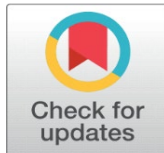
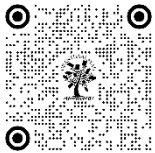


# CONCEPTUAL PHOTOGRAPHY: SIGNIFICANCE AND FUTURE IN INDIAN PHOTOGRAPHY

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## ABSTRACT

Conceptual photography is a form of art that uses photographs to convey abstract ideas, concepts, and emotions rather than depicting reality. It is an expressive and creative approach that allows photographers to explore their imagination and produce visually stunning images. Unlike traditional photography that captures the reality of the subject, conceptual photography goes beyond the surface and aims to evoke thought-provoking responses from the viewer. This research article aims to explore the significance and future of conceptual photography.

By contrasting conceptual photography with traditional photography and other related genres, the article highlights conceptual photography's unique characteristics, techniques, and objectives. Through the lens of renowned Indian conceptual photographers, the piece demonstrates how this genre resonates with diverse societal issues and challenges conventional perceptions. The article presents a comprehensive overview of conceptual photography's transformative power in shaping artistic expression and encouraging profound intellectual engagement.

**Keywords:** Conceptual Photography, Indian Photography, Significance, Future, Art

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Photographers of the recent times are very much excited with the technological advancement from it being manual to digital. The digital age has given new possibilities to the photographers and has become less time consuming and with cost effectiveness. It has often become difficult for a photographer that what he/she should capture. Whether they should capture the world around them or they should capture their thoughts and ideas. Capturing the world around is a conventional approach and on the other hand Conceptual photography is about depicting ones thoughts or feelings. Further, the term conceptual photography becomes a great

topic of debate i.e., it is a form of photo manipulation or a traditional form of photography or it is something else. Hence, it has become very difficult to define and understand the parameters of Conceptual photography for a photographer. Moreover, in layman terms people have misconceptions regarding the conceptual photography or they completely don't understand the term. The purpose of this study was to review published research and available information to develop better understanding of conceptual photography and its parameters within Indian context. Further, it will also throw light on Indian photographers who have contributed in the field and talked about the cultural and social relevance of this genre of photography. The study will inculcate some of the pioneers of conceptual photography namely- Pushpamala N, Diwan Manna, Sharbendu De, Gauri Gill, Atul Bhalla to provide deeper insights about this form of photography.

## 2. METHODOLOGY

This study uses qualitative research methods and an exploratory research design, involving a comprehensive review of the existing literature on conceptual photography. For collecting primary data, interviews with Indian photographers were conducted to gain insights into their experiences and perceptions of this art form. These interviews were designed to be open-ended, allowing participants to contribute insightful information about the subject. The secondary data was collected from various websites, books, research articles, e-journals, and other web sources.

## 3. DISCUSSION

Conceptual photography is a significant art form that has been expanded over the last few years and resonates with a wide range of audience across various demographics. The conceptual photography is a genre of photography which focuses on exploring abstract ideas and concepts through visual imagery. Rather than simply documenting the world as it exists, conceptual photography is often created with the purpose of conveying a deeper meaning or message. It can be highly experimental and innovative. Conceptual photographers investigate a wide range of ideas which can be achieved by staged photography, as it gives them freedom to effectively communicate their desired ideas [Conceptual Photography Explained With Examples. \(2021\)](#). This genre has a power which pushes the boundaries of traditional photography and exploring new ways of representing the world.

Conceptual art is the origin of conceptual photography, which can be dated around 1960s to 1970s. In conceptual art, an idea or concept is significant rather than the aesthetics and technique, and is mostly used to represent the abstract through physical material [Conceptual Photography Explained With Examples. \(2021\)](#). The pioneers of conceptual photography were artists who sought to use photography as a tool for exploring abstract ideas and emotions. These artists rejected the idea of photography as a medium for capturing reality. Instead, they used photography to convey abstract concepts, often through the use of text, symbols, and metaphor. Sol Lewitt, Cindy Sherman, Yves Klein, are among the well-known photographers.

**Figure 1**



**Figure 1** Crowd, No. 8 by Misha Gordin.

**Source** <https://muse.jhu.edu/article/834788>

To develop a better understanding of Conceptual photography it was compared with the traditional form of photography.

- In terms of subject matter, traditional photography focuses on capturing the reality of the subject whereas the conceptual photography is more concerned with communicating an idea or emotion.
- In terms of intent, traditional photography is to document reality and creates aesthetically pleasing images or it is capturing a moment in time. In contrast, conceptual photography is to evoke thought-provoking responses from the viewer and challenge conventional ways of thinking.
- In terms of subjectivity, traditional photography is objective and aims to represent the subject as accurately as possible, whereas conceptual photography is subjective and aims to represent the photographer's interpretation of an idea or concept.
- In terms of techniques, traditional photography relies on techniques such as composition, lighting, and framing to capture the subject. On the other hand, in conceptual photography employs techniques such as symbolism, metaphor, and surrealism to convey abstract concepts and emotions.
- In terms of post-processing, traditional photography is often limited in terms of post-processing, with minimal adjustments made to enhance the picture, while in conceptual photography extensive post-processing is practiced to enhance or alter the image and convey a precise message.

The outcome of traditional photography is typically a photograph that represents reality, whereas the outcome of conceptual photography is a photograph that represents an idea or concept.

The conceptual photography is often misunderstood with the other genre of photography like storytelling and digital manipulation, but it is far different for the connoisseurs. To get a crisp knowledge about the parameter of conceptual photography, it was compared with the different approaches of photography.

### **1) Storytelling Photography vs Conceptual Photography**

Storytelling photography and Conceptual photography are two distinct genres of photography, each with its own unique characteristics and objectives. The differences are as followed:

- Storytelling photography focuses on telling a story or narrative through a series of photographs, whereas conceptual photography focus on exploring abstract ideas and concepts.
- Storytelling photography follows a specific plot or storyline. On the other hand conceptual photography has no clear storyline instead it is open for interpretations.
- Storytelling photography has reach of wider audience, as works are more accessible and relatable. While, conceptual photography appeals to intellectual or art-oriented audience.
- Storytelling photography intends to convey a specific story or a message. In contrast, conceptual photography challenges traditional modes of representation and explore new ideas and concepts.

The key difference is that storytelling photography and conceptual photography are two distinct genres of photography, each with its own unique characteristics and objectives. Storytelling photography is focused on conveying a narrative or a story through a series of images, while conceptual photography is more focused on expressing abstract ideas and exploring themes such as identity and culture.

### **2) Digital Manipulation vs Conceptual Photography**

Digital manipulation and conceptual photography are two different approaches to create art with photographs. While both can involve editing and manipulating images, there are some key differences between these two genres:

- Digital manipulation is to alter or enhance a photograph for aesthetic or practical purposes, whereas conceptual photography aims to convey a message or idea through the image.
- Digital manipulation can be done on an existing photograph, whereas in conceptual photography a photograph is captured in a controlled environment.
- Digital manipulation involves altering a pre-existing photograph using software tools, while conceptual photography involves creating an image from scratch that conveys an abstract idea or concept.
- Digital manipulation allows for a high level of creative control over the final image. In contrast, conceptual photography requires more planning, and experimentation to create the desired image.
- Digital manipulation may create a final image that is far from the original photograph, while conceptual photography often involves some level of abstraction, but still maintains a connection to the original subject matter.
- Digital manipulation is often used in commercial advertising or editorial work. On the other hand, conceptual photography is primarily used for artistic expression and exploration of abstract ideas.

- Digital manipulation is often used in commercial photography, advertising, or for enhancing personal photographs, whereas conceptual photography is primarily used for artistic expression and exploration.

In brief, digital manipulation and conceptual photography are distinct approaches to create art with photographs. Digital manipulation involves altering and enhancing pre-existing photographs for aesthetic or practical purposes, while conceptual photography involves creating an image from scratch that conveys a specific message or idea.

The lack of a well processed out concept, when perfectly executed, can still result in a poor photograph. Consequently, the most essential component of a strong picture is the concept and the combination of the ability to conceive a concept and to execute it are the two primary components of a successful conceptual photograph [Misha \(2013\)](#).

## 4. INDIAN CONTEXT

### 1) Pushpamala N

Pushpamala N was one of the pioneer conceptual photographers from the land of India. She began experimenting with the medium in the late 1980s. Pushpamala N. was a trained painter and performance artist. In 1982, she was graduated, followed by her Master's degree in 1985 from the Maharaja Sayajiro University of Baroda [Pushpamala \(2023\)](#). She became interested in photography as a means of exploring ideas around gender, identity, and its representation. She is renowned for being a strong feminist for rejecting the idea of authenticity and being open to different ways of looking at things. Being a pioneer in conceptual art of India and her innovative work in photography, sculptures, video, and performance has had a huge impact on art in India. She's interested in history and the concept of cultural memory, and often challenges the traditional images from art, photography, movies, theatre, and popular culture, thus positioning herself as the focal point of social and political investigation in India [Pushpamala \(n.d.\)](#)

**Figure 2**



**Figure 2** Toda H by Pushpamala N; c. 2004. Sepia Toned Silver Gelation Print; Size: 8.8 x 13.1 cm; at Museum of Art & Photography (MAP), Bengaluru.

**Source** <https://mapacademy.io/article/pushpamala-n/>

**Figure 3**



**Figure 3** Lady in Moonlight by Pushpmala N, Clare Arni; c. 2004. Sepia Toned Silver Gelation Print on Warm Tone Archival Fibre Paper; Size: 8.8 x 13.1 cm; at Museum of Art & Photography (MAP), Bengaluru.

**Source** <https://mapacademy.io/article/pushpamala-n/>

## 2) Diwan Manna

Another well-known, pioneer of conceptual photography from the land of India is Diwan Manna. In 1977, he studied art at Government College of Art, Chandigarh in graphic art/print making and completed his art training in 1982 [Diwan Manna \(n.d.\)](#). In his work, he employs a combination of photography, painting, body art and acting to produce works that defy categorization. In his work, rather than showing images of the destruction of human kindness, bravery, and beauty, he seeks to tap into the hidden, yet undiscovered, depths of humanity in people ([Figure 4](#) and [Figure 5](#)). He seeks to create a space for people from different backgrounds, cultures, languages, and political groups which give a strong experience of emotions that restores one with a feeling of loss of humanity. Through his work, Diwan talks about how social violence affects people, how life is hard for men and women who live in the shadows like forgotten people, and how lonely people are and how much they suffer. On perceiving his pictures, one gets both disturbing and exhilarating experience. Moreover, it reveals our innermost humanity which turns into a journey of self-discovery for each of us [Diwan Manna. \(n.d.\)](#).

**Figure 4**



**Figure 4** Shores of the Unknown New 1 by Diwan Manna.

Source [https://www.diwanmanna.com/photo-gallery#prettyPhoto1\[gallery2\]/0/](https://www.diwanmanna.com/photo-gallery#prettyPhoto1[gallery2]/0/)

**Figure 5**



**Figure 5** Violence Series 3 by Diwan Manna.

Source [https://www.diwanmanna.com/photo-gallery#prettyPhoto3\[gallery2\]/2/](https://www.diwanmanna.com/photo-gallery#prettyPhoto3[gallery2]/2/)

### 3) Sharbendu De

Sharbendu De, a conceptual photographer who is notable for his work for Indian indigenous communities, ecology, and environment conservation. He grew

up in Andaman and Nicobar Islands. He perused his post-graduation diploma in journalism from the renowned Indian Institute of Mass Communication, New Delhi [About \(n.d.\)](#). Later, in 2010, he was graduated in photojournalism from the University of Westminster, London, UK. After which he professionally started his career in the field of photography [Sharbendu \(n.d.\)](#). His love for nature and environment can be seen in his work. His artwork acts as a window into the future and portrays the living standards of humankind. His work makes one think about the question “where would we go once all of this outside in the natural atmosphere is gone?”, which can be observed in [Figure 6](#) and [Figure 7](#). With his pictures he is trying to make futuristic speculations. He desires that people should stop and have a closer look to think what is happening and why it is happening and question their position in the future. He hopes that by the process of engaging with the images, people go back looking for the answers.

**Figure 6**



**Figure 6** New Nature, An Elegy for Ecology, 2021: by Sharbendu De.

**Source** <https://www.desharbendu.com/an-elegy-for-ecology>

**Figure 7**



**Figure 7** Oxygen Cafe, An Elegy for Ecology, 2021: by Sharbendu De.

**Source** <https://www.desharbendu.com/an-elegy-for-ecology>



#### 4) Gauri Gill

Gauri Gill, an Indian photographer, is renowned for her conceptual documentary-style photography, which explores themes of identity and tradition, as well as the experiences of marginalized communities. Gauri Gill was born and raised in New Delhi, India, and obtained her Bachelor's and Master's degrees in applied art and photography from the Delhi University, followed by another Master's degree in fine arts from Stanford University in the United States [Bio. \(n.d.\)](#).

Throughout her career, she has been captivated by India's rich cultural heritage and has travelled extensively throughout the country, capturing the essence of India's people and culture. Many of her photographs explore the lives of people and communities who are often marginalized or ignored by mainstream society. She has consistently sought to foster an intimate relationship with her subjects in order to gain a better understanding of them and to capture their narrative through her lenses [Agarwal \(2019\)](#). Gauri Gill's photographs have been widely exhibited in renowned galleries and museums worldwide, and have been widely praised for their compassionate depiction of human experience and sentiment.

Her lens captures moments that bridge the gap between reality and imagination. Her photographs often transcend the surface, encapsulating layers of emotion, identity, and cultural heritage. From [Figure 8](#) and [Figure 9](#) it is easy to say that she has a keen eye for detail and sensitivity to her subjects, she crafts images that evoke a visceral response from viewers. She delves into issues such as identity, gender, tradition, and the intricacies of human relationships. She creates visual narratives that prompt contemplation and encourage a reevaluation of one's perceptions. Her conceptual photography stands as a testament to her ability to use the medium to convey complex ideas and provoke thought. Her work has left an indelible mark on the world of photography, inspiring audiences to engage with her images on a profound and intellectual level.

**Figure 8**



**Figure 8** 'This Wasn't About Making a Comment on Hygiene in Hospitals' ... Untitled (9) by Gauri Gill, from the Series Acts of Appearance, 2015.

**Source** <https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2019/jan/31/gauri-gill-best-photograph-bahoda-mask-festival-india-rat>

**Figure 9**



**Figure 9** Untitled (27) by Gauri Gill, from the Series Acts of Appearance, Archival Pigment Print- 42 x 28 Inches, 2015.

**Source** <https://www.gaurigill.com/works.html>

### 5) Atul Bhalla

The renowned Indian photographer Atul Bhalla is known for his conceptual photographs that delve into the themes of urbanization, environmental issues, and the complex relationship between human beings and their environment. He earned his B.F.A. for the College of Art, Delhi University and his post-graduation from School of Art of Northern Illinois University, US [Sinha & Sterberger \(2007\)](#).

His work highlights the environmental issues, particularly related to water, for more than two decades. He primarily works through photography, which allows him to explore the ecological politics of water, as well as the histories and associations of places of daily living, often constructing narratives through performances [Bhalla \(n.d.\)](#). Moreover, his work focuses on the changing urban environment and the profound effects of urbanization on the environment and on people's lives. He beautifully balances the man-made with the nature, emphasizing the tension, harmony and sometimes extreme contrast between the two.

Through his picture, Bhalla poses important questions about sustainability, air pollution, and the effects of unchecked development. His photographs not only document the physical changes that occur in urban areas, but also the psychological and emotional changes that happen to people and communities. From [Figure 10](#) and [Figure 11](#) it is easy to say that his work, serves as a medium of current concerns that shape modern society. Bhalla's work combines a unique combination of aesthetic and message, prompting viewers to reevaluate their role in the urban landscape and the collective responsibility to protect the natural environment. As a visionary conceptual photographer, Atul Bhalla has left an indelible mark on the world of art, inspiring huge audience to engage critically with their surroundings and consider the profound implications of urbanization and environmental change.

**Figure 10**



**Figure 10** Nostalgia-I by Atul Bhalla, Archival Pigment Print- 16 x 64 Inches, 2020.

Source <https://atulbhalla.com/home.php?cid=1>

**Figure 11**



**Figure 11** Intervention by Atul Bhalla, Archival Pigment Print- 10 x 12 Inches, 2019.

Source <https://www.vadehraart.com/artists/32-atul-bhalla/works/39605-atul-bhalla-interventions-2019/>

These are just a few of the many Indian conceptual photographers who have gained recognition for their innovative and experimental approaches to photography. Not just this, photographers from different genres like commercial photography, fashion, storyteller etc. has started practicing the conceptual photography and making their artworks more meaning full.

## 5. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, conceptual photography stands as a powerful and evolving art form that has expanded its boundaries over recent years, captivating a diverse audience across various demographics. This genre, rooted in the exploration of abstract ideas and concepts through visual imagery, goes beyond mere documentation, aiming to convey deeper meanings and messages. Conceptual photography's experimental and innovative nature allows artists to push the limits

of traditional photography, introducing new ways of perceiving the world. Moreover, it has an immense power to make people think or question the world around us.

Comparisons with traditional photography shed light on conceptual photography's distinctive qualities. While traditional photography emphasizes reality and aesthetics, conceptual photography thrives on idea-driven narratives that challenge perceptions. Contrasting conceptual photography with storytelling and digital manipulation photography further underscores its distinctiveness. The subjectivity in conceptual photography allows photographers to interpret concepts uniquely, fostering an intellectual engagement with viewers. Techniques like symbolism, metaphor, and surrealism are harnessed to communicate complex abstract ideas, transcending the conventional visual language.

Conceptual photography remains a vital and growing genre in India, where artists are continuing to explore new techniques and ideas. Examining Indian conceptual photographers such as Pushpamala N, Diwan Manna, Sharbendu De, Gauri Gill, and Atul Bhalla demonstrates the genre's impact in diverse contexts. These artists discuss social, environmental, and cultural issues, provoking contemplation and empathy. Their works bridge the gap between reality and imagination, capturing intricate layers of emotion, identity, and societal challenges.

While studying for the topic it was found that there is a need for greater institutional support and recognition for conceptual photography in India. The future of conceptual photography in India is promising, and with the right support and resources, it has the potential to become a major force in the global art scene ([Acharya, V. Interviewer, 2023, March 10](#)).

In essence, conceptual photography is more than just a visual art form; it's a vehicle for expressing intricate concepts and pushing the boundaries of perception. It transcends traditional photography, inviting viewers to engage intellectually and emotionally, fostering a deeper understanding of the world's complexities. As artists continue to innovate within this genre, conceptual photography remains a catalyst for change and introspection in the art world and beyond.

## **CONFLICT OF INTERESTS**

None.

## **ACKNOWLEDGMENTS**

None.

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