

#9

PhotoDemos Pamphlet Series
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KATHMANDU, NEPAL:

ARCHIVES FOR A VISUAL HISTORY

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Kathmandu in Nepal is a true South Asian megalopolis of a million people. Most of it is very different to the tourist-attracting crowded streets of Old Kathmandu. It is on the edge of the Old Town, adjacent to New Road, that the oldest surviving studio, Photo Concern, sprawls among six storeys of a modern office building. It is adjacent to the Peepal Bot, a local landmark. Established in 1960 by Dambar Bahadur Thapa, it is now run by his grand-daughter, Srijana and still retains its reputation as one of the most professional (and certainly the most expensive) studios in the city and has recently published its own manual of photography.

Born in Dhading, DB Thapa migrated to Calcutta at the age

of 12 and it was there that he learned photography. He returned to Kathmandu with a Mamiya Super 23, established Photo Concern as a competitor to two older studios, and soon was able to count crown prince Birendra among his clients. Business dramatically expanded in 1978 when Photo Concern was appointed as Kodak's sole agent in Nepal. At the height of its success Photo Concern employed 180 people.¹

Srijana's office on the fifth floor still displays a laminated wall-mounted map dated September 27th, 2005 documenting the presence of Kodak Express colour labs (ie negative processing and colour printing labs). This revealed a total of 153 in the whole country and of these most were in the Kathmandu Valley: 67 were in

¹ Alisha Sijapati, 'Still In Focus', Kathmandu Post, November 24, 2013.



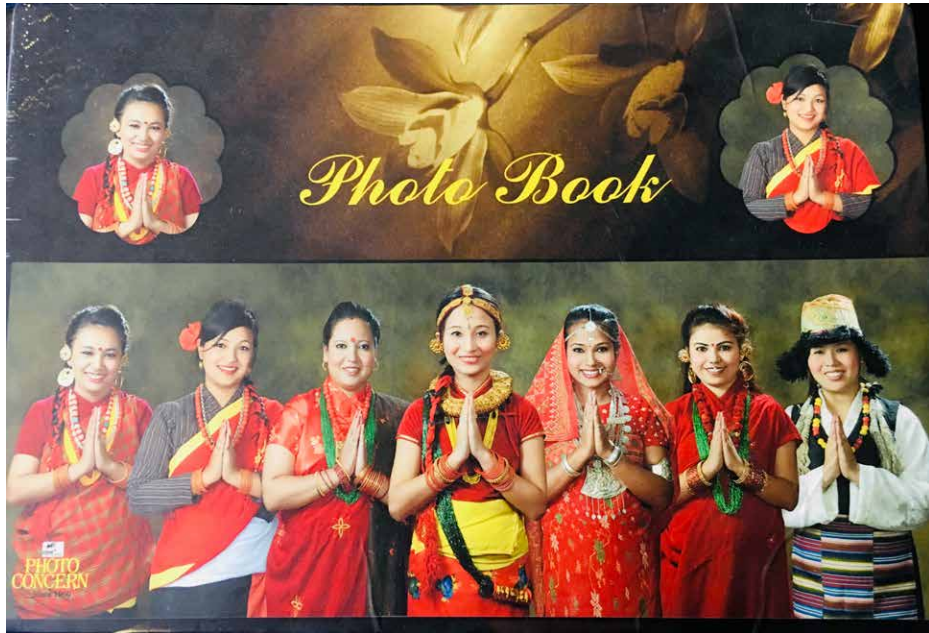
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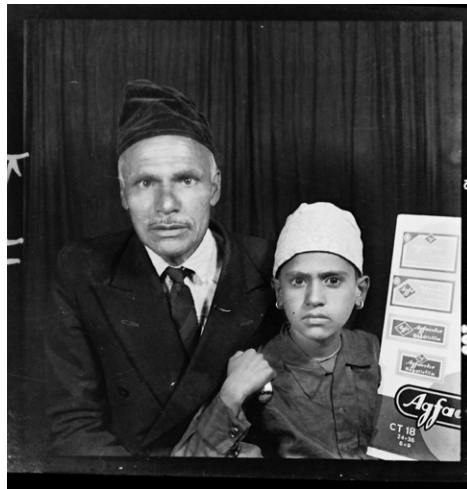
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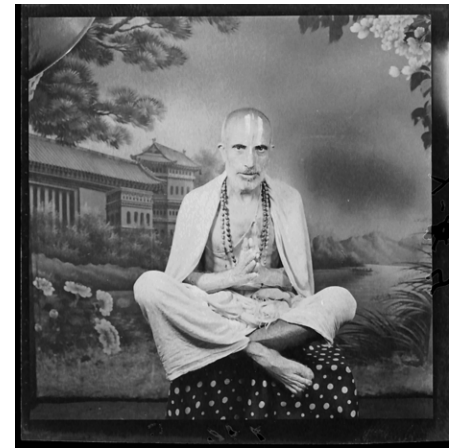
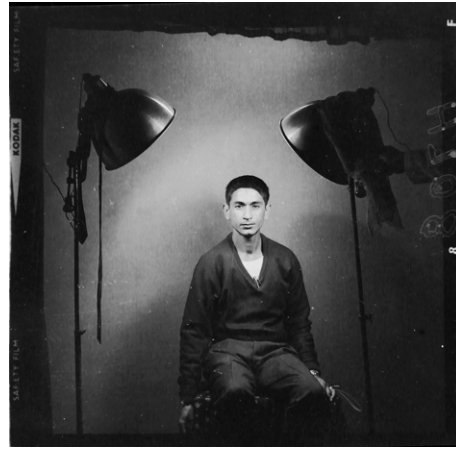


wearing very dark sunglasses, and Dhaka topi clad men who perform in the studio a theatrical impression of studiousness and literacy. There are also urban women, some dressed in western skirts, many holding umbrellas inside the studio. But there are also farmers displaying apprehension in front of the camera, women from the hills, and young urban labourers who are often pictured in groups, sharing cigarettes.

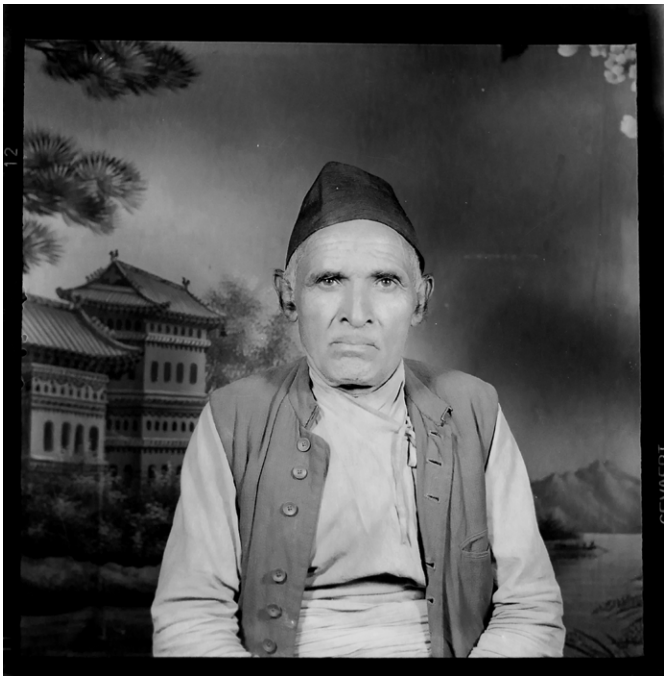
Photo Concern maintains a full studio which still sees a good amount of traffic and has diversified into the manufacture of plastic photo frames, the sale of flex printers, and the supply of photobooks. However, Dinesh is clear that 'photography has changed its course'. Once they sold one lakh (100,000) rolls of film each week he recalls, now of course they sell none. They ran their own colour lab in another location in Thamel which operated 24 hours a day processing and printing 200-300 rolls of film each day. Then digital arrived and this all came to an end in the valley although there was still demand in the Terai driven by

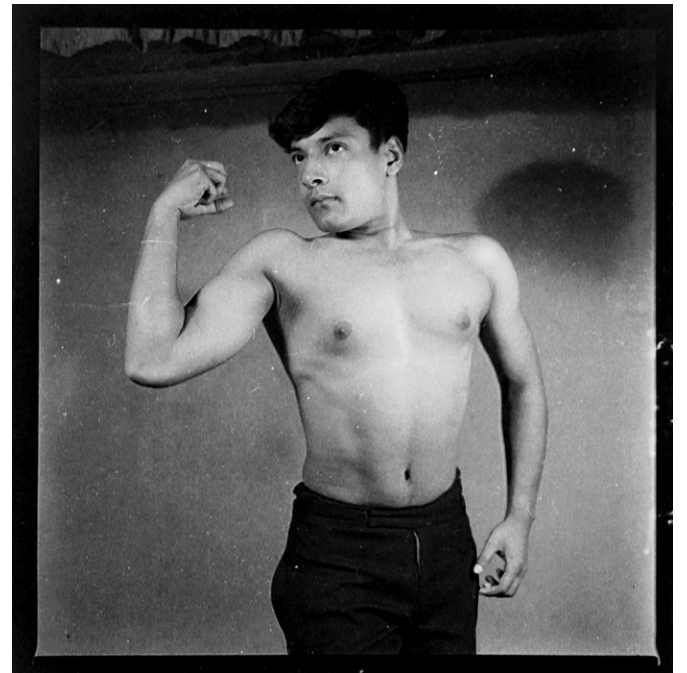
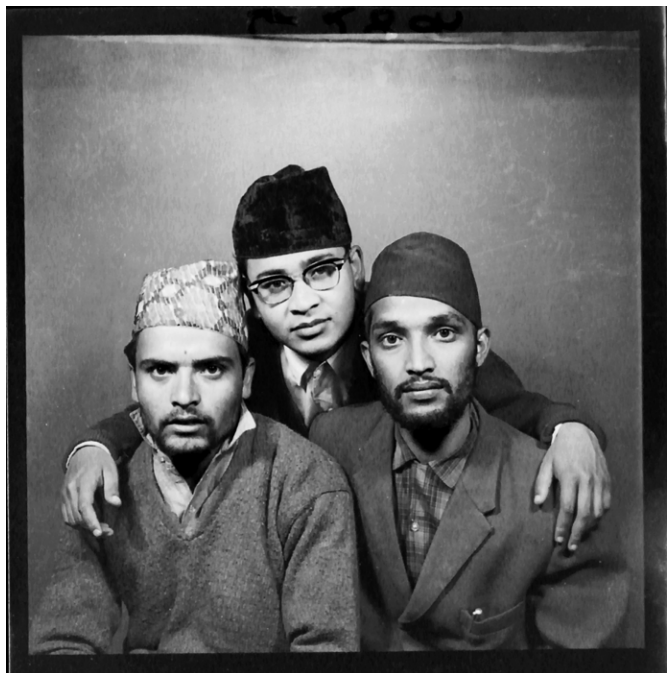
low-cost demand from India. The preference in the valley had always been for matt printing, whereas in the Terai there was a preference for glossy paper and for borders with decorative designs.

But new technologies have partly filled that gap: in 2008 Dinesh went to a wedding expo in China and brought a sublimation heat transfer printing device, which allowed the printing of photographic images on ceramic mugs. At first they were hard to sell, and he thought he had made a mistake in purchasing one, but now they sell 25,000 per month. Dinesh thought that the only person who could properly narrate the history of the studio was the now-retired Chief Photographer Mohammad Mustaqin Khan who now lives in Darbhanga just across the border in India.











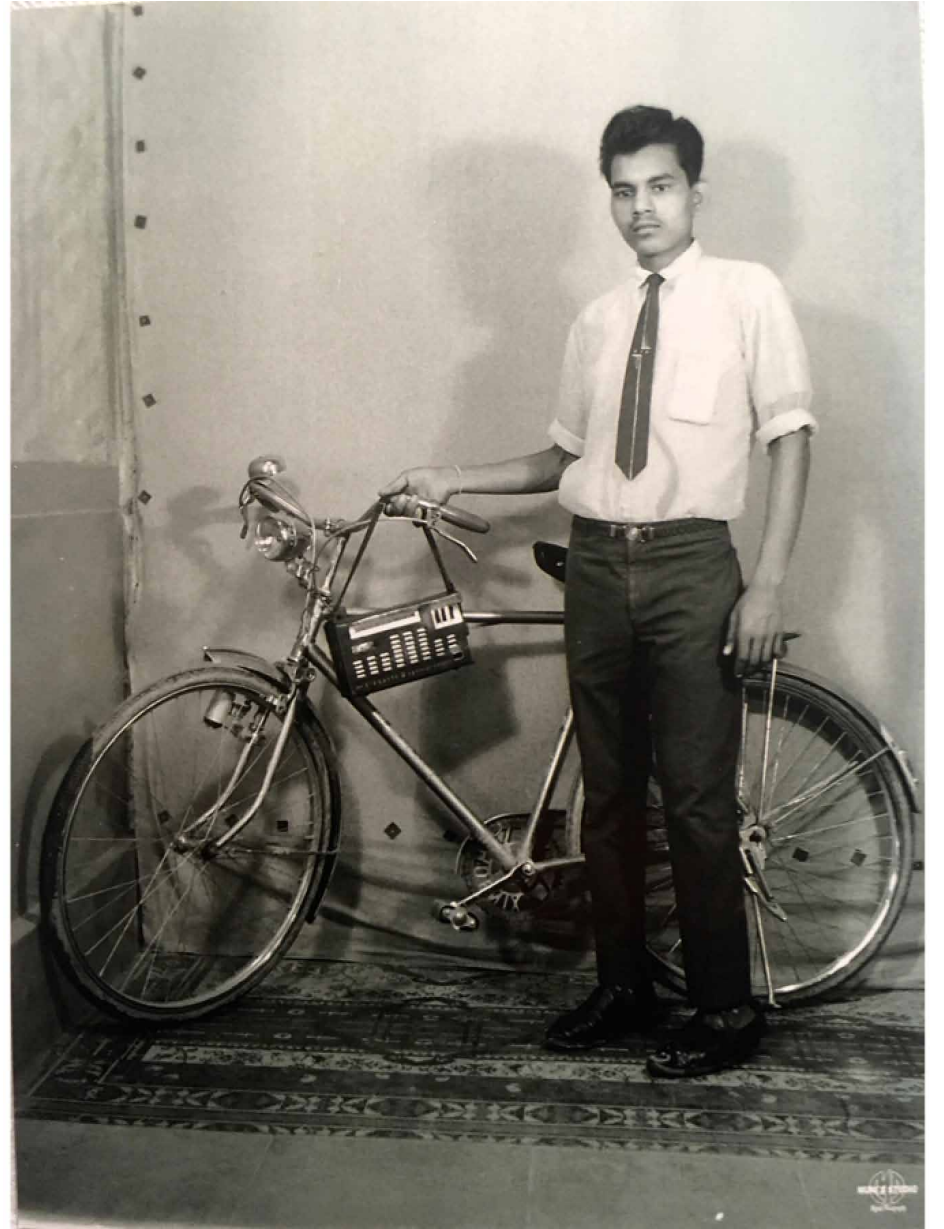
About ten minutes walk away from Photo Concern, much closer to the ancient Darbar Square, the ritual heart of Kathmandu (where a cluster of temples surround the Royal Palace and the Kumari's residence) are a number of much smaller and newer studios including Muni's Studio, Lawa Kush, Chakra and Bahadur. Muni's Studio lies just to the south of the ancient square, very close to Lawa Kush and seems energized and thriving on local demand. Ravi Muni Bajracharya is a deeply engaging impish character who has a profound sense of the value (both historical and financial) of his vast analogue archive. Using a handheld card template he has re-photographed thousands of his early medium format negatives which he then Photoshops and catalogues. He enthusiastically shares his vast computerized archive, highlighting images of men with bicycles and transistor radios, city females posing as 'traditional' hill women, and Kathmandu residents that requested Japanese dress or Thai backdrops.

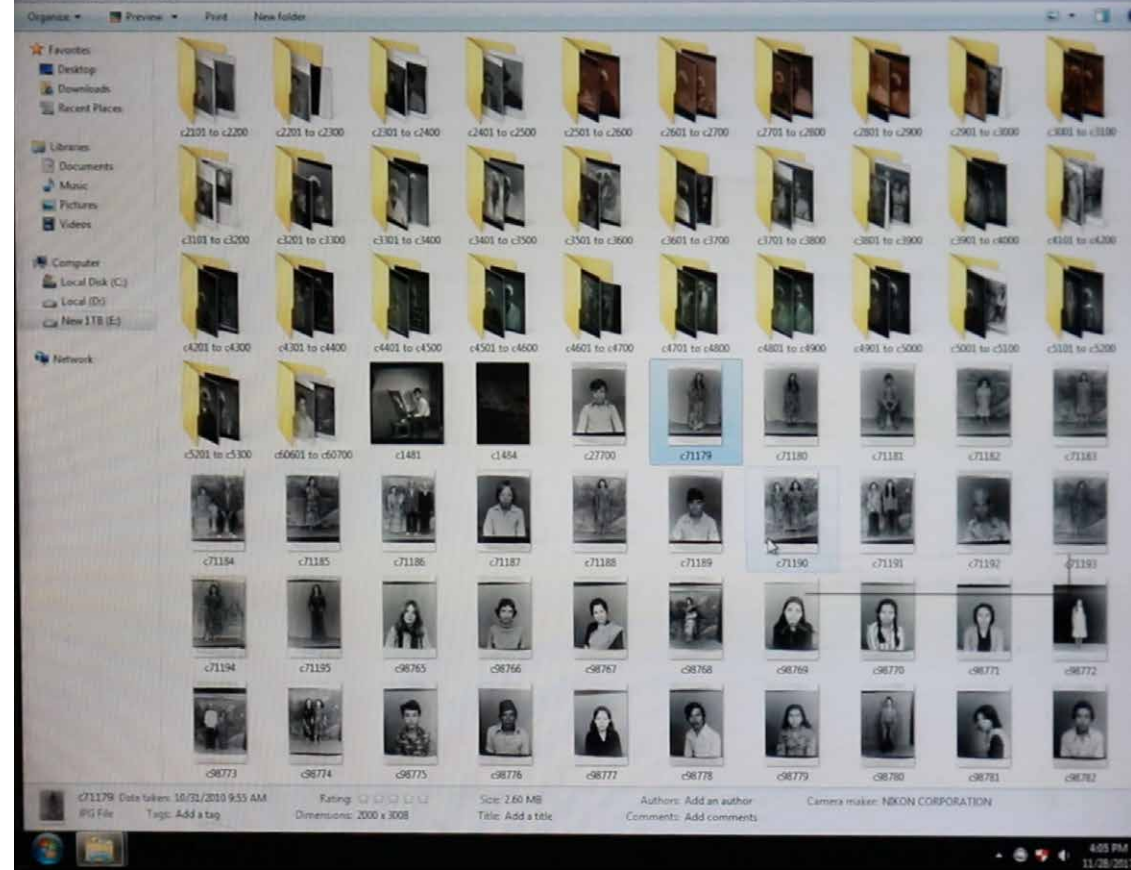
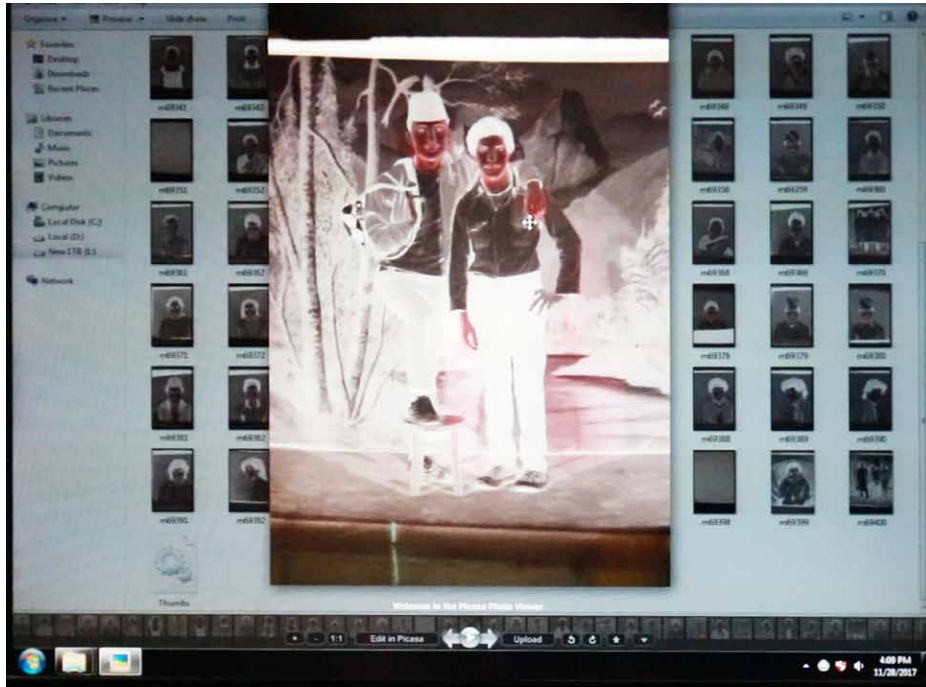
The sense of photography as a complex practice laying down an elaborate record of the past, but also as a window onto the future is provoked by contemporary

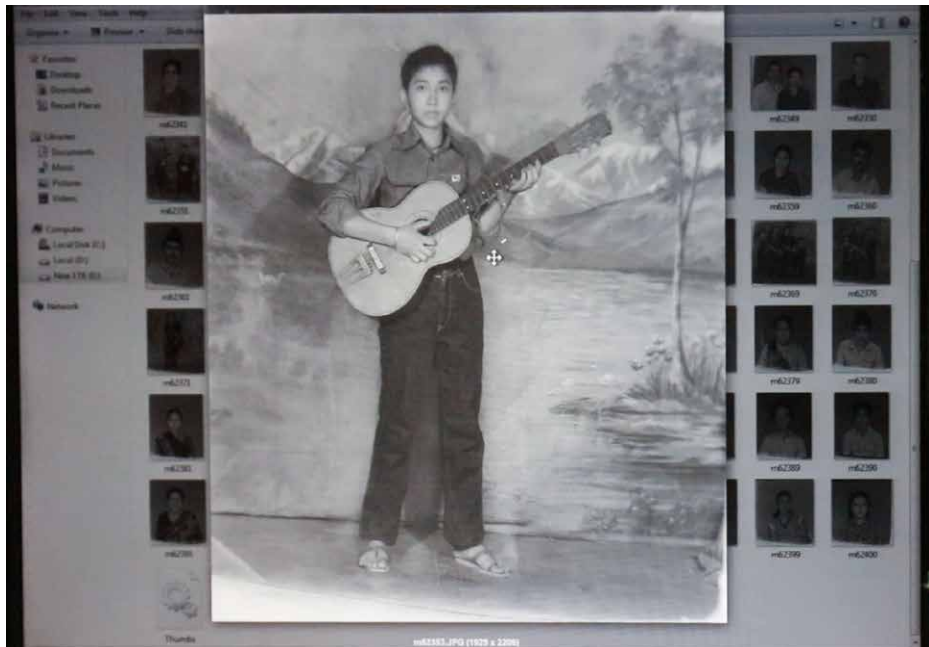


practices that are visible in the current activities of both studios. In PhotoConcern printed photobooks are promoted that highlight the new visual politics of indigenization in the post-civil war Kathmandu Valley. Newly 'lost-found' ethnicities are presented as theatrical persona to be enacted before the camera. Likewise, albeit it on a more modest scale, Ravi Muni offers a 'cultural dress' service to young female Newari customers. The camera and the photo studio provide the perfect apparatus for the formation of future essentializations.









Citizens of Photography: the Camera and the Political Imagination

The PhotoDemos project is an empirical anthropological investigation into the relationship between “representation” through everyday images and “representation” through politics.

The PhotoDemos Collective is a group of six researchers.

The names of the researchers and the countries in which they researched are:

Naluwembe Binaisa (Nigeria)
Vindhya Buthpitiya (Sri Lanka)
Konstantinos Kalantzis (Greece)
Christopher Pinney (Bangladesh, India, and Nepal)
Ileana L. Selejan (Nicaragua)
Sokphea Young (Cambodia)

The project is based in the Department of Anthropology at UCL and is funded by a European Research Council Advanced Grant no. 695283.

More information on <https://citizensofphotography.org>

Research in Nepal was made possible through the skill and expertise of Usha Titikshu.

Text and photos by Christopher Pinney
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