EASTERN PROMISE

DRAWING INSPIRATION FROM AN ANCIENT CORNERSTONE OF HINDU LITERATURE, VASANTHA YOGANANTHAN'S AMBITIOUS SERIES DOCUMENTS THE *RAMAYANA'S* PLACE IN CONTEMPORARY INDIAN SOCIETY THROUGH PHOTOGRAPHY, ILLUSTRATION AND HAND-TINTING. WORDS BY BRENNAVAN SRITHARAN
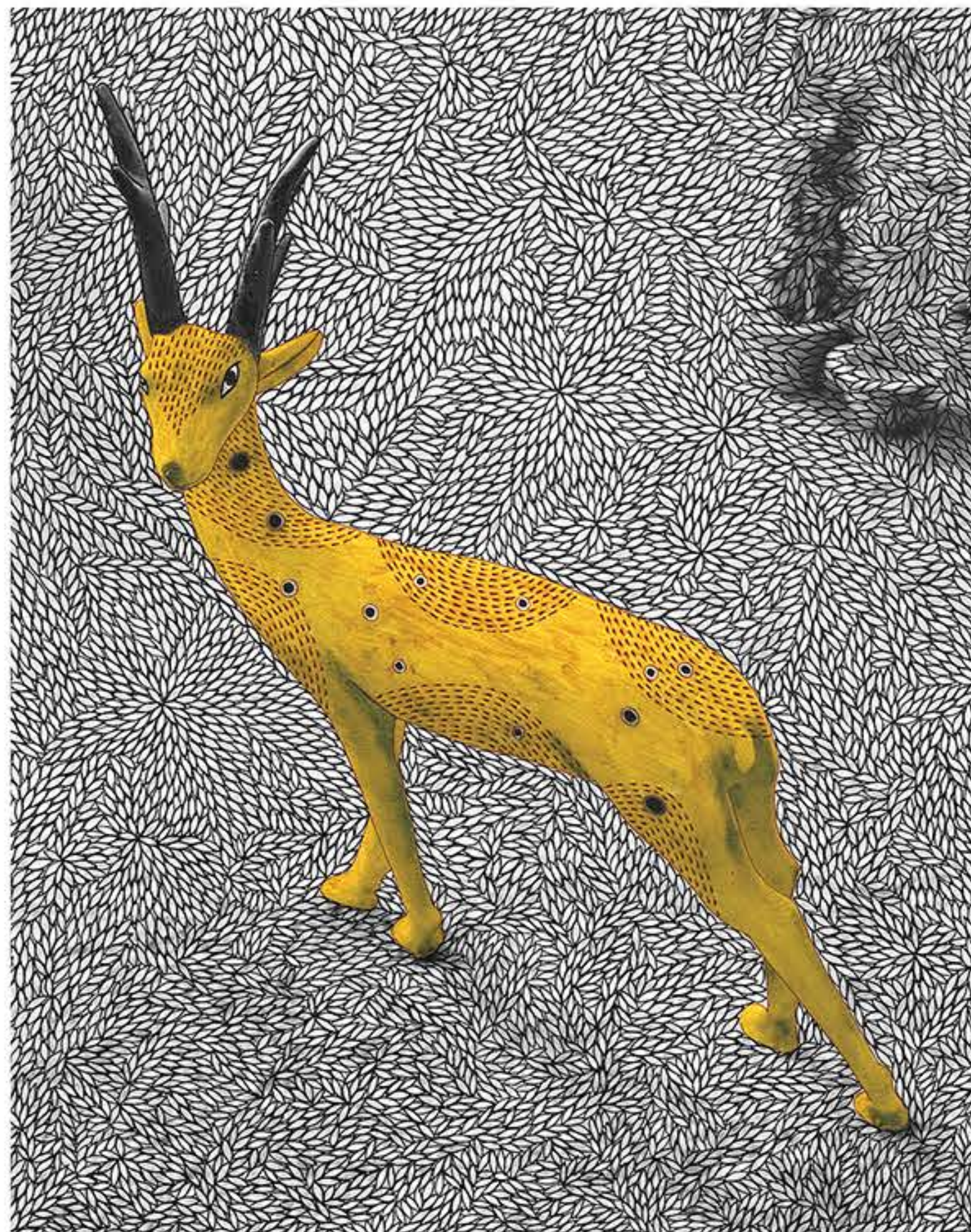
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"I WAS INTERESTED IN THE WAY THE PHYSICAL WORLD INTERACTS WITH THE FICTIONAL"

When Vasantha Yogananthan was a child growing up in France his Sri Lankan father would tell him stories from the Hindu epic poem the *Ramayana*. Tales of heroism, filial duty and love full of magic, allegory and divinity, these stories were at the time just that – stories. But when Yogananthan first visited India in 2013, he came face-to-face with the pervasiveness of myth and legend on the subcontinent. In a land steeped in ancient history, folklore and veracity are deeply intertwined, and attempting to disentangle the two can be futile. Eventually, Yogananthan decided to stop trying.

Historians and archaeologists estimate the composition of the *Ramayana* to the 4th century, and it is at once a foundation stone of Indian literature, one of Hinduism's key texts, and a model for familial relationships. It follows the journey of Prince Rama, who travels the length of the country to get his wife, Sita, back when she is abducted by the demon Ravana. It's a complex story, and its characters have become embodiments of virtue and honour in Indian society, but the story touches on universal themes of violence, discrimination and, through whispers, infidelity. This heady mix sparked *A Myth of Two Souls*, Yogananthan's epic series documenting the omnipresence of the *Ramayana* in everyday life in India.

It's an utterly ambitious project, comprising seven books (corresponding to the seven books of the *Ramayana*) to be published over three years. *Early Times* is just the first chapter, and in it Yogananthan uses a combination of colour and monochrome photography, illustration and vernacular material, as well as – most intriguingly – hand-tinting. For the latter he shot large format black-and-white portraits, then had them coloured by a local Indian painter trained in the technically meticulous art; working without colour references, the painter added an extra layer of interpretation to a project already well-aware of the opacity of myth. The colours, creamy and diffuse, match Yogananthan's palette, but some details seem a little off – oversaturated tones, purple skies, and luminous shades of skin. The unearthly sensation this creates intensifies the sense of invention, the blurring of the line between fabulation and realism.

This method, developed in the 19th century before the advent of colour film, hints at a kind of temporal rupture and the type of dialogue between eras that Yogananthan hoped to create. "When I started the project one of my main interests was the concept of a journey through time," he explains. "I had that feeling, looking at such an old story, but in 2016, and in India. There is this feeling of going back and forth in time, different histories meeting together and mixing into a big masala."

The project blends dreamy, evocative landscapes with staged portraits of passersby acting out scenes from the saga. "During my third trip I got the idea of asking the locals, and the project shifted," Yogananthan says, adding that hand-tinted images also fed into this thinking. Poring over historical collections of such pictures, he noted they were all taken in photography studios, typically the preserve of the wealthy. Yogananthan says he decided to cast from the street, encountering his "actors" outside the hand-painter's studio. "I thought, 'What if the studio is the street? What if I take all the pictures outside, and the people I shoot come from every caste?' I decided to move the practice from the studio to the real world, with real people."

In doing so he discovered that, when it came to the *Ramayana*, there were multiple interpretations of both the text itself and the extent to which it is myth. "I have this question that I ask the people I photograph: 'Is the *Ramayana* a true story?'" he says. "People say very different things. The story occurs in real places – Ayodhya, Hampi, Adam's Bridge – and I was interested in the way the physical world interacts with the fictional."

The *Ramayana* travels down the spine of India from its northernmost parts to the southern coast and the northern tip of Sri Lanka. Yogananthan is retracing these steps and has made five trips so far, taking in Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, Madhya Pradesh, Maharashtra and Tamil Nadu. He plans to go five more times by 2019, when he'll finish the seventh chapter and publish his final book. "This story has been rewritten so often; in each place there was a different interpretation," he says.

Yogananthan started his project in Ayodhya, the birthplace of the epic's

protagonist, Rama, and a city awash with temples, shrines and paintings alluding to the myth. "It's like going back hundreds of years," he says. "People live inside crumbling former temples and they still talk about it. Being in the city that's supposed to be the kingdom of Rama, and hearing people talk about how the tale still impacts on their everyday lives, was the moment I understood I had a story."

In Bihar, the supposed home state of Rama's wife Sita, another story unfolds. Her role alternates between an object of desire, a passive character and a women of agency; in her birthplace the female role is more nuanced than Yogananth expected. "I met a lot of different women and the way they see Sita in Bihar is very particular. I met very strong women who chose to not even marry, in a very conservative and patriarchal state."

The multiple retellings of the stories in popular culture also provide idiosyncratic re-readings, from AK Ramanujan's influential essay *Three Hundred Ramayanas* to Nina Paley's animated film *Sita Sings the Blues* and Samhita Arni's novel *Sita's Ramayana*. They all provided inspiration for Yogananthan, especially the modernised versions riffing on the saga's role in the Indian literary canon.

"I got in touch with those writers, and I'm going to commission a different Indian writer for each chapter," he says. "The text I'm using isn't the traditional verse by Valmiki or an old version, it's completely contemporary. So far I'm working with three different women from different generations, giving the female perspective on what can be quite a macho narrative that puts women in the shadows."

In Yogananthan's hands, the *Ramayana* story becomes a palimpsest, a document to be recycled, retooled and portrayed in exciting new ways. The binary between truth and falsehood falls away, leaving behind a creative space in which to make new work. "I realised the distinction between truth and falsehood wasn't important," says Yogananthan. "This was an important discovery for me, that this is where my photographs should lie – in this inbetween world between physical reality and the imagined." **BJP**