

Bhupendra Karia

SEPIAEYE

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In the early 1970s, Indian photographer Bhupendra Karia set out to travel across his home country and depict its surging population rate. The grimly beautiful photographs on display here, all shot in Mumbai, were culled from the resulting project, “Population Crisis.” The decision to focus on one city makes sense, as Mumbai is not just India’s most populated city, it is India’s most visibly populated city. “Bombay is a crowd,” wrote V. S. Naipaul.

As a student at the Tokyo University of Fine Art, Karia studied wood-block printmaking, and this method of making images informed his photographic work. Whether shooting people, cars, or clothes hanging on a line, Karia arranged his subjects into neat rhythmic patterns. The result is a poignant paradox: extremely ordered photographs of disorder. The front of a ramshackle building, for example, is neatly divided into a grid of twelve squares, or apartments (*Old Bombay Dwellings*, 1970). But, as in a ragged patchwork tapestry, each block contains touching details—the missing window, the crumbling flowerpot—that remind us there’s nothing uniform about poverty.



Bhupendra Karia, *Old Bombay Dwellings*, 1970, gelatin silver print, 14 x 20".

Also on view is a quieter grouping of pictures from an unnamed portfolio dating to 1968–71: seventy-four photographs that Karia called the “meager harvest of my first twenty years in photography.” These works, shot throughout India, often feature common objects—umbrellas, lamps, guns, pots—hanging on white walls or against plain backdrops. Again, the influence of woodprint is palpable: Like a ukiyo-e artist, Karia used sharp contrasts and space to imbue everyday objects with a gentle, delightful mystery.

— Ratik Asokan