narrative that puts women in the shadows."

In Yoganathan's hands, the Ramayana story becomes a palimpsest, a document to be recycled, retooled and portrayed in exciting new ways. The binary between truth and falsehood falls away, leaving behind a creative space in which to make new work.

"I realised the distinction between truth and falsehood wasn't important," says Yoganathan. "This was an important discovery for me, that this is where my photographs should lie – in this in-between world between physical reality and the imagined." •

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Rocket Science Magazine

Vasantha Yoganathan in conversation with Matt Dunne

INTERVIEW



Matt Dunne: I'm interested in hearing about how your memories of 'The Ramayana'. Do you remember what you thought when you first heard it? Has your opinion or relationship with the epic changed over time?

Vasantha Yoganathan: My first memories of The Ramayana are a bit vague. As a kid I was looking at the comic books – the most popular version of the story – but I could not read English so I was only looking at the pictures. Twenty years later, I bought an abridged French translation and I remember being blown away by the story. Everything we experience in life was there. Of course, my relationship with the epic side of the story has shifted over time. After five years of work – seven trips and still counting – I now know a lot more about The Ramayana and the issues it raises. I have read countless different versions of it. In India people use to say: “there is not one Ramayana but three hundreds Ramayanas”, and this is what makes it so intriguing.

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MD: Furthermore, I wonder if you feel that the poem has contemporary relevance for India? Does it still say something very meaningful about Indian society, or Indian people?

VY: The epic is still very relevant in contemporary India. Because of the themes it tackles – family, love, honor, rape, purity – it is subject to multiple interpretations. Right-wing political parties try to use it to disseminate the idea that India is first and foremost the nation of Hindus. Women writers have been retelling the epic from its heroin's point of view, questioning the status of women in India. The Ramayana is used for countless advertising, from real estate, tourism and so on. Because the story has been modernized over time, the younger generation knows it as well as their grandparents do. Only the medium through which the story is told has changed. A hundred years ago, bards were travelling across India to sing the epic in villages, now people discuss it on Whatsapp.



MD: It seems that this epic poem is incredibly pervasive around the world – why do you think it's managed to become so wide spread and worldly? Do you think that it defines a lot of Indian culture?

VY: The Ramayana is pervasive in Cambodia, Indonesia, Bali and most of Southern Asia. It has even crossed the borders of religion. It is fairly easy to engage with because it is a universal story. The epic interweaves with the Indian culture. It is fully part of it. Images from the tale are everywhere in the streets. Common sayings refer to the story.

MD: You've mentioned in previous interviews that the locations of the Ramayana are real – and that anyone can visit them in India. Is this how you came to the locations where the photos were taken, or do you visit other locations?

VY: The locations were mentioned in the first written version of The Ramayana (300 BC). The names of the places have not changed. You can follow the itinerary from Nepal to Sri Lanka, making your way through the entire Indian sub-continent. A funny example is that Makemytrip (one of the biggest online flight booking Indian company) made a Ramayana website entirely dedicated to its locations. You can follow Rama's footsteps and for each locations, they tell you which flight you need to book and where you can stay. The fact that the story is geographically grounded in real locations is also what makes it so important to Indians.

MD: How do you edit this project? Given that you've chosen to split it into 7 chapters, are you editing one work at a time, or editing all 7 simultaneously? What does an 'editing session' look like for this project?

VY: It is like a giant puzzle slowly building up. Because the Ramayana is divided into 7 chapters – each one telling a specific part of the story – it was the most interesting (and crazy!) way to approach it. Each chapter and book is different. The first chapter was about childhood.

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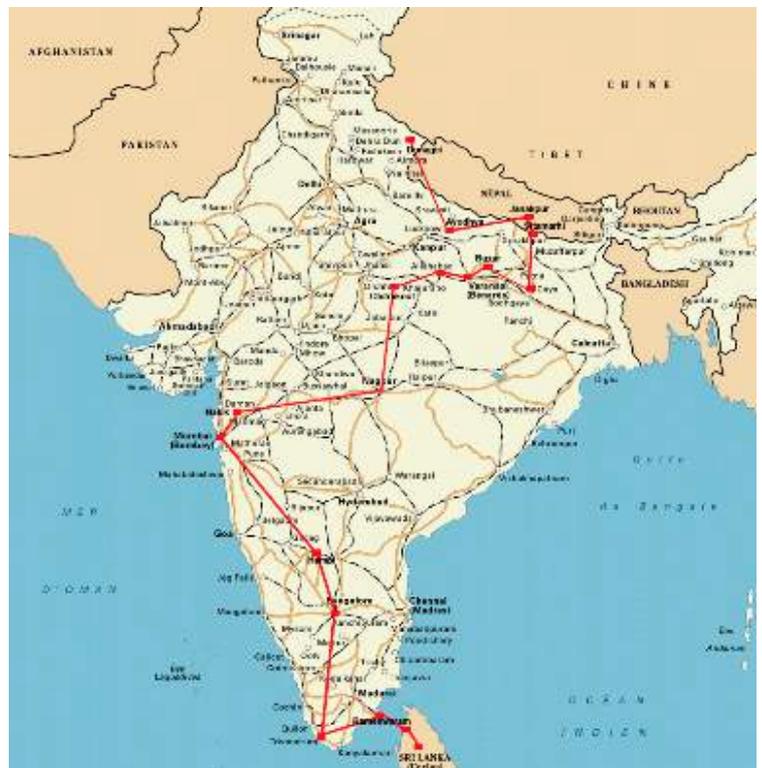
The second about love. The third one about exile and losing all material possessions, etc. Like in every good story, each chapter should come as a surprise for the reader, and makes him eager to know what comes next. I have these seven folders on my computer. Editing-wise it is a bit of both: working on one book at a time while thinking of the bigger picture. The hardest part of it all is to gauge between each trip which pictures or material I am still missing. There is this pressure of producing work, which at the same time freaks me out while being super exciting. It would have been much easier to wait for the project to be done and make one big book. But we've opted for the more challenging way instead. The editing itself is done in close collaboration with my partner Cécile Poimboeuf-Koizumi. We have co-founded our publishing house together, Chose Commune. Once we have a first sequencing, we meet with our designers Kummer & Herrman, who are working on all seven books with us.

MD: This project seems just about as collaborative as it's possible to get. From talking to the people who pose themselves for you, to allowing the tradition of professionals hand-painting black and white film, there are many facets of collaboration taking place in 'A Myth of Two Souls'. What led you to this level of collaboration, is it something that you think you'd like to continue?

VY: When I started researching about The Ramayana, I quickly realized there were already many people working on and around it, especially in India. Building a collaborative project allows me to have multiple voices telling one story. It is hard, it demands a lot of energy, a lot of dialogue with energy, a lot of dialogue with everyone involved (writers, artists and painters) but it is very fulfilling. I'm working on a much smaller project in France at the moment, and the process is the complete opposite. No texts, a very loose story, pictures only. I work alone and it feels so good.

MD: How do you improve as a photographer? Do you expect that the final chapters will show improvement from the first, if so how do you feel about that?

VY: The deeper I get into the project, the clearer my vision becomes. I remember the first three trips: I was really lost. The pictures were either too literal or too far away from the story. I don't speak a lot about technique but after I started working with a large-format camera during my third trip, the way I photograph had changed. I slowed down and started doing these staged portraits with the locals. I had never staged a picture before. When I think of the sixth chapter, which is about war, I know I will have to shoot in a completely different way. It keeps me going because the possibilities are endless – you just have to be creative and be careful not to ever stay too long in your comfort zone.



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MD: When I'm looking at work online I'm lucky in a sense that I see the successes, but I'm curious about the difficulties. During this project, so far, what worries or anxieties have you had to deal with, or are still dealing with?

VY: Well... There has been a lot of failures. I shoot analog so I don't see what I do while travelling. When I come back to Paris I go straight to the photo lab to have the films processed. I wait for a week and these are the worst days of the year. I always think I might have fucked it up – that I did not do well enough. Working on the books is also stressful: you need to make the story easily accessible to a wide audience while telling it in a complex way.

MD: I want to ask you about publishing others' work – how does publishing others' work vary from your own? Do you have a very hands-on approach, or do you step back and let the artists do most of the editing and design themselves?

VY: I love publishing other photographers' work. It makes me stop thinking about my own practice. I am grateful to get to work with other artists and learn from them. As these are not my pictures, I am much more confident in what we should do to convey the work successfully. Cécile and I always do the editing and sequencing together. We work with designers but we are always closely working on the book concept. When we are happy about the directions the book is taking, we present a first version to the artist and the dialogue can then start. We have never worked with a ready-to-print dummy.

MD: Finally, I'm curious as to what you do to relax, and how it helps you slow down a bit?

VY: Walking in the wilderness is what relaxes me most. I love the sea, I love the countryside. I love the mountains. I come from Grenoble, which is a small city near the French Alps. I used to go snowboarding twice a week when I was a kid. I can never stay too long in the city, I have to head out to find peace. •





The blurred boundary between reality and fantasy lies at the heart of French photographer Vasantha Yoganathan's new photobook, *The Promise*. This book is the second part of his long-term project *A Myth of Two Souls*, which is planned to ultimately consist of seven photobooks, one corresponding to each chapter of *The Ramayana*, a Hindu mythological epic. The *Ramayana*, a tale first recorded in 300 BC by the Sanskrit poet Valmiki, tells the story of the divine prince Rama's exile and his relationship with Sita, his wife. Yoganathan re-tells this story and demonstrates the myth's themes of fantasy, love and togetherness.

The Promise is told through a combination of imagery and text. While the images are comprised of conceptual photographs and vernacular illustration images, the text tells in a more literal way the story of *The Ramayana* – a story which Yoganathan explains has been continuously rewritten and

reinterpreted over time, and on this occasion by Indian writer Arisha Sattar. The photographs are a mix of portraits of various couples, bright images of paint and electricity and landscape shots. Many of the images contain juxtapositions of the old and new, such as illustrations of ancient Hindu gods next to electric switches, illustrating the timelessness of the myth. Yoganathan also includes black and white blank pages which can be seen as spaces for us as viewers to personally interpret his mediation of the myth of *Ramayana*. Collectively, the fusion of text and imagery showcases the living spirit of India.

Yoganathan's mixed media approach highlights how the text and images can work together to manifest themes of love and imagination. For example, in the beginning of the photobook, Yoganathan includes a portrait of a woman standing in a corridor, staring into the sunlight with her arm resting against a white wall. This photograph is juxtaposed against text that reads, "I saw Rama stride towards the palace [...] my heart blossomed with love, as a flower does at the first touch of the sun's rays". This is one of several instances where the visual and the verbal express the same sentiment and experience. On a figurative level, the moving in and out of the visual and the verbal parallels a movement in and out of the literal and the imagined. The haze and mist that Yoganathan photographs demonstrate the blurred boundaries between the dimensions of reality versus fantasy. The photographs of haze also highlight the literal dust that covers much of India.





In contrast to the hazy photographs, a large part of Yoganathan's work is full of vibrant colours and bright lights. This is seen in his photographs of bright pink and white lights sparking and neon splatter paint.

Together, these symbols manifest a sense of celebration. This is brought further to light in the middle of the book, where a couple of pages are cut to a smaller size, showing a large group of people in colourful saris, dancing and celebrating. On the opposite side, we see a photograph of a man and a woman, presumably representing Rama and Sita.

Having them at the centre of the celebration shows the myth's centrality to people in India.

Yoganathan's photobook attempts to re-tell the story of Rama and Sita. While his visuals do express themes of love and blurred boundaries, it's difficult to reach a satisfying understanding of the story without some previous exposure to the myth. Nevertheless, across the mediums of text, illustrations and photography and across time from 300 BC to the present, we get a glimpse into the overlap of tradition with contemporary life in India. •