

Cumulative Affect: Museum Collections, Photography and Studio Portraiture

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Abstract

This article—formatted as a conversation between two curators—concerns affect photography and museum collections. Sparked by studio portraiture in the Jhabvala Collection of South Asian Photography in the Royal Ontario Museum, Toronto, the authors explore the concept of “cumulative affect” and reflect on the possibilities of applying current scholarship on affect to museum collections. They argue that it is the conventions in a genre like studio portrait photography, and its repetitive nature, which define its affective force. The idea of “cumulative affect” is in direct contrast with claims that have been made about other kinds of photographs, such as images of violence, which argue that over-exposure decreases the impact of such images leading to a desensitized and disaffected viewer.

Keywords: cumulative affect, studio portraiture, Jhabvala Collection

Most studies on affect and photography tend to focus on single images and their power to “do things,” such as trigger response, provoke action, or make change. Studio portraits offer a different perspective. A genre largely based on convention (i.e. repetition of pose, props, framing devices), studio portraiture has affective power not for the uniqueness of single photographs—although there are examples of this—but rather for the attributes these photographs share as a whole, for the effect they have as a collective group on something in our selves that surpasses emotion. It is this characteristic that we are calling “cumulative affect.” Cumulative affect refers to the emotive reaction caused by a photograph not because of something inherent in a single image alone, but rather because it shares qualities with a body of images already familiar to the viewer. These qualities are part of a shared cultural language that is built up over time through exposure to other studio portraits. This language becomes part of a memory that is not conscious but rather exists in the body at a subconscious level and instigates visceral reaction. While one could argue that this can be applied to any kind of imagery, studio portraits are distinct in that their affective force is directly linked to the viewer’s familiarity with the genre. In fact, the idea of cumulative affect is in direct contrast with claims that have been made about other kinds of photographs, such as images of violence, which argue that over-exposure decreases the impact of such images, leading to a desensitized and disaffected viewer (e.g. Sontag 1977).¹

What follows is a conversation between Deepali Dewan, curator of South Asia at the Royal Ontario Museum, and Sophie Hackett,

assistant curator of photography at the Art Gallery of Ontario. The conversation concerns affect, photography and museum collections while specifically addressing studio portraiture in the Jhabvala Collection. This collection of over two thousand photographs from India, ranging in date from the 1870s to the 1950s, was acquired in 2007 by the Royal Ontario Museum in Toronto, Canada. It contains eight albums by Raja Deen Dayal & Sons—one of the most prolific and well known of nineteenth-century Indian photography studios; ten other albums of varying subject matter, including a princely marriage, a hunting expedition, missionary albums, and collections of *cartes-de-visite*; and loose images by both known and unknown photographers of people, architecture, and ceremonial events. Additionally, studio portraiture is a significant component of the collection, including the uniquely South Asian “painted photograph.” The collection was compiled by Cyrus Jhabvala, an Indian-born architect from New Delhi now based in the United States, who collected the images largely from India, but occasionally from outside as well, from 1960 to the mid-1980s, until the exponential rise of Indian photography on the art market. The collection is valuable not only for its size and breadth or for its documentation of elite and non-elite subjects by Indian and European photographers, but also for the insight it offers into photographic practice beyond the Western world. The purpose of this article is not only to explore the concept of “cumulative affect,” but also to introduce this important collection to a larger audience.

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Deepali Dewan: In exploring what Susan Ash (2005) has called the “affective force” of photographic images, scholars have noted that it is not what is within an image alone (some inherent aesthetic quality) that produces an emotional response but rather how the image is used. For example, Shawn Michelle Smith, in her study of lynching photographs, has suggested that it is the circulation and context of an image that creates its meaning (Sliwinski 2008). Museum collections offer interesting challenges for thinking through this understanding of photography and affect. What do we do with a set of images in a collection that have, due to the very circumstances of their having been collected by someone or several people over time, lost any connection to their original context of production and circulation? While there are methods to try to recover this or examine the subsequent contexts of circulation that images may have had after some originary moment, in many cases information about a photograph’s production and use is lost in the process of becoming part of a collection. This is not as often the case with press photography, which is easier to trace, and hence perhaps the reason why it frequently becomes the object of affect studies. Yet what of other types of photographs where all we have is the image itself? How can we measure its “affective force” beyond our personal aesthetic reactions?

Sophie Hackett: While Smith argues for circulation and context as the prime creators of meaning, I don’t think she is

arguing that the details of a particular image don’t matter. As historians, we need to mine those details for clues. We know with a studio portrait, for instance, that it was probably made to mark an occasion. Sometimes we can tell what that occasion was; sometimes we can’t. It’s usually evident in, say, wedding portraits, what the occasion was and why the image was made. You can then get closer to what the importance might have been for the makers and for the eventual owners of the photograph.

But I think what Smith is saying is that those clues—evidence she calls it—can’t be the only thing we rely on. It isn’t the only thing. But it is one thing.

DD: And with a collection like this, if you don’t know anything else, it’s the only thing.

SH: While photographs may lose the context of their production and/or other contexts of display through the collecting process, there are certainly ways that they circulate after joining a museum collection—for example, in an exhibition, or through reproduction in a publication or on a postcard in the museum shop. For some works, particularly those produced by a known artist for the specific contexts of art galleries and museums, this is the only form of circulation they have.

Michael Hardt explains that affect is a kind of automatic response in excess of consciousness (Clough and Halley 2007), while Sara Ahmed talks about affect in terms of emotions that “do things” by circulating between bodies and signs (2004). I wonder

about how these concepts can be applied to contexts in which we both work. Can an exhibition create affect? And, is affect only a collective thing? The experience of museum-going has largely been described in individual terms—the visitor, a work of art, a personal moment. But museum collections are certainly part of a network of circulation, expressed through acquisitions, exhibitions and publications—they undeniably play a role in validating certain photographs over time. And often, the reasons why a photograph enters a museum collection is because it has already proven its “affective force.”

DD: True, in many ways collection policy engages with affect. While it differs from institution to institution, in most cases objects need to go through a collections committee before they are acquired. What gets passed and subsequently added to a collection usually has as much to do with the affective quality of the piece as with any arguments of historical importance that a curator can make.

SH: And, I think there's a claim to be made for a broader swath of photographic activity having a kind of intensity that can be understood as affect. It doesn't only belong to the works of the canonical photographers of the history of photography. At the Art Gallery of Ontario, we have deliberately looked outside that canon. One of the ways our collection has grown in recent years has been through acquiring large groups of photographs that represent broader uses of photography. For

example the Klinsky Press Agency Collection—18,000 photographs from the 1930s—dates from a time when the picture press was gaining importance in Europe. The studio portrait photographs in the Jhabvala Collection are, of course, another example of this.

The impact of these collections, then, lies precisely in their, at times overwhelming, volume. So much of it looks the same. And yet this is the bulk of the kind of images we've all encountered—press photography and photographs, like studio portraits, that can be so personal. My sense is that the key is to look at the visual conventions of each genre. What rules were understood to make a successful press image, or a successful studio portrait? In examining those visual codes, one could potentially decode how certain types of images have “affective force.”

DD: I think the whole genre of studio portraiture brings up interesting issues about affect. It's the one genre that crosses all cultures where photography became used. Part of that is just globalization and commercialization at the turn of the century, especially along colonial routes. But studio portraiture obviously had a profound effect on both sitters and people who viewed the images. And their circulation was either very small, although it could have also been extremely large. What is interesting is that, despite the codification of certain practices and the repetition of visual elements, the genre continued to have such a profound

effect. Maybe that is a contradiction about studio portraiture.

SH: Looking at the portraits in this collection, to which I have no personal or cultural connection, I still find that I am fascinated. I suppose that fascination is a more personal reaction, though.

DD: But I think that's telling about studio photography: you don't have to know the person in the photograph to actually have a response to it. It's ironic that we're talking about affect and photography on the day of Barack Obama's inauguration. Talk about a photographic spectacle! His face seems reproduced everywhere, on T-shirts, hats, and commemorative plates.² There's clearly an aspect of celebrity—or maybe one can understand it more broadly as familiarity—with a human face that produces affective force. Or perhaps, a human face that has been frozen in a moment of time. There is still something so powerful about photography's indexicality that plays a role in its affective force.

SH: The idea of the dissemination of an image of celebrity, at a particular time and place, is interesting. Some of the portraits in the Jhabvala Collection are likely of Indian royals. What is it about owning such a representation, carrying it with you, putting it up in your home, that seems to bring you closer to a particular event or a person you've never met? It definitely points to some collective impulse, whether it's Obama or the image of the Maharajah of Jaipur.

DD: In India, there are clear links between the tradition of miniature painting and studio portrait photography. An

interesting question that comes up is: was it conservatism in South Asian society that pushed this desire to link to painting? Studio portraits don't function in the way these painted pictures do, yet studio photographers in South Asia seem to have used all the available conventions—older ones culled from paintings as well as new conventions of the photo studio—certain poses, the carpets, the swath of drapery, the plants, the tables, etc.

SH: Perhaps there was a perception among photographers, sitters, and viewers at the time that particular qualities gave representations a certain status and authority. Visually referring to painted miniatures likely created that sense of legitimacy in the way that painted portraits did in the West.

DD: Or perhaps it was an urge for Archaism—an attempt to create something of an earlier age. One of the things that I'm interested in is to understand precisely this in the South Asian context. I'm interested in doing this as a way to begin to understand how photography played a role in South Asian modernity and by extension the production of modern subjectivity. And so one of the things I want to do with this collection is explore how the medium of photography became part of the production of modern South Asia. I don't think the answers are the same as the analysis of modernity in the West. I'm sure it was revolutionary in similar ways as the West but also in different ways. And part of that, I think, is about understanding what photography's "affective force" was

in different locations for different people. Certainly one has to take into account the particular cultural and epistemological environment in which an image is viewed by a viewer, and how that shapes reaction. In this way, affect and the way it functions is linked to time, location and culture.

SH: What interests me—it's the reason I've begun to research the conventions of studio portrait photography—is the repetition—what was repeated, why was it repeated? How did photographers then teach each other these norms and what was the consensus about them? Some of this breaks down, of course, across cultural lines, but I think repetition, in this case, can perhaps point to some roots of why an image has affective force or, by extension, why a genre has cumulative affect.

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Notes

- 1 Sontag has since rethought this claim (2003).
- 2 This particular image was of Obama at the National Press Club in April 2006 and was taken by freelance photographer Manny Garcia for the Associated Press. It was the center of a legal debate around copyright issues that stemmed from its widespread use (Kennedy 2009).

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Fig 1 Unknown photographer; Rajput man seated with sword and gun, India, about 1880, albumen print mounted on board, 22.5 × 15.6 cm, Royal Ontario Museum 2007.17.26.1. The inscription above the image is a “doha,” a Hindi verse form taken from poetry usually found above paintings of kings extolling their virtues.



Fig 2 Unknown photographer; Raja of Khairagarh, India, 1920s, gelatin silver print, 28.7 × 20.9 cm, Royal Ontario Museum 2007.17.26.9.



Fig 3 W.L. Caney, Man with moustache wearing cap and coat, India, about 1880, albumen print mounted on board, 20 × 14.7 cm (image), Royal Ontario Museum 2007.17.26.16. The photographer may be the same one who opened a studio of some note in Durban, South Africa, in the early 1880s.



Fig 4 Unknown photographer; Maharajah and son, Rajasthan, India, 1890s, collodion or gelatin printing out paper mounted on board, printed and mounted later, 20 × 14.8 cm (image), Royal Ontario Museum 2007.17.26.17.



Fig 5 Unknown photographer; Wedding couple with family, Rajasthan, India, gelatin silver print, 1920s, 36.1 × 25 cm, Royal Ontario Museum 2007.17.26.26.



Fig 6 Unknown photographer; Seated Raja with attendant, India, albumen print mounted on board, about 1900, 45.5 × 35.2 cm, Royal Ontario Museum 2007.17.27.9.



Fig 7 Unknown photographer; Two princesses seated at table, India, platinumotype, about 1890, 21.2 × 21 cm, Royal Ontario Museum 2007.17.27.26.



Fig 8 Unknown photographer; Raja seated with children, India, gelatin silver print mounted on board, about 1900, 35.5 × 45.5 (overall), Royal Ontario Museum 2007.17.27.66.



Fig 9 Unknown photographers, Page from album, India, albumen, platinotype, and gelatin silver prints, c. 1890s, 43 × 35.8 cm (album page), Royal Ontario Museum 2007.17.27.52–57.

Fig 10 Unknown photographers, Page from album of Parsi family, India, gelatin silver prints and platinotypes, 1920s, 35.5 × 45.6 cm, Royal Ontario Museum 2007.17.27.61–65. Note the group portrait of the three sisters above center is surrounded by photographs of each individually or with spouse.

