



The 'Real' Deal

Hailing from Manipur, L. Rajnikanta Singh's passion for art started early and only grew with time

Meeta Borah

It is easy to doodle on a piece of paper, or randomly make something on the computer and think of yourself as an artist, but real artists don't have it so easy. Every day is a struggle but it is a struggle that they embrace in order to grow. For Rajnikanta, the journey from Bishnupur to Delhi hasn't been a walk in the park but he wouldn't have it any other way.

Fresh Slate

The first time he fell in love with art was when he was in Class III. 'In my village, there was an art teacher who was trained at Santiniketan. He used to teach about four- five kids. I was passing by his store one day, I liked the artwork so I requested him to teach.' Rajnikanta finished 12th in Manipur then moved to Kolkata where he pursued B.F.A. (Painting) at the College of Visual Arts, followed by M.F.A.(Painting) at I.K.S.V.V. Khairagarh.

'I have done odd jobs in the past to earn money but nothing could hold my attention, and I realized that only art was the best fit for me.'



During BFA, he had a hard time keeping up. 'I had to learn everything from scratch. I had no idea about sketching and no formal training. For artists in the Northeast, there is no art scene as such, so your techniques are very raw. I felt like, before BFA, I didn't know anything. But MFA was much smoother sailing since I got my basics right during BFA.'

Paint With Passion

Rajnikanta is specially focussed on portraits. 'I feel that the spiritually or the soul of a person is evident in the facial expressions. There are billions of people on Earth, and yet no two faces are exactly the same, that

interests me. Also, I make a point, not to paint portraits of famous people. Rather, I want my art to make the unknown known.'

We are all aware that artists struggle financially and things are more difficult for artists like Rajnikanta who are into realistic work. 'It takes me close to 4-6 months to finish an artwork. People who pursue commercial art can easily display their work and can also work on commercial assignments but that is not the case for me.' There are times when he is financially stable, and then there are months where he has to borrow from loved ones. Even though it is taxing financially, he is adamant on purely freelancing. He doesn't have any other job. 'I take part in competitions sometimes to earn a little money but the money I win, I try and invest it back in my art.' He usually comes by work through friends or companies interested in him. He mainly uses social media to promote his work.

Manipur to Barcelona

During the last days of MFA, he was making art with dark themes. That was the time when he had a painful break up. 'She wanted to get married but I didn't have much to support her so we had to call it quits. I was looking through a catalogue and came across an artist whose artwork showcased a lot of anger, and dark themes, and I tried to follow that style. I made around 15-20 works of art like that. After finishing my MFA, I started to work with a senior in Mumbai, working on fibreglass but I wasn't satisfied and decided to move to Delhi. The art scene in Delhi is very different from Mumbai and the work that I had created didn't get much response. It is understandable many people do not like artwork in their home to have dark tones. By then, I had calmed down mentally as well and I wanted to work on something more positive. Even in the art world, not all artists will spend 6 months working on a project but I took it up as a challenge. I didn't want to do a non-Manipuri portrait as I wouldn't relate to it much. Then I came across this picture, clicked by Oinam Doren who was taking photos to be used in a museum at Shillong. I don't know who the woman is, but something clicked and I started working.'

He entered this artwork titled 'Mesmerizing Beauty' in the International Figurative Painting and Sculpture Competition in 2017. 'I learned about the competition through Facebook. In the first round, there were only two people (including him) selected from India and in the final round, there was only me. I had to send my painting to Barcelona by 5th June. I enquired at Fedex about how much it would take, they said it would cost



Mesmerizing Beauty

Awards

- 2018: Prafulla Dahanukar National Gold Medal Award For Painting
- 2017: Prafulla Dahanukar Merit Award, North East Zone, Painting
- 2011: Professor Dr. Suvon Som Memorial Awards For Painting
- 2009: Awards for graphics from C.V.A. Annual Exhibition, Kolkata

around INR 15,000 but I didn't have the money. I had to send it by government mail. It reached Real Madrid but it wasn't being moved to Barcelona. I called them and lodged complaints but to no avail. The deadline was getting closer so I ended up calling the organizers. They must have sympathised with my story so they spent their own money to transfer the painting from Real Madrid to Barcelona. But it missed the deadline. I was rather heartbroken but then I got a call, they said they wanted to acquire the painting for 3000 euros. I didn't know how much that was worth so I asked my friends. They told me to take it and I did. I didn't do any sort of bargaining,' said Rajnikanta with a laugh. The painting now hangs at MEAM- Museu Europeu d'Art Modern, Barcelona, Spain. 🇪🇸

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Photo: Nejib Ahmed

Focusing on the Behind-The-Lens Conservationists

Two wildlife photographers help us understand what it takes to capture moments out in the wild

Meeta Borah



In 2015, a new species of macaque named White-cheeked Macaque from India was reported; it was photographed by Dr Ranjan Kumar Das and Udayan in Eastern Arunachal Pradesh.



Conservationists with Cameras

Head of Aaranyak's* Wildlife Genetics Division, Udayan Borthakur is a known name in the field of wildlife photography. A wildlife biologist by profession, he is working on conservation genetics of threatened mammals and birds in South and South East Asia, with particular emphasis in Northeast India. He also recently established the Media Production & Communications Division at Aaranyak. Another recognized name is Nejb Ahmed. Working for wildlife conservation since 2012, he is an amateur wildlife photographer, and founder secretary of NGO Wild Wings, Assam.

For Udayan, he was always interested in photography and wildlife since his school days. 'My passion for photography and wildlife merged after completing my master degree, when I started working in the field of wildlife research.' For Nejb, it also started when he started working. 'As I was involved with wildlife conservation, I used to visit national parks, wildlife sanctuaries, and forest reserves quite often. I used to click photos now and then; pretty soon, I started to really like taking pictures and that is where it all started.'

Udayan is very inspired by Dhritiman Mukherjee. 'I have worked closely with him and seen his dedication towards the field, which has inspired me a lot. Dhritiman, I think, is the only true professional wildlife photographer in the country who makes a living by selling photographs and not other things like organizing tours and workshops in the name of wildlife photography! Also, I follow and admire the work of Art Wolfe, Danny Green, Andy Rouse, Jayanth Sharma, to name a few.' For Nejb, he looks up Sudhir Shivaram, Karen Lunney, Annette Bonnier, Matthew Smith, Jayanth Sharma, Sandesh Kadur, etc.

Mesmerizing Northeast

Both reveal that it is a real treat to pursue wildlife photography while being based out of the Northeast.

There is something magical about capturing a bird mid-flight or a close-up shot of a shy animal in its natural habitat on film, but what is even more magical is all the things that you don't get to see in the photo. Venturing into the natural habitat, waiting patiently for a moment that may or may not happen, becoming one with the surrounding while respecting the laws of the jungle, are all aspects that add to the charm of the photo. Wildlife photographers don't have it easy but when they sling their heavy cameras and equipment around their neck and over their shoulders, and venture through lesser traversed spaces and tiring terrains, they are motivated by the need to raise awareness about wildlife in a way that no textbook or encyclopaedia can.



Photo: Udayan Borthakur

'The Swamp Francolin is not a very rare bird in this part of the country, but it is extremely shy and therefore taking an eye level shot is difficult. This shot was taken by placing a hide and waiting for hours for the birds to come out in the open without scaring them.' Location: Nimati Wetlands, Jorhat.



A photograph by Udayan reached the final round of BBC World Wildlife Photographer of the Year 2015.



'The diversity of the Northeast is fascinating! There are many places yet to be explored and documented. The excitement of getting something new is there when I shoot, which is not the case in many other places of the country,' shares Udayan.

Nejib shares that although there are more opportunities to capture real striking pictures in the Northeast, there are challenges as well. 'For example,

we have very dense forests and it is not always easy to get a clear/open frame of some subjects, but the advantage is that there are so many areas which are yet to be explored.'

Whether it be in the Northeast or elsewhere, wildlife photographers do need to overcome quite a few challenges. 'You need to know about the habitat, behaviour of the species, location is also important,



Nejb's picture titled 'Gem in Sky' was published on National Geographic YourShot



and you need a lot of patience,' shares Nejb. 'But after waiting for several years to spot a particular species, when you finally get that perfect shot, it's all worthwhile.'


Udayan shares that aside from the external challenges, there is one struggle that proves to be the most challenging for photographers in this field of work. 'The most challenging part is to take a picture that others have not already taken! Showing things differently in photography and using your own creativity and hard work. Other physical difficulties are secondary to this.'

Generating Awareness

For wildlife photographers, it doesn't end with capturing the perfect moment. Their work, when circulated among the masses, through publications or online help generate awareness. 'Photography is a strong media for reaching the masses and also convincing people who can contribute to conservation through their actions and also decision making,' commented Udayan. Shooting wildlife isn't only about buying the correct gear or equipment. 'One must love and respect wildlife before knowing how to use a camera,' remarked Nejb.

'For me, wildlife comes first and I suggest the same to everyone. Sometimes simply observing wildlife without lifting the camera is also rewarding! Knowing photography techniques and equipment inside out is essential when someone is doing the job very seriously, but if one does not know the subject and its behaviour and importance, techniques hold no meaning,' Udayan adds. He also shares that wildlife, not photography, should be the top priority. 'Sometimes photographers, just to get that perfect shot, do things that harm wildlife. I think that should not be the case, wildlife photographers should follow ethics in their approaches when obtaining a photograph.'

Passionate wildlife photographers like Udayan and Nejb have proved through their work and dedication

that being a wildlife photographer is not only about capturing the perfect shot, it is to lend conservation a hand through colourful striking images that leave a lasting impression. 

*Aaranyak is a leading wildlife NGO based in Guwahati.

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Photo: Nejb Ahmed