

Calcutta (or Kolkata as it is now known) has for centuries held a mirror to the cosmopolitan gaze, absorbing its attention while also using it to inspire its own offspring (such as myself) to explore the world for themselves. This is due in no small part to the disjunctions and contrasts that were built into the city from the start. Founded by the British in the seventeenth century, the settlement was defended by Fort William, an English citadel that was manned largely by Indian sepoy. The fort was—and still is—surrounded by expanses of land that offered clear fields of fire as well as parks in which to stroll. At the center of the city lay a small but enormously wealthy “White Town,” with so many extravagant mansions that Calcutta was for a while known as the “City of Palaces.” But a few minutes’ walk from these palaces lay some of the most impoverished shantytowns on earth, and they earned the city a sobriquet of another kind: “The City of Dreadful Night.”

These contrasts mesmerized the European artists who worked in the city in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries: Johan Zoffany, Thomas and William Daniell, and George Chinnery, for instance. The interest of the Daniells’ “views” of the city lies precisely in their juxtaposition of the palaces of British Nabobs with the beggars, mendicants, and vendors of the surrounding streets.

The shutter of Laura’s Deardorff camera transfigures this landscape of disjunctions, exclusions, and contrasts. I use the word *shutter* advisedly here, for I do believe that the originality of Laura’s work has much to do with the thinking that goes into the operation of this part of the camera. It was not until I observed Laura’s methods that this became apparent to me—and fortunately I was able to watch her quite closely because she happened to be living in my family house in Kolkata while she was photographing the city.

Laura’s arrival was a noteworthy event in our *para* (or neighborhood) for she was accompanied not only by her immediate family and an assistant, but also by a camera the like of which was a rare

sight: an enormous box-like object, it was made of mahogany and sported a dramatic hood. A 1950s reconstruction of a nineteenth-century original, the Deardorff stood atop a structure that looked more like a trestle than a tripod.

Every morning Laura and her assistant would set up her camera at the edge of the street that runs past our house. Within minutes a large crowd of curious onlookers would gather around and Laura would explain that she was taking pictures of passers-by. Conversations would begin, and those who were interested in being photographed would step forward. When people volunteered (and there was never any lack of candidates), Laura would invite them to look through the viewfinder and position themselves exactly as they wanted to be photographed. Only when the subject was completely satisfied would the cable release be pressed and the shutter opened.

Not until several weeks had passed did I begin to appreciate the significance of what Laura was doing: she was trying to dissolve the disjunctions between shutter and lens, subject and photographer. Her method was, in other words, collaborative, consensual, and participatory.

If these words are notable, it is because they so rarely occur in relation to photography. We speak of pictures being “taken” or images being “captured”; we remember Cartier-Bresson’s “decisive moment,” a phrase that evokes, in turn, a distinctly military metaphor: “the decisive battle.” If the protruding lens of an SLR constitutes the yin of photography, then Laura’s shutter is its yang: where one is intrusive and predatory the other is receptive and welcoming.

One of the miracles of this transactional method is that it does away with the contrasts and exclusions that play so prominent a part in depictions of Calcutta. Many of the portraits in this book are of the vendors and hawkers who go past my house every day, shouting out their wares. My neighbors and I have seen them so often that we have almost ceased to notice them. Laura’s

camera transforms and empowers these all-too-familiar figures; it is clear from the pictures that they have asserted control over how they are depicted. They are not “captured” by the camera; with the photographer’s help they have established a bond with the camera; they are giving it a gift, an offering.

This then is the magic of Laura’s book: the beautiful, marvelously vivid images that figure in it have been made possible by a carefully considered reconfiguration of the relationship that usually obtains between artist and subject, viewer and viewed.