

MEERA MUKHERJEE: PHOTOGRAPHS BY ARUN GANGULY

CURATORS' NOTE

“I realised that something momentous was happening...” This is how the octogenarian photographer, Arun Ganguly, looks back on the first time he began photographing the working process of Meera Mukherjee at her residence on Paddapukur Road in Bhowanipur in January 1978. It was indeed the beginning of a remarkable encounter – a coming together of the creative engagements of a sculptor and a photographer, where each of their acts of image-making entered into a deep dialogue with each other. The photographer had by then stepped out of his successful career in the advertising industry to pursue his own line of professional interests in free-lance and commissioned work. Introduced to the artist by a common friend, Kishore Chatterjee, the immediate requirement of preparing colour transparencies of Meera Mukherjee’s works for an illustrated lecture she was due to present (possibly at the Fine Arts Faculty at M.S. University of Baroda) expanded into an intense stage-by-stage documentation of her process of sculpting in her reworked indigenous *cire perdue* technique. Aware of the limited life of colour photography, Arun Ganguly set up a parallel camera with black and white film to produce his own photographic archive on her working methods that he developed over several seasons of her work.

His documentation was as methodical and intense as the artist’s work process - as it proceeded from modelling the core in layers of different kinds of clay, to the detailing of the forms with coils of wax, to the making of protruding channels from the wax bodies to allow the later process of dewaxing in the kiln, and the preparation of the outer clay moulds. He moved with the works from the Paddapukur Road residence, where the models in clay and wax were all readied, to her studio in the village of Elachi near Narendrapur, in the south-eastern outskirts of Calcutta, where they were taken for metal casting in a foundry. This was a temporary foundry set up by Meera Mukherjee at a space that belonged to Nirmal Sengupta, her lifelong friend and partner. From the care and intimacy of the work of the hand, the photographs take us into the bodily toil of the artist and her team in the preparation of the furnaces, the melting of scrap and mixed metals, the pouring of hot metal into the upturned moulds, and the collective labour of the nights of casting.

Break here for the second panel

If these photographs bear vivid testimony to the Meera Mukherjee’s self-fashioning of “the artist as a workman”, they also narrate the story of the making of a community of artisans she trained and gathered around her. Her work became for her a way of life, an alternative chosen mode of existence, as she carried the indigenous lost-wax technique of metal-casting that she had learnt during her survey of traditional metal craftsmen of India into new orders of scale and innovation, and as she simultaneously moved her individual practice into a space of collective work. At the time Arun Ganguly began his photographic journey with her, Meera Mukherjee was poised at a significant phase of her career. Finding a working groove and community at Elachi had enhanced the volume of her work each season and the technical acumen of her casting and welding techniques.

Travelling in time from 1978 to the first half of the 1990s, Arun Ganguly's camera keeps moving from the artist to material, processes, tools, objects and occasions, and lovingly dwells on the faces of people (residents, workers and visitors) and everyday life at Elachi. Through the work he performs, the photographer himself becomes a member of this community – one which extends from Meera Mukherjee's people to her finished sculptures, placed on display on the grounds at Elachi or at the Birla Academy of Art and Culture, Calcutta, whom the artist looked upon as her "professional family" and always felt a little sad to part with. The photographs showcased here are embedded in this relationship of trust and empathy between the photographer and the artist. From being unfamiliar neighbours to becoming friends, they could work with each other with natural ease, with Meera Mukherjee seldom posing, engrossed in her work, leaving Arun Ganguly to freely and unobtrusively carry on with his. When the number of sculptures to be photographed was large, he often brought them across to his own house down the road, where he had more space to photograph these in natural light.

Meticulously dated and catalogued, Arun Ganguly's photographic series on the artist (taken during January-February 1978, December 1990, March 1993 and January 1995), poignantly carries over into the months after her sudden death on 27th January 1998. This is when he takes on the documentation of the finishing of Meera Mukherjee's last work, her monumental seated Buddha, and leaves us with the faces of the "last cast" of the work team she had trained and nurtured. Here was a parting tribute done exactly the way Meera Mukherjee would have wanted.

We are honoured to launch Meera Mukherjee's centenary year with this photographic exhibition at Galerie 88, drawing on Arun Ganguly's extraordinary archive of almost 700 black and white and colour negatives and a set of prints that the gallery acquired from him in 2014.

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Acknowledgements

Our sincere gratitude to:

Arun Ganguly

Supriya Banerjee and her team at Galerie 88

Photographer, Debanjan Das

Research assistants, Anuja Mukherjee and Jigisha Bhattacharya