Vacheron Constantin captures movement and the choreography of time with Tasveer.

In the world of time and precision, the craftsman’s hand plays an essential role. Through gestures inherited from past centuries, it sets out to conquer matter, lingering over the smallest details, while finding the path to perfection armed with patience and concentration. Saluting this unwavering passion and skill of artists, Vacheron Constantin extends its ongoing support to the art of photography in India by partnering with Tasveer’s eighth season of exhibitions across the country.

Vacheron Constantin celebrates uniting time, art and culture along with the values on which the company has been built since its founding in 1755: supporting creativity, openness to the world, sharing a passion, passing on knowledge and the search for excellence.

Photography arrived in India via the East India Trading Company in the late 1840s, which is the same time that Vacheron Constantin can trace its ties to the Indian market – selling its first watch in the country in 1849. Twenty years later, Jacques-Balthélemy Vacheron’s grandson, John Roux, travelled to Mumbai for prospection. He returned to Geneva in 1872 with several orders in his briefcase. In the following years, many more fine watches were ordered by Maharajas and ruling elite. This was the golden age of travel, technical ingenuity and trade and therefore a time of great exchanges in the arts between Europe and the East. Indian clients were inspired by the precision and unmatched quality of Vacheron Constantin timepieces, and the enriched art and culture of India became an endless inspiration for the brand.

Each Vacheron Constantin timepiece houses a fragment of history – that of horology in particular, as well as more broadly that of art, culture and society. Photography and horology share a common ground through their relationship with time. The advanced technical precision of both the camera and the watch are the result of techniques and procedures that have been passed down from generations and honed and adapted along the way. The levels of perfection now achieved in both these art forms are symbols of human ingenuity, achievement and refinement. It is, however, only when placed in the hands of those whose vision transcends their craft, that the most remarkable art works are produced, be these photographs or timepieces.
Having studied Western fables as well as Hindu avatars, Karen Knorr is a purveyor of cultural history. India Song (begun 2005) is an ongoing body of work which reinterprets Rajasthan's haveli and royal art in contemporary ways, asking evocative questions about identity and guardianship. Knorr's encounter with Abhishek Poddar, one of the founding partners of Tasveer, further helped her in her research across Rajasthan, culminating in a series that has captured the world's attention.

When Poddar first heard about American photographer Karen Knorr from Anna Fox, a critically acclaimed British photographer and friend, he was bowled over. Appealing to his penchant for both traditional and contemporary forms of art, Knorr was one of the few photographers who truly succeeded in juxtaposing the past with the present, raising evocative questions about history, myth and power in the viewer's mind. Poddar found himself researching Knorr's background and soon met her to discuss a showing of her previous project, Fables (a series of photographs taken in European heritage sites, which references epic tales of Ovid and La Fontaine against lighter, contemporary stories of Disney, using animals as principal characters in the frame), in India at Tasveer. In the various discussions that followed, the idea of another significant work emerged, and thus, India Song was born—a series that would prove groundbreaking for Rajasthani architectural history, socio-politics and feminine studies.

In 2008, Knorr travelled to India, where she visited a total of sixteen sites across Rajasthan, including Samode, Ramgarh, Nawalgarh, Mandawa, Phalodi, Udaipur and Jodhpur. She was fascinated by the art and the architectural history of the desert state and the change (in terms of women's rights and the cultural modernity that led to the dilapidation of ancient structures) that globalisation brought with it. 'I discovered a complex and syncretic culture', she says. 'I saw that India was changing rapidly'. Apart from appreciating and learning about Rajasthan's rich culture, Knorr's purpose was to find architectural sites that represented the inherent hybridity of India.

Having read India's foundation epics, the Ramayana and the Mahabharata, as well as reading the experiences of international authors including William Dalrymple in books such as 'White Mughals' and 'Nine Lives: In Search of the Sacred in Modern India', she was also influenced by her early readings of Salman Rushdie's 'Midnight's Children' and Gabriel García Márquez's 'A Hundred Years of Solitude'.

Knorr wanted to portray visually, what these authors did in text—a culture in transition. Knorr's earlier works had been staged in places that represent cultural pinnacles—museums, palaces and royal houses; and as she travelled, she found Rajasthan's heritage sites—havelis, forts and palaces—similarly inspirational.

With Poddar's help, she was introduced to modern-day maharajas and princes, and sought permission to shoot at their ancestral houses, but that wasn’t all. As a student of feminist studies and the politics of representation, she wanted to do more. By juxtaposing animals in these royal sites of beauty, she aims to highlight a dissonance, pitching the splendour of the past against the environmental and social decay of the present.

An understanding of Knorr's background and her previous work puts her visual quest into greater context. Having worked with the camera since the early 1970s, Knorr is an American born in Germany, brought up in Puerto Rico and educated in Paris and London. Armed
with this multicultural background, she is currently the professor of Photography at the University for the Creative Arts at Farnham, Surrey, and has travelled to institutions including Harvard, The Art Institute of Chicago and Goldsmiths, lecturing on and sharing her passion for photography. Heavily influenced by, and having participated in, the cultural movement that explored the politics of representation (how the ones in power define cultural representation, what they portray and how they portray it) in the West during the 1970s, she has found her calling in producing work in the documentary style of photography, simultaneously exploring issues concerning family, feminism and social constructs.

My educational background has made me consider photography as a way of inquiry. Having studied the history of art in the West, I have an acute awareness of the exclusions that distorted art culture to privilege Italian and Greek canons, with Renaissance and its relationship to power. There are negative and positive effects to the way power intertwines and re-inforces itself, says Knorr. The name of her photographic series is taken from Marguerite Duras’ identically titled movie, which released in 1975. Her film highlighted a subjective, feminine voice exploring issues concerning family, feminism and masculinity, which aim to disturb the spectator’s expectations, explains Knorr. Both women and animals, she tells us, as seen in Christian heritage, have been considered subalterns, to be owned and abused by power. ‘This is not so different from the way Hindu and Muslim castes in India treat women and tribals’, she adds. A political commentary as well as a contemporary documentary, the series also presents the fragility of these architectural sites, linking them to the fragility of animal life.

While there are similarities, there are also contradictions that Knorr’s work captures. ‘The presence of both Bollywood and the Vedas in contemporary India and the fluidity of past and present fascinate her. Another example of this interweaving is women’s roles. More women are being educated and even forming their own businesses; yet, the pull of traditional values may be difficult to negotiate,’ says Knorr. ‘Her film highlighted a subjective, feminine voice considering the end of British colonial presence in Kolkata, just as I am attempting to develop a new poetics of Rajasthani spaces that celebrate architectural artisanry, considers the presence of the feminine and animal life in Rajasthani spaces’, she says. Her photographs also highlight the bright colours of Rajasthani architectural design, and this too, was a conscious decision by the photographer, who had studied the intensity of colour in miniature painting produced during the Mughal and Rajput era and saw them reflected in the bright sari worn even today in Rajasthan.

An artist’s work, according to theories of metafication and representation, first reflects the artist and then the subject. Both Knorr’s scientific, analytical bent of mind and her more romantic persuasions are apparent in her work. ‘I see my photographs as developing a new documentary poetics that can make an appeal about particular social issues affecting India using aesthetics’, she says, on one hand. And on the other: ‘When there are good rains, the Thar desert blooms!’ See the precision of light and angle in her photographs; the fine lines of the tiger, for example, in ‘The Peacemaker’, Chandra Mahal, Jaipur City Palace’ (p. 51), and the romanticism of the photograph on the whole, and this alluring dichotomy is apparent.

To make this body of work Knorr used a large format Sinar camera, choosing for its high technical resolutions and detail, and then used separately taken photographs of animals at high shutter speeds (to freeze their movements), inserting them into the interiors using Photoshop, spending months at a time to get a single image right.

It often takes an outsider like Knorr, who, armed with a different perspective, can reveal aspersions of our own culture, in this case Rajasthani havelis, in a new light. Pekkar concurs when he says, ‘Knorr makes us re-look at the splendours that are all around us, but re-inervates these scenes with playful devices such as the inclusion of animals within the human sphere—a juxtaposition we ourselves would perhaps not have dreamt of, or dared to realise’. It is no surprise then, that Knorr has been awarded the Pilar Citoler Prize, one of the most prestigious photography awards in the world, for India Song, and has also been longlisted for the Deutsche Börse Photography Prize. ‘She continues to be eagerly collected by museums, royals and private individuals, but I think her latest work holds an even more special place in the hearts of people like me — those from Rajasthan’, says Pekkar. Knorr’s interest in the guardianship of North Indian sites of architecture is praiseworthy indeed, providing exciting new avenues of study, bringing culture into perspective alongside art.
The Queen’s Room, Jazmyn, Udaipur City Palace, Udaipur
The Lifting of Purdah, Moti Mahal, Mehrangarh Fort, Jodhpur
The Exodus, Paradesi Synagogue, Kochi
The Arrow of Kama, Nahargarh Fort, Jaipur
The Survivors, Sheesh Mahal, Deogarh Palace, Deogarh
The Private Audience, Aam Khan, Jashe Mahal, Dungarpur Palace, Dungarpur
Flight to Freedom, Durbar Hall, Junha Mahal, Dungarpur Palace, Dungarpur
A Place Like Amuravati, Udaipur City Palace (Nilgai), Udaipur

A Place Like Amuravati, Udaipur City Palace (Sarus Crane), Udaipur
Waiting for Atman, Junagarh Fort, Bikaner
The Sound of Rain, The Cloud Room, Junagarh Fort, Bikaner

Karen Knorr
The Joy of Ahimsa, Takhat Vilas, Mehrangarh Fort Palace, Jodhpur
The Roat of the Rathore, Moti Mahal, Jaisalmer Fort
Discussions Concerning Rasa, The Phool Mahal, Mehrangarh Fort, Jodhpur
The Inheritor, Meit Mahal, Mehrangarh Fort, Jodhpur
Solitude of the Soul, Udaipur City Palace, Udaipur
The End of the Hunt, Bana Mahal, Udaipur
Durga’s Mount, Zanana, Jensa Mahal, Dungarpur
Maharani’s Attendant, Queens Palace, Thanjavur Palace, Tanjore
Karen Knorr

Sita's Wish, Juna Mahal, Dungarpur
The Return of the Hunter, Sheesh Mahal, Jaipur City Palace, Jaipur
Sikanders Entrance, Chandni Mahal, Jaipur City Palace, Jaipur
The Peacemaker, Chandra Mahal, Jaipur City Palace, Jaipur
The Witness, Humayun's Tomb, New Delhi
Attaining Moksha, Ajanta Caves, Ajanta
Palais royal, Hazara Rama Temple, Hampi
Shelter of the World, Jama Masjid Mosque, Fatehpur Sikri
Bhakti, Path of Saints, Shiva Temple, Hampi
Karen Knorr was born in Frankfurt am Main, Germany in 1954. She was raised in San Juan, Puerto Rico in the 1960s and then studied photography and film at the University of Westminster in the mid-1970s. In addition to her photographic practice, Knorr has lectured internationally at institutions including The University of Westminster, Goldsmiths College, Harvard University, and The Art Institute of Chicago. She is currently Professor of Photography at the University for the Creative Arts in Farnham, Surrey.

Knorr has lived in England since the 1970s and her early career was spent looking at the British class system and other cultural traditions in Europe. Her exploration of political, economic, and gendered representation developed through a number of major series including Belgravia, Connoisseurs, Academies and Fables. Her most recent work, India Song, is a further investigation into these ideas, albeit in a new cultural context.

In 2003, India Song was nominated for the Deutsche Börse Photography Prize, Europe’s most prestigious award for a living photographer who has made the most significant contribution to the medium of photography over the past year. In 2004, Knorr won the Pilar Citoler International Photography Prize for her work ‘Flight to Freedom’, also from the India Song series.

SOLO EXHIBITIONS (SELECTED)

2018
Fables, Musée de la Chasse et de la Nature, Paris
Fables, Centrale Electrique, Brussels
Fables, Château d’Eau, Toulouse, France

2007
Les Peintres de l’An 2000, Donatien Collection photographique de la Caisse des Dépôts, Centre Pompidou, Paris, France

2006
Casella Migi Photoboom, Brescia, Italy

2005
Fables, Photos & Co, Torino

2004
Musées, Centre d’Art Quercq, France
Histoires Naturelles, Musée de la Créche, Chaumont, France
Musées, Galeria Bluemans Skupienzy, Geneva

2003
Cerc-Lex, Les Filles du Calvaire, Brussels
Les Filles du Calvaire, Paris

2002
Sanctuary, Migli Photobienale, Brescia, Italy

2001
Les Filles du Calvaire, Brussels

2000
Sanctuary, Miart, Milano

COLLECTIVE EXHIBITIONS (SELECTED)

2013
Tasveer Gallery, India Art Fair, Delhi
Filles du Calvaire Gallery, Art Genève 2013
Seduced by Art, National Gallery, London
Ladies at Art Mumbai International Photography Festival, Mumbai
James Danziger Gallery, Agad, New York
A Contemporary British, Departmental Museum of the One, Bourne

Musée: Musée de la Photographie de Toulong
2003

Musée: Musée de la Photographie de Toulong
2003
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Audi Delhi Central
TASVEER

Tasveer is an organisation committed to the art of photography and photography as art. Dedicated to promoting and showcasing contemporary photography, Tasveer has created a network of galleries between Bangalore, Delhi, Kolkata, Mumbai, and Ahmedabad.

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Vacheron Constantin works in partnership with Tasveer to promote the art of photography in India.