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## Sex Slavery Survivors Shine in 'Another Me'

BY JANE DURRELL · SEPTEMBER 6TH, 2012 · VISUAL ART



"Sheltering Tree" - Photo: Achinto Bhargava

1 Comment Tags: Visual Art, Another Me: Transformations from Pain to Power, Achinto

The elegant color photographs on the walls at Iris BookCafe at first glance could be from a sophisticated fashion shoot. They are not.

Back-stories for the photographs in *Another Me: Transformations from Pain to Power* are their reason for being. Photographer Achinto Bhargava has invested each work with compassion as well as a knowing use of the medium. The exhibition is a departure for Iris, where black and white photographs have been the unspoken norm. Curator William Messer says *Another Me* "plumbs the transformational and healing power of clothing and costume."

Messer met the photographer in the south of France in 2008. Bhargava, of the Indian city of Kolkata (Calcutta), studied in India and also at the London College of Printing. He told Messer of his project and fruitless efforts to have the work seen in the United States; Messer, interested, promised to help. The end result is the current exhibition at Iris, an element of Cincinnati's initial FotoFocus biennale, and an interesting contrast to the exhibitions at two of our major museums, each of which is showing fashion photography per se.

The young women in *Another Me* have all been victims of kidnapping or outright sale of themselves into sex slavery. One is as young as 8 years old, none are more than 22. Rescued and placed in the Sanaap Shelter in Kolkata, they found returning to a self they had lost hard going. The photography project, which went on for five years, was a collaboration between Bhargava and Shelter Counselor Harleen Walla. Its goal was to help the subjects return to themselves by way of constructing new and fanciful but meaningful identities for the camera.

The young women were invited to embark on "a journey of psychological healing, recording their imaginative re-envisionings of themselves as human, animistic and divine beings of power, anger, love, revenge, protection and freedom." Wow.

Tall order. Costumes were at hand, also masks and face paint, as revealing themselves as individuals was not yet easy for most.

Bhargava uses a smudged brown background for each shot. It could be anything — an abandoned building, a cave wall, a dream locale. In front of this, each woman (or child) enacts her vision, explained in a personal statement with each picture.

The 8-year-old wears a peaked crown (we will see that crown again, in other photographs), a voluminous red scarf over a purple shirt and she is barefoot, as, in fact, are almost all the subjects. One hand is held high; the other holds a weird collection of what might be lances but might not. She is Durga the Powerful and wants "to inspire others and give them power and strength." She is not alone; almost invisible is a small figure sitting behind her, another of the lances held erect. Other works, each ostensibly of a single individual, also make unspoken use of another. "The Dancer" has four arms and says she "is not what the world tried to make me."

Another subject, age 12, chooses to become a bull "because it's in control." She is crowned with a suggestion of bull horns and her face is painted blue. A woman in her 20s, toggled out in silky dress, armloads of bracelets, holding a mirror and echoing Bollywood, says, "I want to be so famous no one can ever stop me." Makeup is key for the subject of "Tormented," her face stark white except for eyes hugely rimmed in black.

In one poignant work a young face looks out over a large palm leaf that echoes the colors of her sweeping sari; its text says, "Because so many times I needed a refuge, but there wasn't one, I want to give the shelter of a flowering tree to any girl who needs it." The subject is 15 years old.

Another photograph, by Snaky Gaddara and still another talking about this position are here.

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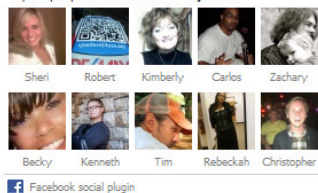
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Another has chosen to be a Snake Goddess and still another, tellingly as this practice can have terrible consequences, is a Child Bride, doll clasped in hand.

An exhibition reception is scheduled for Final Friday, 7-10 p.m. Sept. 28 and on Sept. 30 a special FotoFocus reception from 2-5 p.m. will present photographer Achinto Bhadra to speak about his work and the exhibition. He is an independent documentary photographer most often working with the urban poor, marginalized women and children for national and international development agencies.

Visual Art  
Another Me:  
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photography FotoFocus  
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ANOTHER ME continues through Oct. 12 at Iris BookCafe and Gallery ([irisbookcafe.com](http://irisbookcafe.com)) in Over-the-Rhine.

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09.08.2012 at 12:30

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Amazing work! Highly recommend:)



Shaunda



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