

WE ARE ALWAYS WORKING



Works by Waswo X Waswo
with Rajesh Soni and Shyam Lal Kumhar

The Light Tactic of Humour

In a world where academic and even popular discourse has moved beyond Saidian concepts of Orientalism and Othering to a new and broader terrain that encompasses “whiteness”, “privilege”, and “cultural appropriation”, the foreign white artist in Asia finds his or herself in ever more uncomfortable political/philosophical positions. For those of us who make an attempt at art making (I consider photography intrinsically linked with the other arts), the knowledge that we will probably trespass a critical line of “correctness”, intentionally or unintentionally, is always there. As an artist-photographer who has lived and worked in India for well over sixteen years, a large part of my concerns have been with navigating, responding to, or combatting what sometimes seems as an insurmountable outsider-ness both within and beyond the Indian art scene. This “outsider-ness” extends to geographies elsewhere aside from India, where both white and non-white curators question the validity of a non-Indian claiming membership in the “Indian artist club”, bringing up the issue, rightly or wrongly, of racial identity as a signifier.

All of this sounds drearily overwhelming, and it is precisely due to this that my art has often veered into self-deprecating humour. The hand-colored photographs that I make in collaboration with Rajesh Soni are paired conceptually with the miniature paintings that I make in conjunction with R. Vijay. In the miniatures, the foreign photographer becomes a humorously sympathetic (though culturally bumbling) caricature placed in situations that address his very foreignness, his lack of understanding, his privilege and his otherness; his simple joys and also the depths of his alienation. On the other hand, we can imagine these photographs as the images this man in the miniatures has clicked. These photographs look outward at his Indian “subjects”, always portrayed against painted backdrops similar to the landscapes in the paintings. These portraits seem to be of the people the foreign photographer has encountered along his journeys through the imaginary miniature realms. They are not very serious documents as much as his personal souvenirs and the Indian people who populate them react with poses and expressions that range between welcoming, intrigued, aloof, suspicious, and stern. The effect of this conjoined aesthetic subterfuge is to subvert Ethnography and Orientalism, converting potentially oppressive encounters into playfully concocted and collaborative theatre.

Photographic self-portraiture has been another tactic of mild humour employed to signal the self-awareness of my practice. In these portraits I enact the role of the fedora-wearing gentleman of the paintings. As in the miniatures, he is at times a representative of self, at others an Everyman, at others an “Evil Orientalist” (a role that I've embraced with tongue-in-cheek glee). These self-portraits are tinted and painted by both of my Indian collaborators, Rajesh and Rakesh, and thought our collectors have yet to fully embrace them; to us these images are integral to the body of our work. They carry forward, and further complicate, the ever-evolving narrative.

Mild, self-critical humour always has a humanising influence. Employing it was never a deeply thought-out strategy, but a reply from the heart, a plea for acceptance and recognition regardless of identity and theory. To some extent that has succeeded. I continue to live and work in Udaipur, thinking of it as home, and slowly but surely our efforts have been recognised and sometimes acclaimed. The issues of Otherness and Othering remain, but keeping lightness in approach does the best job of lighting our way of making.



We Are Always Working

Archival black and white digital photograph hand-painted by Rajesh Soni
26 x 34 inches

Edition 1 of 2
2014



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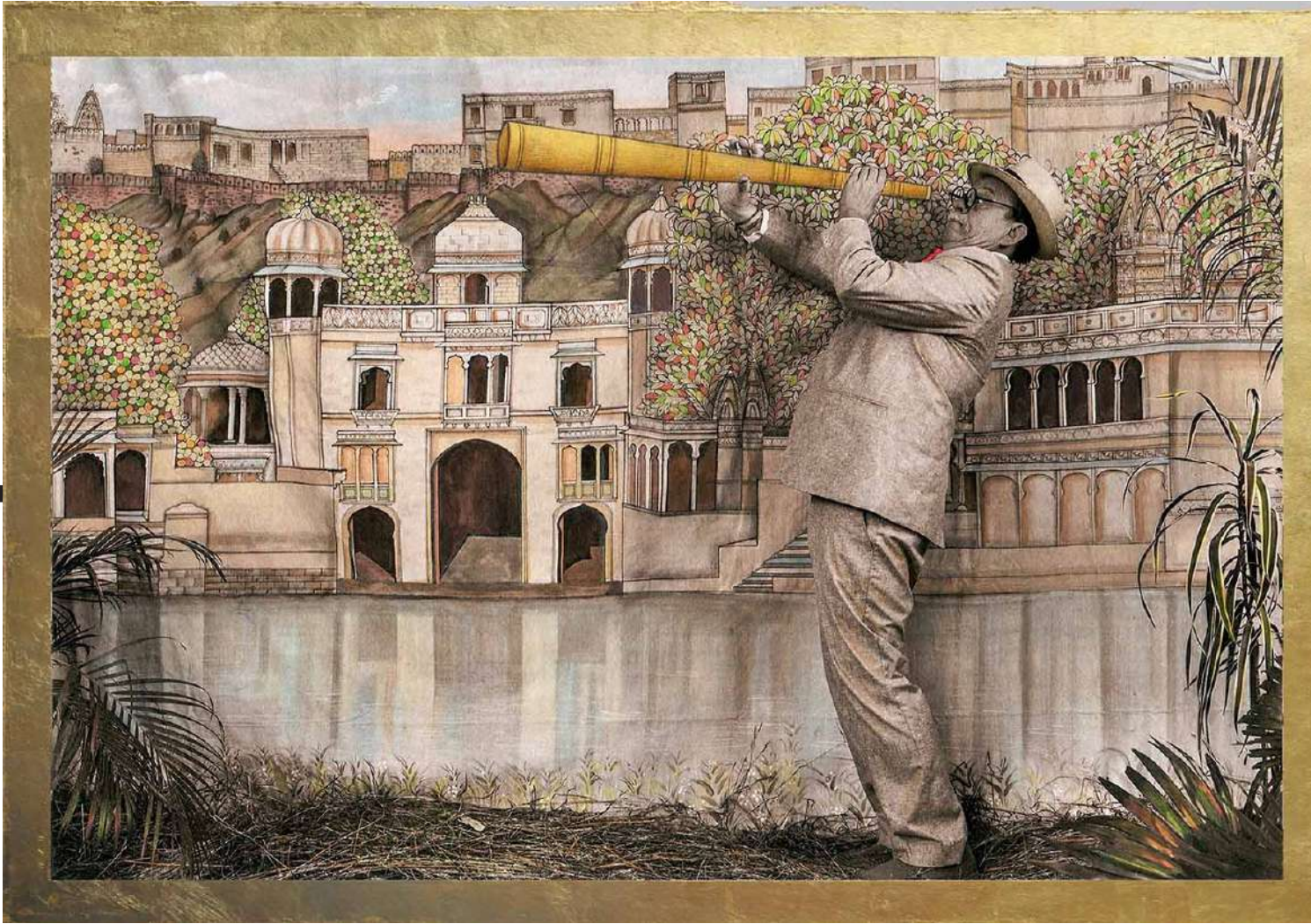
Edition 1 of 2
2014



The Observationist at Leisure in a Stolen Garden (crocodile)

Black and white digital photograph hand-painted by Rajesh Soni and R. Vijay
24 x 16 inches

Edition of 3
2017



The Observationist at Leisure in a Stolen Garden (telescope)

Black and white digital photograph hand-painted by Rajesh Soni and R. Vijay
24 x 16 inches

Edition of 3
2017



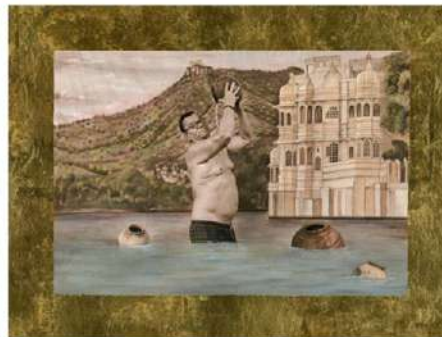
The Observationist at Leisure in a Stolen Garden (butterfly chase)

Black and white digital photograph hand-painted by Rajesh Soni and R. Vijay

24 x 16 inches

Edition of 3

2017



The Observationist in a Stolen Garden

Black and white digital photograph hand-painted by Rajesh Soni and R. Vijay

15 x 12 inches

Series of 10

2020



The Observationist in a Stolen Garden (Installation View)

Black and white digital photograph hand-painted by Rajesh Soni and R. Vijay

15 x 12 inches

Series of 10

2020



The Observationist in a Stolen Garden

Black and white digital photograph hand-painted by Rajesh Soni and R. Vijay
15 x 12 inches

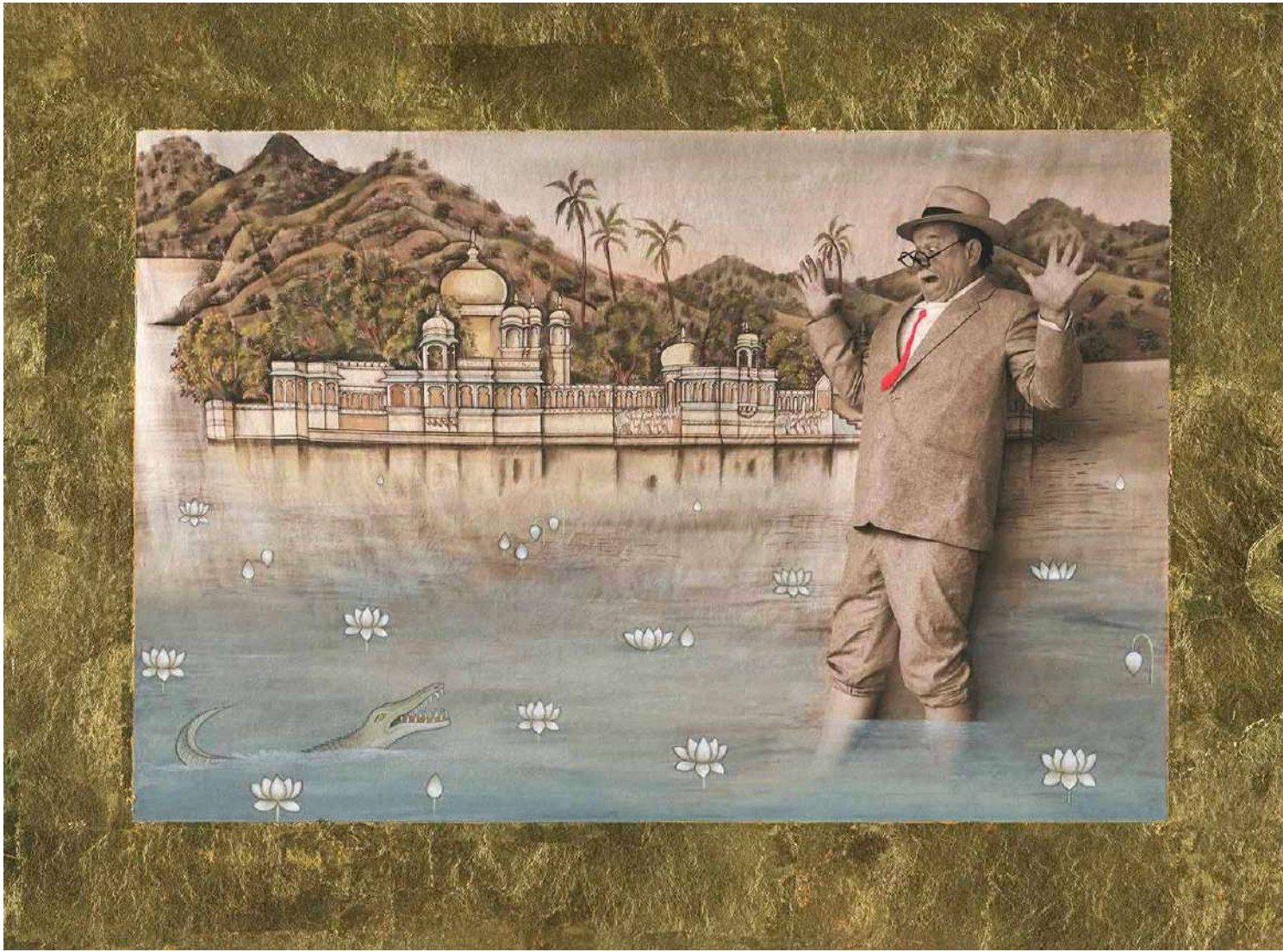
2020



The Observer in a Stolen Garden

Black and white digital photograph hand-painted by Rajesh Soni and R. Vijay
15 x 12 inches

2020



The Observer in a Stolen Garden

Black and white digital photograph hand-painted by Rajesh Soni and R. Vijay
15 x 12 inches

2020



The Observer in a Stolen Garden

Black and white digital photograph hand-painted by Rajesh Soni and R. Vijay
15 x 12 inches

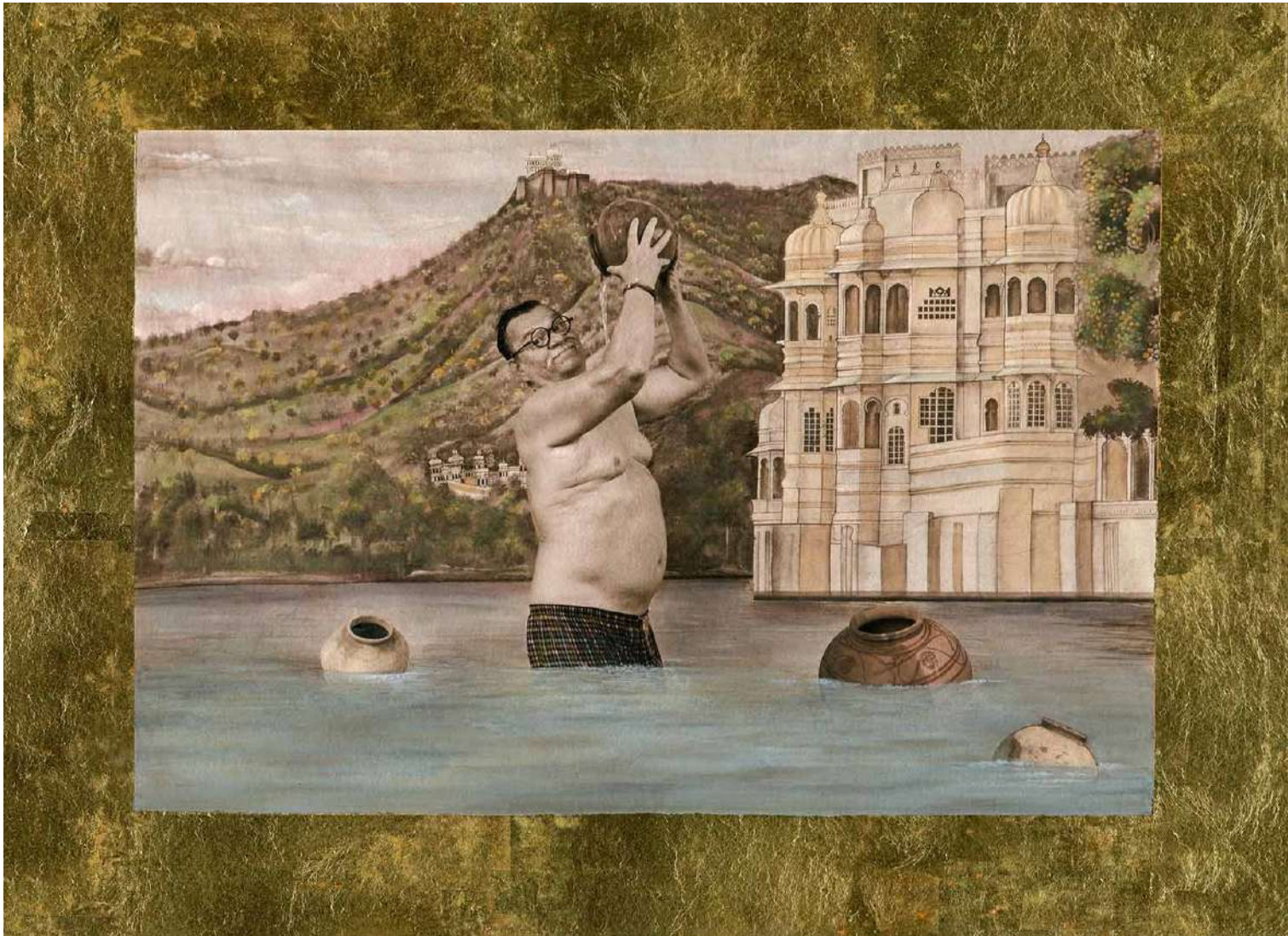
2020



The Observationist in a Stolen Garden

Black and white digital photograph hand-painted by Rajesh Soni and R. Vijay
15 x 12 inches

2020



The Observationist in a Stolen Garden

Black and white digital photograph hand-painted by Rajesh Soni and R. Vijay
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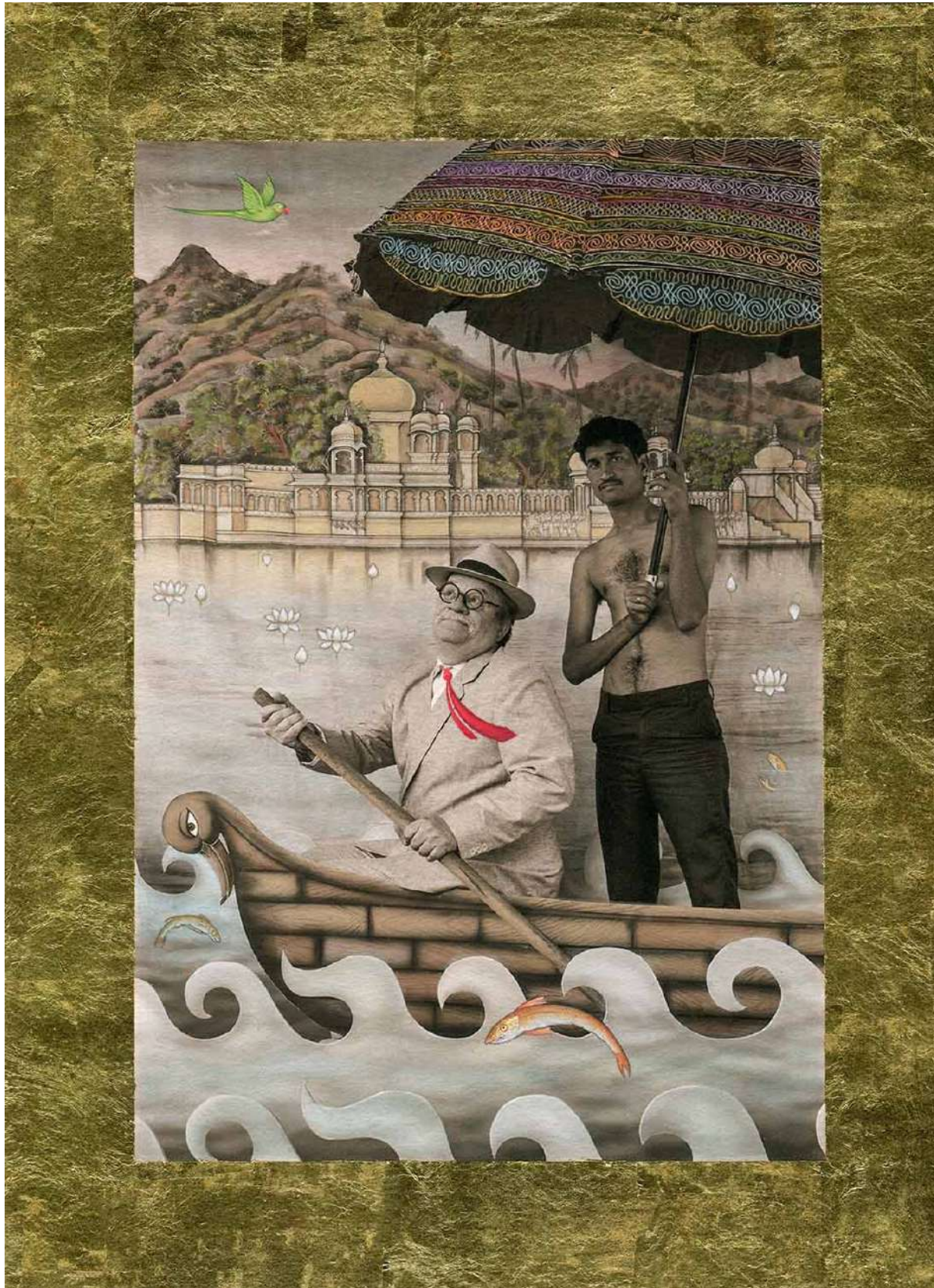
2020



The Observer in a Stolen Garden

Black and white digital photograph hand-painted by Rajesh Soni and R. Vijay
15 x 12 inches

2020



The Observationist in a Stolen Garden

Black and white digital photograph hand-painted by Rajesh Soni and R. Vijay
15 x 12 inches

2020



The Curator

Digital photograph printed on archival paper with archival ink and hand-painted by Rajesh Soni and R. Vijay

15 x 15 inches

Edition 2 of 3

2018

About the artist

Waswo X. Waswo was born in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, in the U.S.A. He studied at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, The Milwaukee Center for Photography, and Studio Marangoni, The Centre for Contemporary Photography in Florence, Italy. His books, *India Poems: The photographs*, published by Gallerie Publishers in 2006, and *Men of Rajasthan*, published by Serindia Contemporary in 2011 (soft-cover) and 2014 (hardcover), have been available worldwide. The artist, writer, and collector has lived and travelled in India for over sixteen years and he has made his home in Udaipur, Rajasthan, for the past nine years.

Photographic self-portraiture has been a tactic of mild humour employed to signal the self-awareness of Waswo's practice. In these portraits, he enacts the role of the fedora-wearing gentleman of the paintings. As in the miniatures, he is at times a representative of self, at others an everyman, at others an "evil Orientalist" (a role that Waswo has embraced with tongue-in-cheek glee). These self-portraits are tinted and painted by both of his Indian collaborators, Rajesh and Rakesh. They carry forward, and further complicate, the ever-evolving narrative. In one such self-portrait, Waswo is seen picking mangoes from a tree, quite literally the low-hanging 'exotic' fruits that his adopted country has offered up to him with ease. These fruits, and the picturesque surroundings, gently mock the conjectured paradisaical and languid lifestyle enjoyed by the expat artist à la Gauguin. In another, Waswo (or the character that has emanated from him), chases a butterfly with joyful abandon. The net becomes the symbol of science, categorisation, and invasive inquiry in which the character is both actively involved and oblivious to. Similarly, in another image he struggles to balance an enormous telescope through which he peers, seeking close observation but excluding the totality of his surroundings.



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