

VISUAL STORYTELLING

Recipient of The Society and DepicT! 2013 Cinematography Award, Chintan Gohil reveals the project the prize money will help fund, and explains why acknowledging cinematography is so vital



“Cinematography is a crucial part of any film, especially documentary”, says filmmaker, photographer and architect Chintan Gohil. “It has the power to either engage an audience or not.”

For the first time this year, The Society partnered with DepicT! (Watershed’s International short film competition), to introduce a new award celebrating the art of cinematography. Chintan was the worthy winner, and she is emphatic about the importance of recognising cinematography within image making.

“Cinematography frequently takes a backseat, while the narrative leads the production”, she says. “I believe that more emphasis needs to be placed on cinematography, and this award aims to do that.”

“Winning the bursary is very important to me. It is a true honour to receive an award from a prestigious and longstanding institution like The Society. It confers recognition, not just on me, but on filmmakers all over the world who are striving to do beautiful yet meaningful work.”

The prize money from her award will help fund a project entitled *A Good Life*, which will look at food, shelter and clothing – and their connection to sustainability.

Although photography is a relatively recent passion for Chintan, she was influenced

and surrounded by art throughout her childhood in India.

“My father wrote poetry, had good taste in art and music, and had many friends who were artists”, she says. “However, we didn’t own a TV, and my exposure to anything aside from stories of my father’s friends, local newspaper articles on art and culture, and cassettes of Indian classical music, was limited. I grew up in a small village until I was seven, and then in a small town in Gujarat.”

Chintan left home aged 17, to study architecture. Coming from a typical small town, and a reasonably traditional lower middle class family, her desire to travel was considered unusual.

“My parents have come to accept and appreciate my journey, which is not typical of girls in my extended family”, she says.

“I have lived in India, the UK and the Netherlands, and now my life is pretty nomadic. I travel to remote parts of India and other countries to shoot videos. I will be spending the next three months in Thailand on an artists’ residency programme at a documentary centre.”

It was Chintan’s interest in architecture that slowly but surely led her to photography. She studied at a premier architecture institution in India, where she was exposed

not only to the work of architects, but to that of artists, photographers and filmmakers too.

“I was fascinated by some of the eastern European filmmakers, like Andrei Tarkovsky, Béla Tarr and Andrzej Wajda”, she says. “Tarkovsky was special in particular; he has a still, almost photo-like, quality to his videos, where only a very small element of the frame is moving, and it’s like a beautifully composed photograph, somewhat alive.”

“During my studies, I was introduced to the concepts of composition, light and shadow, and storytelling. These components are as essential to the discipline of architecture as they are to photography and film. My education played a crucial role in developing my sensitivity and capability as a visual artist.”

Growing up in the 1980s and 90s, Chintan witnessed a major shift in Indian society, as changes in the economy changed the fabric of middle income India, and she began to question her own values and those of the people around her, something that subsequently shaped her ensuing work.

“I started researching and working on the issues of urban India, focusing on slums, low income housing, and the informal market economy”, she says. “I was exposed to the importance of sustainability while I



Far left A woman worker on her farm. Women play a pivotal role in agriculture but their contribution to agriculture and other sectors remain unaccounted for.

Above A Muslim woman at her squat in Ahmedabad, many like her are waiting for support from the government to help them to build low cost houses.

Left Gujjars in Kashmir. Gujjars are a nomadic tribe of the Himalayan Kashmir region – traditionally they were cattle herders.

worked in London with a corporate architecture firm, where I was frustrated designing green golf courses in deserts like UAE.

“My frustration grew as I worked on the masterplan for the London 2012 Olympics, which promised a lot to the people already living in the Lee Valley but didn’t deliver enough.

“I left London with that frustration, and came to India to promote mud buildings.

This work strengthened my interests in the issues of sustainability and environment.”

Chintan frequently highlights social and political issues through her photography and video. She summarises the reason for this with the old adage, ‘If you aren’t part of the solution, you’re part of the problem’.

“We are living in crucial times”, she says. “The world is changing at a rapid pace – on environmental and social fronts – and

a lot of those changes are bringing negative impacts. I don’t want to be part of the problem, so I do what I can to bring about solutions. Photography and film are powerful mediums to create awareness; they can make people think, question, investigate and take action.

“I’d always been aware of what was happening in the socio-political sphere, and had a strong desire to make documentary films.



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Above and right Gujjars in Kashmir. Their way of life is now under threat due to changes in the social and political climate of that part of India.

Left Khadi weavers in Gujarat. Khadi is a symbol of self-reliance promoted by Gandhi and it is now in decline due to various socio-economic changes faced by modern India.

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“This was due to feeling frustrated about the state of the world, and in particular India, and realising that my work in architecture – promoting mud buildings and researching the informal economy and slums in the city – was something that required persistent efforts with few visible results.

“Then by chance, I met filmmaker Jason Taylor at a time when I was wondering what to do next. He needed help starting up *The Source Project*, so I joined in and he became my next teacher.”

Today, Chintan works primarily on two themes that combine her interests: one focuses on environmental and social issues, and the other on craft and sustainable building technologies.

“Among other things, I am developing a series of films for a university, documenting traditional crafts”, she says. “I will be looking at the concept of shelter from a sustainability point of view during my residency in Thailand.”

Although Chintan is clearly passionate about filmmaking, stills photography remains an integral part of her work process.

“Most of my films consist of clips which have constant frames”, she says. “Instead of my moving the camera, the movement occurs within the frame.”

“For me, this kind of filming is part still photography and part video. The composition, proportions and lighting play an equally important role.”

Apart from occasional use of her iPhone, a Canon EOS 7D is Chintan’s camera of

choice for both stills and video.

“I use fixed primes mainly”, she says, “a 35mm f/2, and a 17-24 f/4. I need faster lenses for a good depth of field, and I pretty much rely on a 50mm f/1.8 and 35mm f/2 for that. I find that working with lenses of smaller size and weight is easy, and less intimidating for the subjects when I’m filming. I rely and insist on good natural lighting.

“I normally edit on my MacBook Pro, which can be a bit slow, but it gives me the flexibility to be anywhere – on a beach or in the mountains – and still be able to work.”

Chintan uploads her work onto Vimeo, and distributes it through email and various social media outlets. “Most of my work is distributed through social media – it’s very important to my practice”, she says. “However, there is also a catch here, because the vast amount of information available online has resulted in people having lower and lower attention spans.”

Despite the availability of ever better HD video capable DSLRs, increasing broadband speeds and so on, Chintan sees a future for the still image. “Photography and video are both tools to communicate stories”, she says, “but they have unique capacities and potentials, as well as their own unique limitations. Photos tend to work better in many situations. While the way we view photographs made with professional DSLRs may change, there will always be a place for still imagery in visual storytelling.”

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DEPICT! AND THE ROYAL PHOTOGRAPHIC SOCIETY CINEMATOGRAPHY AWARD

The Depict! and The Royal Photographic Society Cinematography Award will be continuing for 2014.

Says RPS Education Manager Liz Williams, “The RPS is delighted to be working with Watershed and Depict! in offering an award for the best cinematography among the shortlisted films.

“The Society has always been a strong supporter of the moving image, conferring RPS Awards on the likes of Roger Deakins, John Mathieson and Sir Ridley Scott.

“We feel it’s important to recognise this swiftly changing and influential medium, by helping and supporting up and coming film makers. This award is a perfect way of doing so.”

Says Depict! producer Maddy Probst, “The partnership with the RPS is very exciting for Depict! We share a passion for imagemaking, innovative practice and an ambition to uncover and progress distinctive creative talent.”

• Look out for a 2014 call for entries at www.depict.org