Photo Journalism: The Sadhus of India & Nepal
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Photo Journalism

The Sadhus of India & Nepal

Sadhus are an enigma to me, living the mystery of ancient questions that have no answers. Mystics, yogis, wanderers, even tricksters, derelicts, madmen and

charlatans, their boldly painted bodies confront us with essential questions at the heart of existence. I found them wandering through crowded, polluted urban centers begging, in the villages and on what is left of forest and mountain pilgrimage trails. Like walking mysteries of the human soul, for me, sadhus provoke the questions: "Who am I? What do I need? what really is important? And the more ancient pre-settled desire to wander in search of God." Most importantly, they remind us that the answer for all things only lies within our own elusive hearts.

In my adopted home of Kathmandu, some sadhus survive primarily off alms made from allowing tourists to photograph them. They are a spectacle and love to play their assigned role in the illusion or drama of society. Their masks are thickly painted on their naked bodies.

Sadhus have formally abandoned conventional time; and their world is dense with its own complex politics, social hierarchy, taboos and customs, often making access challenging. Volatile and unpredictable, spontaneous photography of sadhus can actually be dangerous. You can easily be trampled or attacked if you immerse yourself in a naga baba procession after a mass Kumbha Mela bathing. There's no such thing as achieving photographic acceptance within the sadhu mandala. For me, photographing at ritual time is always the most dynamic and fluid. Once rapport has been established, a camera is tolerated, often with a sense of lila, or maya, play and illusion. It took repeated visits over many seasons and melas, to occasionally reach this level.

As a photographer, I loved how they allow their bodies to become symbols of the sacred--from walking around naked to remind us of our naked selves, to wearing ash to remind us what are bodies become, to dreadlocks to remind us of our natural wild natures devoid of social convention. Their bodies are texts that speak volumes regarding sacred symbolism.

A sadhu's body is a map of the Hindu universe, for the body is a microcosm of the cosmos. Like a canvas, the color and painted symbols aid in purification, inspire, and remind of the timeless divine beyond body and form. As the sadhu works towards an egoless state, he becomes the very symbols he has painted, whether it be Siva, Vishnu or Rama, and the colors refer to esoteric inner visions and possible alchemical states of consciousness. The real goal of a sadhu is to achieve an attitude of non-attachment and transcendence of the physical body.

As a photographer, I sometimes like to hide behind my lens, become invisible. Yet for sadhus, it is their very outlandish visibility, the powerful symbols of the divine they paint on their bodies, which helps them not to become invisible, but to transcend self. Photographing these disturbing, annoying, inspiring, exasperating, irrational, wise and powerful beings is like photographing a living question that people have forgotten to ask.

Photo and text by Thomas Kelly, from "Body Language--The Yogis of India & Nepal," which is showing at the Rubin Museum in New York through May 2011