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The flower and the glory



The Hindu

IN BLOOMING DALE Cherry blossoms light the Philosopher's Path in Kyoto. Photo: Sharad Haksar



Sharad Haksar Photo: Sudhin Prabhakar

Sharad Haksar, whose show on cherry blossoms opens tomorrow, tells about the joy of striking a balance between commercial and art photography

At the edge of the continent, in the land of the rising sun, Sharad Haksar was stunned by the far and the near, the vast and the miniature, the pyramid of Mt. Fuji framed by the white cherry blossoms that draped it like an embroidered shawl. He aimed his camera in the same direction that the wind blew the blossoms and captured their surreal beauty in a series of striking photographs that go on show tomorrow in the city.

“I visited Japan last year, and I was determined to go back and capture the beauty of the place and its people. Cherry blossoms hold an exalted place in the literature, arts and culture of the country. Known as sakura, the flowers bloom overnight for a brief window of two weeks that heralds the onset of spring. It’s a spectacular sight when the trees go from barren to bloom,” says Sharad, an award-winning advertising photographer.

As he displays frame after frame on the easel at his trophy-lined office, he says, “I criss-crossed the country travelling from Kyoto and Tokyo to Nara and Miyajima for the Sakura project. People flock to gardens to catch a glimpse of these lovely pink-and-white flowers. Sakura gazing itself has a name — hanami. The idea was to freeze for eternity the fleeting loveliness that leaves an entire country in raptures.”

This series of pictures underlines the romantic that Sharad has been since he first captured flowers on camera as a three year old. But it was as a photographer for advertisements that he found fame and fortune. “Advertising allows you the freedom to create and pursue new interests — the latest commercial my agency, 1pointsize, did was for LifeCell. Chennai does not always bring in the best of advertising assignments. So, while the commercial aspect of the business is necessary, one needs to sometimes step away and look at the bigger picture — do something more satisfying,” says Sharad whose dream is to shoot for National Geographic.

“Photographing people and places refreshes your mind and talent. When I first stepped into the ethereal moonscape of Ladakh, I was blown away by its beauty. Then, I explored the ocean off Maldives while snorkelling and that was equally breathtaking.”

“When you shoot Nature, you need to be lucky,” says Sharad, who used a Nikon D 800E to photograph the cherry blossoms. “I shot without any filters, reworking only the colours and the saturation, and waited for hours sometimes to get just one or two good shots a day. It was a lesson in patience.”

Surprisingly, the photographs are bereft of the crowds that throng the pathways to gape at the sakura and the flowers pose alone, unrivalled in their beauty.

They glow white and pink against skies that deepen into biblical darkness, light the Philosopher’s Path in Kyoto, veil the copper Buddha at Kamakura (Sharad’s favourite) and turn the white peak of Fujiyama to parchment. The warm natural light of the Asian east enhances the loveliness of the place.

“There is no real market for art photography in India,” he says. “Sakura is a limited edition series. It’s a way to increase the demand for more such art.” In all these photographs, Sharad’s talent as a superlative artist comes to the fore — a master of the ephemeral spring and the cosmic diorama. Shot in a small window of light, his pictures are not merely a record of the season but an emotional equivalent of life from across the world.

Sharad is a keeper of culture. Across nearly three decades, he has drifted through countries and continents seemingly photographing everything he sees, adding his own narratives. His ongoing project, ‘Divine Irony’, a quirky story with multiple layers portraying images of gods, goddesses and humans juxtaposed with the elements, is meant “to make people think”. Another is a series on the architecture of quaint towns and cities from across the globe. His picture of the rooftops of Paris was awarded the American Photographic Artists’ silver prize for architecture only last week.

And then, there is One Eyeland, the world’s first online community for creative photographers that Sharad kick-started and curates. Pictures on the website have developed into a whole family of images that have found their way into a book, Best of the Best Photographers 2014. “The equipment is not the deal,” says Sharad who teaches photography at workshops. “It’s about how you perceive the world around you...the beauty in the seemingly small things.”

A composition that he seems to have got just right in celebrating the transient splendour of cherry blossoms.

(‘Sakura’, the photo exhibition, is on from September 5-7 at Art Houz, 41, Kasturi Rangan Road, Alwarpet. Tel: 2499 2173)