



The Magic of Bombay

Betsy Karel resurrects her career with a new book, *Bombay Jadoo*. By Edgar Allen Beem

"I AM AT THE CENTER OF A SWIRLING, URBAN FAIRY TALE ON a peninsula in the Arabian Sea, one dotted with pockets of enchanted gardens as well as darker, more threateningly mysterious realms. Gods and spirits are consulted and invoked. In a blink, public spaces become private places—islands of intimacy."

Thus, Betsy Karel begins her new book, *Bombay Jadoo* (Steidl, 2007), a reverie on the streets of the world's largest city in the form of 54 black-and-white photographs. "Jadoo" is Hindi for "magic," and in a decade of traveling to Bombay, known now as Mumbai, Karel found an everyday enchantment that inspired her to return to photography following a 15-year hiatus during which she traded a career as a photojournalist for a life of philanthropy and social activism. As triumphant as Karel's return to photography is, however, it is also tentative. (See sidebar: Getting Back in the Game.)

"In between trips to India," she says, "I almost never pick up a camera." Born in New York City in 1946, Karel studied art history at Barnard College and then earned a master's degree in visual studies at Harvard before marrying and moving to Washington, D.C.

As Betsy Frampton, Karel enjoyed a successful career as a freelance photojournalist in the 1970s and early 1980s. She covered the White House and Wa-

Above: "Girgaum, JSS Road, 2006," one of 53 images in Karel's new book.

tergate for *Time*, shot for the Peace Corps, won several White House press corps awards, and was named a finalist for the W. Eugene Smith Award in 1983.

Around 1984, however, with two young sons to raise and family business obligations, Karel drifted away from photography.

"I couldn't really devote myself to photography with the single-minded passion I demand of myself," she explains.

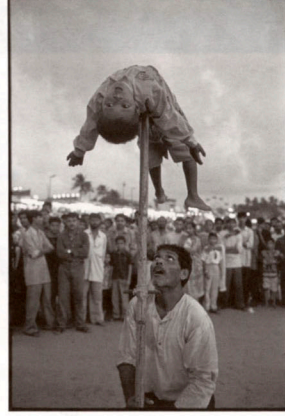
Having put her photo career aside, Karel eventually found a new focus for her social passion in the world of non-profits. She served on the boards of Mary's Center for Maternal and Childcare and the Corcoran Gallery of Art and chaired the board of the Center for Reproductive Rights. More recently, she has served as the president of her family's foundation, the Trellis Fund, which supports social and cultural initiatives in the Washington, D.C., area.

Karel first re-appeared publicly as a photographer in 1999 when Tipper Gore invited her to participate in "The Way Home," a photographic exhibition on homelessness at the Corcoran that also featured work by photographers such as Donna Ferrato, Annie Leibovitz and Mary Ellen Mark.

Karel, who documented homelessness in Boston for the show, was at first

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"LIFE THERE IS LIVED IN THE STREETS," SAYS KAREL. "I WAS INTERESTED IN HOW PEOPLE IN VERY PUBLIC PLACES COULD CREATE VERY PRIVATE SPACES."

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afraid she might embarrass herself in such august company, but found that "the sheer joy of being behind my camera again overcame my inhibitions."

In fact, Karel had picked up her camera again two years earlier as she began the personal odyssey that became *Bombay Jadoo*.

"In 1997, I had the opportunity to go off by myself and I decided to go to India," she explains. "It was a very short trip. I didn't know a soul. I just got lost every day, had adventures, and found my way back to the hotel each night."

And Karel took along her Leica M4 and some Tri-X film. Inspired by her reading of such contemporary Indian writers as Ved Mehta, Suketu Mehta,

Rohinton Mistry, Arundhati Roy and Salman Rushdie, Karel began to think of a photo book about Bombay as a way "to marry my interest in Indian literature with my love of photography."

Karel subsequently made repeated trips to India, exploring the city with a camera in hand and a visual novel in mind.

"I went at it not as a photojournalist but more as a street photographer," Karel says. "What fascinated me about Bombay is that Bombay is about the streets."

The result of Karel's wanderings in Bombay is a small book of black-and-white photographs with a distinctly retro feel, which she finds appropriate to the subject.

Bombay Jadoo opens with an image of women

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Top, left: "Central Railway, 2005." Top, right: "Jishu, Boy performing with Uncle, 2003." Above: "Opera House, 2006."

Getting Back in the Game

"When I went back to photography I decided I didn't want to do it professionally," says Betsy Karel. "I wanted to do it on my own terms."

In order to shake off the rust of a 15-year layoff, Karel attended photo workshops with Sam Abell, Leah Bendavid-Val, and Mary Ellen Mark. Karel intends to remain focused on her philanthropic work and is not sure whether she will take on another photographic project. Former *Time* White House photographer Diana Walker hopes Karel does.

Bombay Jadoo, says Walker, "is far beyond her early pictures and in her early pictures she was obviously good."

"What the layoff did was—she's been looking at pictures for years as a collector, a museum-goer and gallery-goer," says Walker, "so she has fine-tuned all of her thoughts about photography. When somebody that talented goes back to it, she puts her heart and soul into it."

—EAB

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Above: "Mahim, 2004." Below: The cover image of the book, "Haji Ali, 2001."

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packed together on a train. A woman in the foreground reading a book speaks to Karel's literary inspiration. The narrative then unfolds through panoramas of the teeming city and quickly focuses more closely on scenes of Bombay street life.

"Life there is lived in the streets," says Karel. "I was interested in how people in very public places could create very private spaces."

In her explorations, Karel found young girls at play in a secluded rock garden, old men laughing on a park bench, others practicing breathing exercises; people chanting on a beach, playing cricket on the shore, watching mud wrestling, or just sleeping in a public plaza. The final image in *Bombay Jadoo* is of a pair of young lovers at play on the tidal flats.

"I wondered if I should end the book by being swallowed up in the crowd again," says Karel of her very thoughtful sequencing of *Bombay Jadoo*. "There are not that many photographic books that have a happy ending. There is a subtle subtext to the book in that I sometimes felt like I was in a fairytale. Dark and threatening and magical things may happen, but the last six years of my life have been very happy."

Betsy Karel's *Bombay Jadoo*—a triumphant return and a happy ending. □



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