

WAKEFULNESS AND THE DREAM STATE: A self-study by Umrao Singh Sher-Gil
Photographs, Drawings & Scholia from The Sher-Gil Archives

Preview Saturday, 08 December 2018, 6 - 9 pm

On view until 12 January 2019

Gallery hours: Monday - Saturday, 11 am - 7 pm

"I have written this manuscript of the Mandukya Upanishad, again, for self-study, as I have written it often for my friends before. In spite of innumerable readings of it, with commentaries, it remains unfathomable like an ocean of truth, which it is. When I have passed on, I hope it will come into the hands of others who will study, and ponder over, its contents."

24 March 1928. Simla. Umrao Singh Sher-Gil

An inscription in a small, dusty hand-bound book on the Mandukya Upanishad by its author, Umrao Singh Sher-Gil, exhorting the reader to engage with its philosophical discourse was an extraordinary find on a quiet autumn evening. Could the carefully preserved diaries, letters and scholia inside his aluminium camera case offer a different view of this enigmatic and reclusive figure, whose photographs of his family and himself have largely been understood within the construct of western art history? Could the pioneering figure of the *mise en scène* genre in Indian photography be more than the sum of his 'performative' photographs?

The exhibition, *Wakefulness and the Dream State: A self-study by Umrao Singh Sher-Gil* is a proposal to exhume, analyse and study the writings of the self-confessed scribe and scholiast, Umrao Singh Sher-Gil. It is also an attempt to revisit his photographs in the context of his lifelong enquiry into the 'self' and the different states of consciousness and not necessarily through readings one had imposed upon them.

While reflecting on "detachment and yet looking upon the pain and pleasure of other's as one's own", Umrao Singh acknowledged the obvious contradictions and arrived at the core of his philosophical leanings—"being a calm witness of what happens to himself and others around him". The 'watching self' is the one that watches, with awareness of its empirical existence. To the watcher, the self is the object of reality and a conduit to knowledge, which is both subjective and objective.

The study of the self in Umrao Singh's photographs perhaps generated different layers of self-knowledge, self-awareness and self-revelation. Each photograph presents the 'watching self' in a frozen moment in his own consciousness manifesting in a form that is physical. What emerges in the self-portraits is an attempted study of the supreme self—the many significations of the self, who is naked, clothed, scholarly, bold, brooding; the self who is the father, the wise man, the grandfather; the self who is both the teacher and the disciple. His assertion and articulation of the self through these images is perhaps one of the earliest attempts to study the dynamic yet elemental force of consciousness, which, in his manuscript, he calls "unfathomable". These photographs are echoes of a dream consciousness, and invite viewers to ponder whether the subject of his lens is the waking, conscious being, or a would-be, unconscious self that behoves and evokes a becoming only through these images. They chronicle the self in both the states of being and becoming—in pose and repose.

ABOUT UMRAO SINGH SHER-GIL (1870–1954)

Umrao Singh Sher-Gil, eldest son of Raja Surat Singh of Majithia, was born into the landed aristocracy of the Punjab. While his younger brother, Sunder Singh, was an industrialist and politician, Umrao Singh opted for the more contemplative life of a scholar. He spent a lifetime in the pursuit of knowledge; he was a Sanskrit and Persian scholar, and was interested in the philosophy of religion. He had a long-standing friendship with the poet Mohammed Iqbal and greatly admired the Russian humanist Leo Tolstoy. He was also fascinated by astronomy, loved carpentry and calligraphy, practised yoga, and had an abiding passion for photography.

Umrao Singh's older daughter, Amrita Sher-Gil (1913–1941), was a pioneering artist and an emblematic figure in the history of pictorial modernism in India. Her talent, beauty, flamboyant personality, cosmopolitan outlook and her sexual emancipation have made her something of a legend while her presence was framed in a more literal sense by the photographic lens of her father.

Umrao Singh's preoccupation with photography was a private affair, about which he left behind no writings. He printed his negatives, experimenting with toning formulae that master printers would employ. Over 3000 vintage prints along with glass plates and film negatives have since survived. In 2001, his grandson, the artist Vivan Sundaram, made digital photomontages using Umrao Singh's self-portraits and family portraits to create fictional narratives, and presented them as *Retake of Amrita*. In 2007, the first retrospective exhibition of Umrao Singh Sher-Gil's vintage and modern prints (from glass plates and film negatives) was held at the Rencontres d'Arles photography festival in France and attracted critical attention. In 2008, his retrospective was exhibited at the National Gallery of Modern Art in Delhi and Mumbai, India, in conjunction with the publication of his monograph, *His Misery and His Manuscript*, (Photoink, 2008).

Umrao Singh's photographs have also been included in important group exhibitions: *Moving Still: Performative Photography*, Vancouver Art Gallery, Vancouver, Canada (2019), *Vision Exchange: Perspectives from India to Canada*, Art Gallery of Alberta, Canada, (2018-2019), *Illuminating India: Photography 1857-2017*, Science Museum, UK (2017), *The Self and The Other—Portraiture in Contemporary Indian Photography*, Palau de la Virreina, Barcelona (2008) and Artium, Vitoria, Spain (2009).