

Pondy lensman seeks challenge in the familiar

Nandini Sen Gupta | TNN

Puducherry: It's common to look for challenge in the far-away and exotic. But for Auroville-based photographer Sebastian Cortes, the exact opposite is also true. So much so that his latest project — a book titled 'Pondicherry' and an exhibition of the photographs that have gone into it — is a deliberate attempt to look for challenge in the familiar.

"I like to challenge myself with the familiar. My work as a lifestyle photographer took me to many exotic locations. So looking closer home, at a place I have proximity to, seemed interesting," he explains. "Most of my commercial work is telling a gigantic lie — photographing women I retouch completely, for instance. Advertising is about rigging and fixing the game and I am honest about it, but it's not a challenge any more. So I wanted an Indian project but not an obvious one."

Although oft-photographed — Puducherry is a favourite subject for photo exhibits and coffee table books — Cortes says it also gave him a "different lens". Through his camera, Cortes goes on a metaphorical and anthropological journey into the concept of 'place', which is complemented by essays by three eminent names — Puducherry-based author Akash Kapur, French essayist and writer Pascal Bruckner and antiquities expert and international director of Asian art at Christie's Amin Jaffer. "I wanted to use space as an x-ray into private souls," he says. "I wanted to discover what's lingering behind the white walls and the very private, European and orderly place that Pondicherry is, which is also rooted in a fantastically chaotic reality."

The result is essentially a photo essay that captures Puducherry's 'time-warp' character by going beyond the walls and recording the stories that the buildings tell. For Cortes, the city's allure is as much about its quirks as about its cosmopolitan and contemporary look and feel.

"When The Mother of Sri Aurobindo Ashram came to Puducherry, she found an open canvas on which to leave her imprint,"



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Sebastian Cortes

says Cortes. "The Sri Aurobindo Ashram and Auroville offer a contemporary and cosmopolitan character to the city. So there are three elements that I found interesting — the geometrics of the city's construction, the presence of the Mother over everything, the spiritual pockets in the city and of course, its cosmopolitan character." All of these elements, he says, were ingredients in his love affair with the city.

Born in New York, Cortes moved to India with his family in 2004 after two decades of pursuing fashion and lifestyle photography in Milan. Since then his award-winning work — both artistic and commercial — has gained him acclaim both in India and abroad. 'Pondicherry' was launched on Thursday and an exhibition of the photographs will be on display at Aurodhan Gallery from February 3-23.

Inspired by Indian photographers like Dayanita Singh — who, he says, has given him a choice of lens to observe and the courage to interpret differently — and Raghubir Singh, Cortes will seek out yet another 'bubble world' for his next project. "My next project will be on Sidhpur in Gujarat, where I hope to capture the leftovers of a less evident colonial past — the incredible architectural styles captured by the Bohra buildings," he says.