



This Frenchman became a lung-clad groom

Photographer Olivier Culmann found a novel way of capturing the aam aadmi — by shooting himself

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dios in Mumbai and Tamil Nadu during 2009-12.

Paris-based photographer Olivier Culmann spent years in India clicking pictures of the common man in photo studios. But he did this without using any Indians.

For his exhibition titled *The Others*, the 45-year-old lensman with fair skin and grey eyes transformed into a middle-class Indian man by dyeing his hair black, darkening his skin with make-up, and often growing a moustache or beard. He dressed up as a sarkari office-goer, a taxi driver, a policeman, a wannabe Bollywood actor, among other things. He tried on many desi faces to capture that ubiquitous look. "I made 35 different characters, mostly people I have seen during my daily life in India, most of them in Delhi. They are some kind of Indian John Doe, the man that you see every day in the street, and I got more or less respect from people depending on the character I had incarnated," says Culmann, who also visited photo stu-

Culmann came to India to capture photographic customs common to Indian portraiture. "If people in the future want to understand our actual era, they will look at the vernacular or commercial photography seen in neighbourhood studios, family albums, wedding pictures or advertising rather than photo-journalistic works," he says.

To make this project different Culmann chose to use himself as a model instead of shooting Indians. "Like most photographers, I go to countries with my own photographic style and skills, and bring home pictures of the people living in the visited country. For this project, I decided to reverse the process," says Culmann who did this by reproducing on himself the appearance of the people he saw. "I have brought back only what I could see and catch of Indian society. These are not self portraits, I used myself as material always available and usable," he says.



SURREAL SHOT: Mimicking a matrimonial montage, Culmann superimposed his 'Indian' face on the body of a Delhi groom against a backdrop sourced from a Chennai studio

The Frenchman used kitschy studio backdrops to take portraits of himself, testing up to 100 poses per character. He also used filters on photographs to darken his skin, along with lightning bolts, aero-

planes, lurid bouquets of flowers that one finds in small-town photo studios. These juxtapositions were aimed at bringing out how photo studios have tried in their own limited way to highlight a society's need

to escape from mundane reality.

Shot in phases, Culmann started the 150-photograph series with traditional portraits — as a balding "uncle", or a tough-looking taxi driver, at a studio in Delhi or a lung-clad South Indian groom in a Chennai studio. Then he experimented with the common practice of local photo studios that provide a jacket and tie to walk-in customers, along with a variety of painted backgrounds ranging from simple patterns to landscapes.

For the last leg of the project, he sent his mugshots to poster artists. "My project treats the notion of representation. So I gave a painter pictures of myself in black and white and let him choose colours and backgrounds," says Culmann, who showed his vibrant photos at the Delhi Photo Festival. "It had a 'mirror' effect," he says. "While most exhibits showed special situations or news events, this series showed these 'too normal' people, usually ignored by photographers. The viewers were moved, touched and laughed a lot." The exhibition has since gone to the Festival Images in Vevey, Switzerland, Musée Nicéphore Niépce in Chalon-sur-Saône, France, and is set to be exhibited in Moscow in March.



HERE'S HOW TO LOOK 'DROP DEAD' GORGEOUS

One of the more interesting phases of Culmann's project was one that involved "elegant headless bodies". This is a device that Indian photo studios use to improve the looks of their clients' dead relatives. Morph a face to the body and you've got a photo makeover. "It usually happens when there is a death in a family. The family members bring an iconic picture of the deceased to the studio and want it restored and coloured. The result is not always faithful to the deceased," he says. Culmann sent his face shots and got himself 'immortalized' by many studios. Each with a different result — a new version of his face.