

The rooftop decorations symbolically represent the home owner's personal history, and also give us an idea of the evolving tastes and objects coveted by these individuals.



Everyday Baroque

Rajesh Vora sheds light on a diminishing vernacular art form, one that is filled with sentimentality, pride and humour, discovers Conchita Fernandes.

While most of these sculptures are functional water storage tanks, there are several which are simply used as adornments over the tanks.

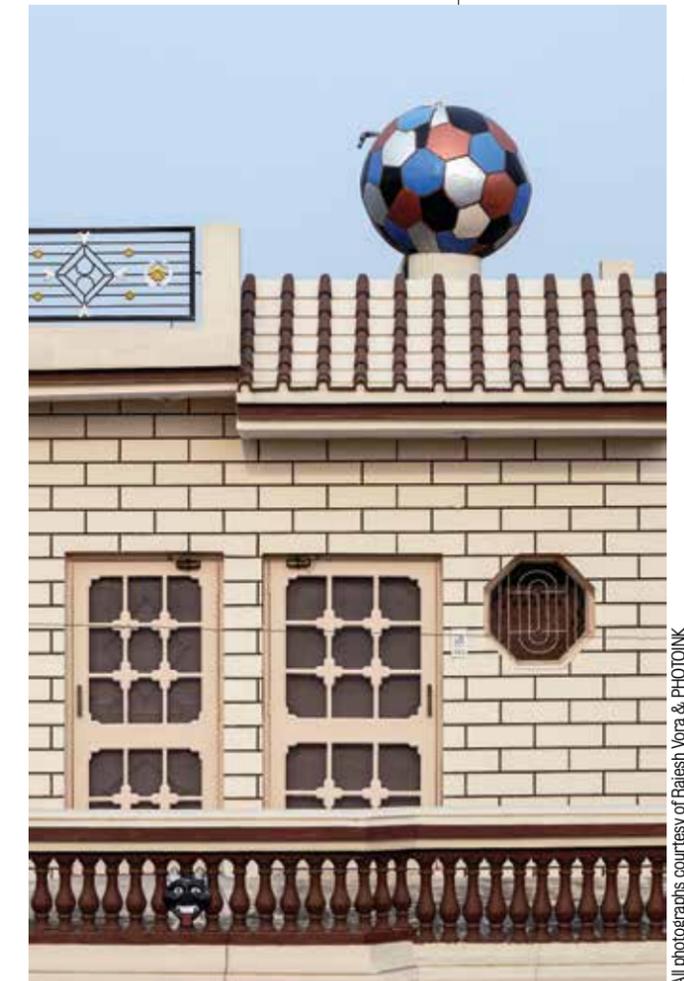
Imagine travelling to over 100 villages, with no address, map or guide, or any prior research, the driving force behind such fervour being the opportunity to witness something truly spectacular. Rajesh Vora discovered just that in the bright and sometimes larger-than-life adornments, taking the shape of airplanes, cars, military tanks, and even the odd whiskey bottle situated on the rooftops of

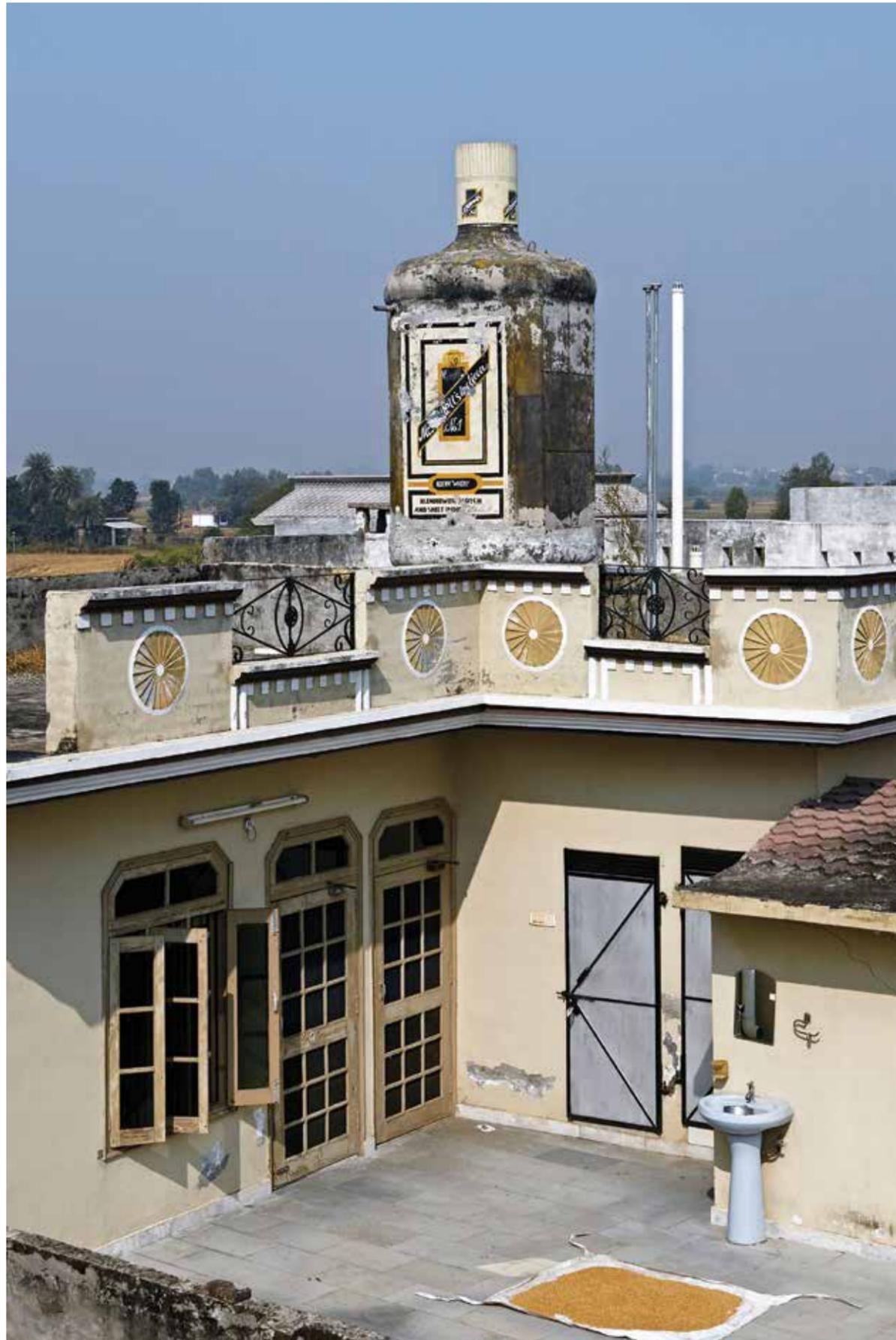
houses in Punjab. Unaccustomed eyes may find some of the visuals bizarre, but it was this unconventionality that quickly reined him in. This was the commencement of his *Everyday Baroque* project.

Unraveling the Story Behind...

These rooftop adornments first made their appearance in the late 1970s, with the first wave of Punjabi NRIs, who began building

Rajesh's interest and years of experience in design and architecture played a vital role in architecture photography.





One would think that the trend of building sculptures over rooftops would diminish over time. Not quite. “Today, the houses are getting bigger and are adorned with just about everything that catches the owner’s fancy—Hummers, motorcycles, bhanga dancers...” Rajesh mentions.

houses in their villages. Rajesh discovered this after undertaking a 6000 km road trip to the state’s four rural districts, led by his longstanding interest on human aspiration and its effect on migration trends.

After extensively photographing the sculptures and conversing with their owners, he realised that these objects were more than just embellishments meant for beautification. They had a functional purpose too, that of water storage tanks. At the same time, they were symbolic, most often a sentimental memory or a reason to celebrate an important event, or taking pride in one’s achievement. So how does a successful restaurant owner in Australia celebrate his success? He builds a water tank in the form of a pressure cooker. How does a taxi driver in New York celebrate India’s victory in cricket? He constructs a trophy in the shape of a water tank. And how does a grandson commemorate the memory of his grandfather owning the first tractor in his village? By commissioning a tractor to be built atop the water tank at his home. “Every NRI would like to celebrate their

success and show off their newly acquired wealth through hard work and struggle, by building a house and adorning it with a decorative water tank or an embellishment on it. This occupies an important place in the history of the village,” Rajesh said.

Projecting Other Sentiments

But sentimentality was only just one aspect of these vernacular art forms. Home owners commissioned all sorts of sculptures, especially those that celebrated the human form, like that of the muscular body builder or the hardworking Indian farmer. What they all pointed towards was masculinity, which signified power and strength. However, what were missing here were symbols or figurines celebrating femininity. And this, perhaps, raises questions about the region’s sensitivity towards the female gender.

Patriotism and technological advancement were two other dimensions that people chose to reveal through the sculptures. The military fighter jets and the staunch figurines of Bhagat Singh holding ▶

Although Rajesh’s photographs are devoid of any physical human presence, yet, if you look closely, you get a sense of them, depicted in the freshly washed clothes left to dry on a rope.



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✦ Airplanes in particular are a very popular choice of adornment. It symbolises the NRI's status and the place they have migrated to, evident in the name of the airline.

the Indian flag or a rifle, are examples of how masculinity and nationalism often complement one another.

Keeping it Clean and Simple

Owing to the eccentricity of Rajesh's subjects, it's quite easy for a novice viewer to oversee the absence of human presence.

This isn't all that surprising, as the owners of the houses mostly reside abroad, and only a few homes are actively used. This benefitted Rajesh's cause. "Very early in the project, I realised that the story was about these sculptures. Any other way of dramatising them would take away and dilute my purpose," he said.

✦ In a way, his photographs celebrate the simplicity and innocence of small towns in India, and exalts their diminishing vernacular art forms.



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As a result, he shot frames that were minimalist and graphical, owing to the various shapes and forms of the adornments and the structures they rested upon. But even here, there were a few constraints. "One of the difficulties that I faced was having to climb the house opposite the one I wanted to photograph, so as to maintain eye level with the object. This was to ensure that the same vantage point was maintained throughout the project. Unfortunately, some of the houses were locked, or had no windows, balconies or terraces from where I could photograph. I must have missed quite a few opportunities to make pictures, and had to be satisfied just looking at them from a distance," he said.

"A house with the Statue of Liberty was the most difficult to photograph. I made three attempts as the owner refused to let me photograph, and had warned neighbours not to allow me to climb up their terraces. But during my last trip, I managed to convince him," he said.

One of the important points that comes across in *Everyday Baroque* is the amount of thought, time and care that has gone into designing the sculptures. While it is still unexpected to see home owners project their private feelings onto works of art open for anyone to see and deduce, this tradition has turned every resident in rural Punjab into an artist, and has provided them an outlet to celebrate their individualism. ■

✦ With the series, Rajesh explains that it was important for him to engage with these aspects of human life, so that through his photographs, he would be able to celebrate their struggles and successes, dreams and desires.



➤ The rooftop decorations also contribute towards creating a dramatic skyline to the lush, yet somber landscape of Punjab's hinterland.

With a career spanning over 25 years, Rajesh Vora's deep-rooted interest in the environment and disappearing habitat has led him into a myriad of projects and collaborations with architects, environmentalists and filmmakers. Earlier this year, Everyday Baroque was exhibited at the PHOTOINK Gallery in New Delhi.