

“I got tired of selling my soul to advertising”



ROHIT CHAWLA

After having spent nearly two decades in advertising, **Rohit Chawla** found his mojo in editorial and fine art photography. In a freewheeling chat with **Akhila Ranganna**, the articulate lensman talks about the challenges and fun of shooting portraits of politicians and actors with their eyes shut, his most famous photographs, and more.

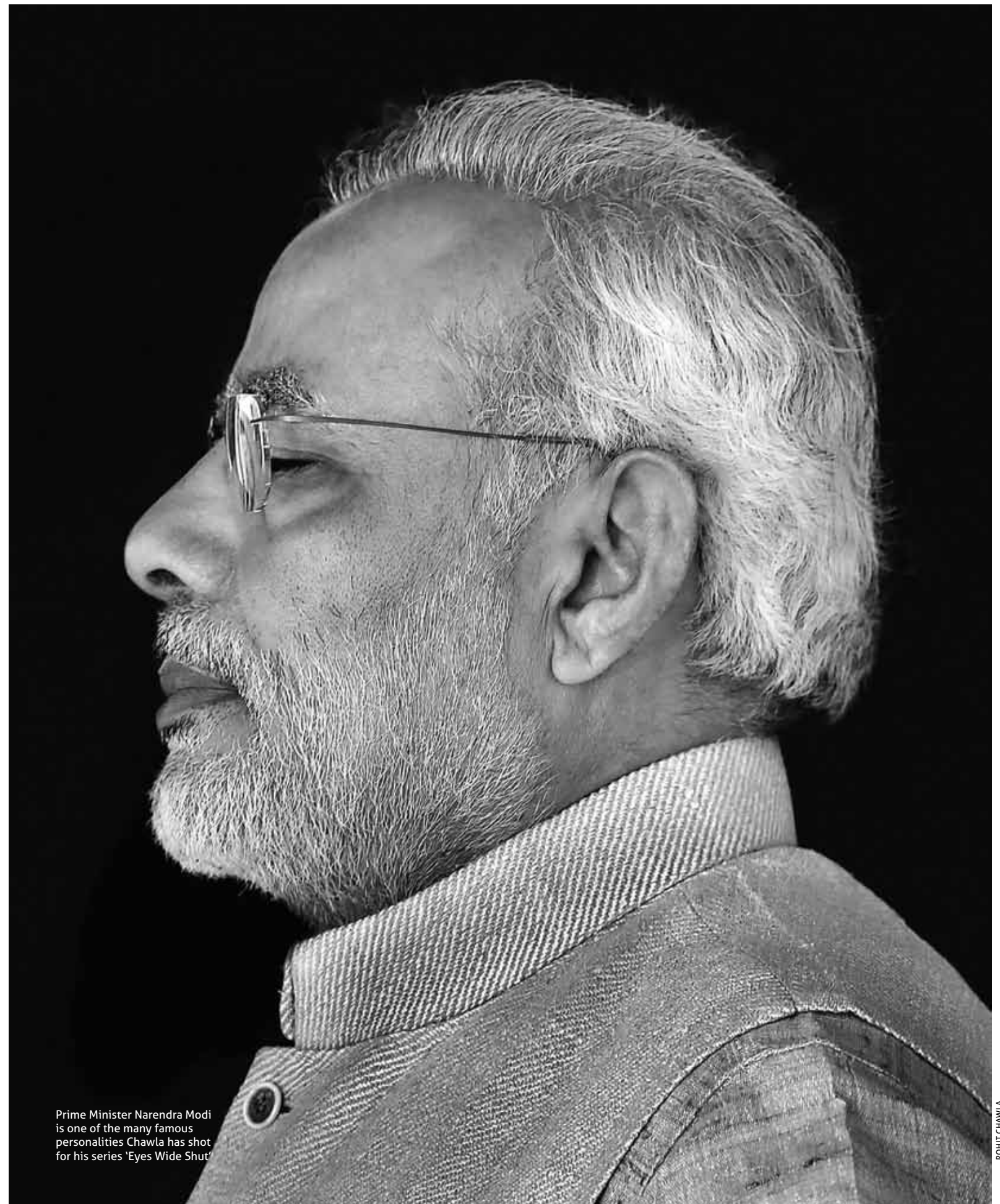
One of the recent projects of creative photographer Rohit Chawla has been 'Eyes Wide Shut', where he has shot portraits of more than 100 Indian personalities and celebrities with, as the name suggests, their eyes shut. It is his way of altering the conception of the portrait, in which the eyes usually, or even inescapably, become the focus. Another of his recent works has been 'The Inspired Frame', where he has photographed iconic paintings (from Raja Ravi Varma to Frida Kahlo and Gustav Klimt) that were specially recreated using live models, and props. The project, exhibited by Tasveer Art Gallery, was displayed across India over the course of the past year or so.

Chawla, 51, has shot for major current affairs magazines over the

years. The former creative director at India Today is now the creative director at Open. He also has his own independent film production and design company. Edited excerpts.

### The disillusionment with advertising

When I joined advertising in the early '90s, it was the coolest thing to do. JWT (J. Walter Thompson) was India's number one ad agency, and when the opportunity came around, I took it. But if you stay in advertising after 40, then you are past your expiry date. After a certain point of time, I got tired of selling my soul to advertising. I was always a bit of a news junkie, and media was always the big thing that attracted me, so it was time for me to move on.



Prime Minister Narendra Modi is one of the many famous personalities Chawla has shot for his series 'Eyes Wide Shut'

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Tasveer's exhibitions also showcased Chawla's recreations of miniature paintings



TASVEER/ROHIT CHAWLA

From Chawla's 'Wanderlust' series, featuring fashion portraits



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### Editorial photography

I started doing some editorial photography for mainstream news magazines. Then India Today came around, and suddenly I was in a big media house, running design and photography. That was very satisfying. I would rather shoot a Narendra Modi than the next-door model, or a Naomi Campbell, for that matter. Different strokes for different folks.

To tell you something along the lines of 'I had this great rush to produce a great image' would be baloney. I come from a middle-class family, my father was a bureaucrat, and photography was a means for me to make a living. I used to write for various magazines and realised that writing was much more hard work for less pay. First photography, then filmmaking, then art photography — it was a natural progression.

### Inspirations

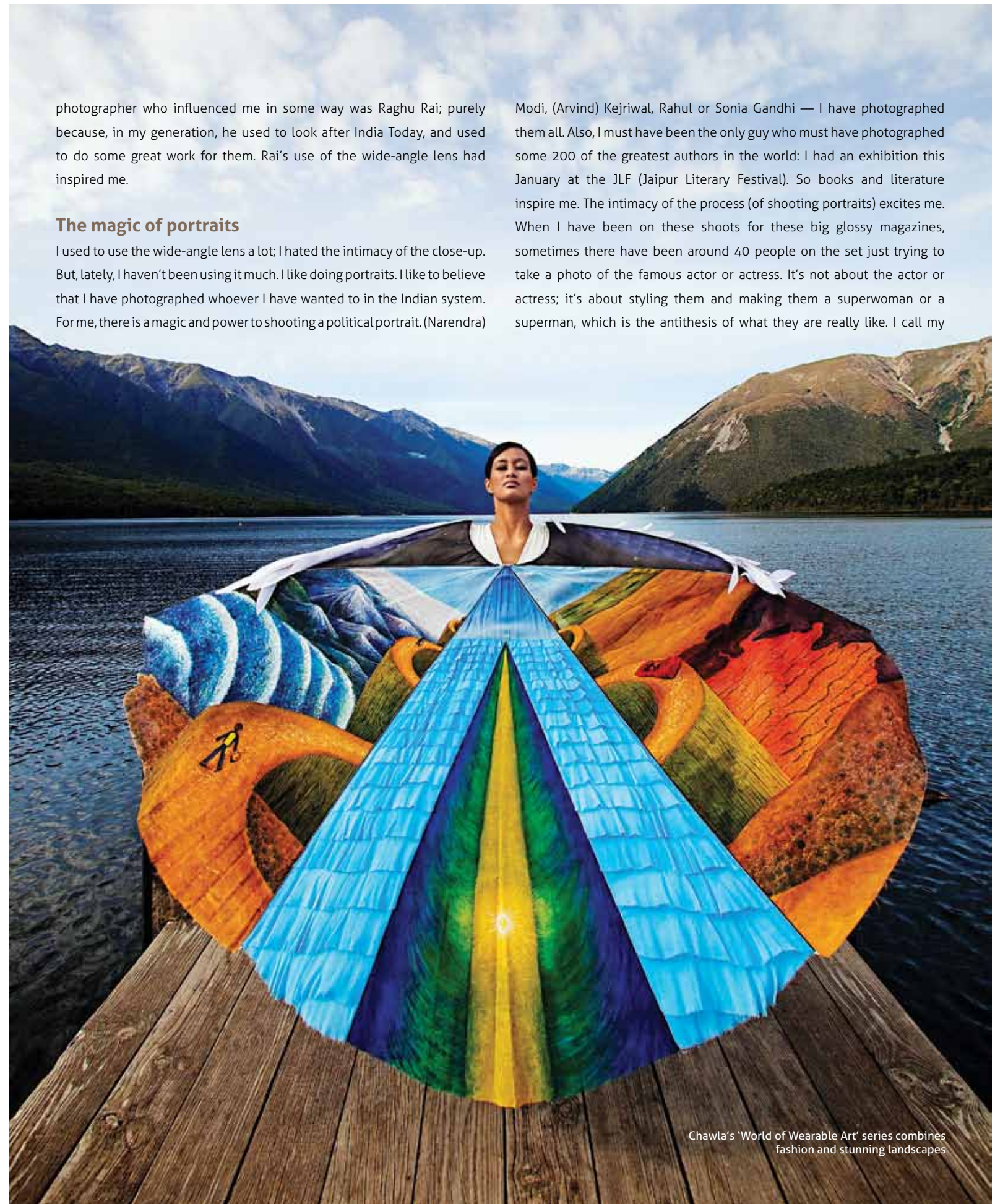
When I was young, my inspiration was Helmut Newton; then at some stage, it was Richard Avedon (American fashion and portrait photographer). I met Avedon and sort of assisted him in the Kumbh mela in India. (Henri) Cartier-Bresson was always a big influence as a photo-journalist, and I was lucky to have met him, in a place called Arles, in the south of France. These were two of my biggest heroes ever. In the Indian context, the only

photographer who influenced me in some way was Raghu Rai; purely because, in my generation, he used to look after India Today, and used to do some great work for them. Rai's use of the wide-angle lens had inspired me.

### The magic of portraits

I used to use the wide-angle lens a lot; I hated the intimacy of the close-up. But, lately, I haven't been using it much. I like doing portraits. I like to believe that I have photographed whoever I have wanted to in the Indian system. For me, there is a magic and power to shooting a political portrait. (Narendra)

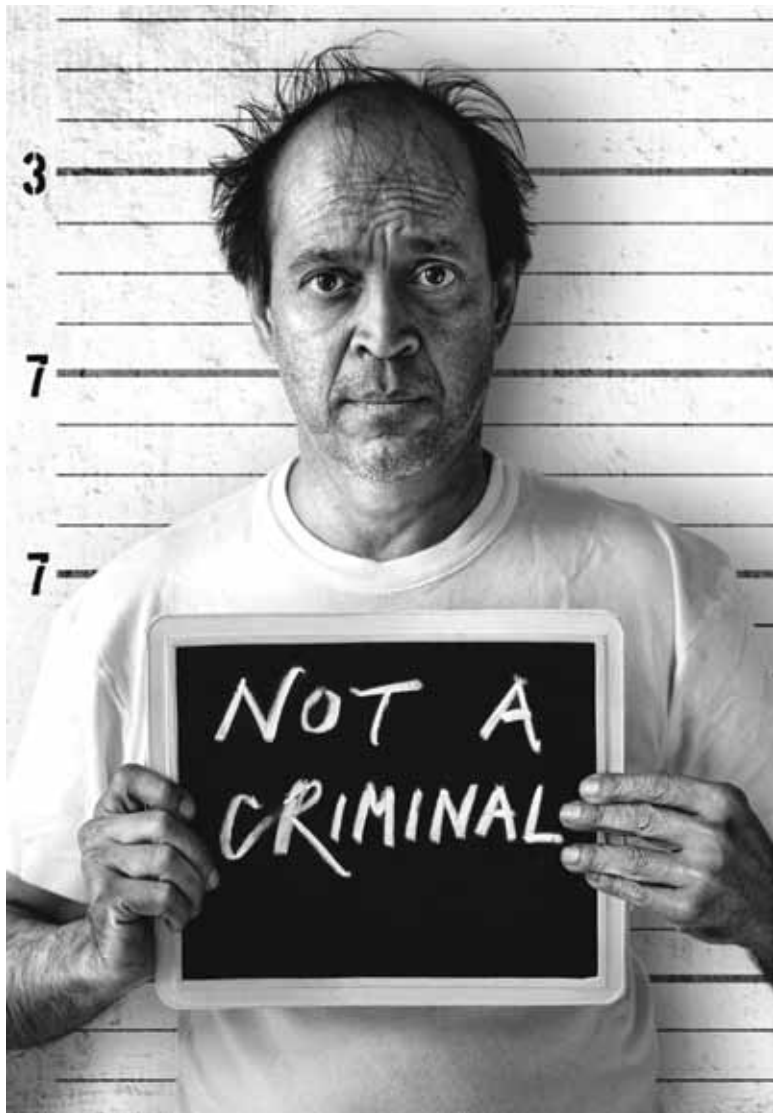
Modi, (Arvind) Kejriwal, Rahul or Sonia Gandhi — I have photographed them all. Also, I must have been the only guy who must have photographed some 200 of the greatest authors in the world: I had an exhibition this January at the JLF (Jaipur Literary Festival). So books and literature inspire me. The intimacy of the process (of shooting portraits) excites me. When I have been on these shoots for these big glossy magazines, sometimes there have been around 40 people on the set just trying to take a photo of the famous actor or actress. It's not about the actor or actress; it's about styling them and making them a superwoman or a superman, which is the antithesis of what they are really like. I call my



Chawla's 'World of Wearable Art' series combines fashion and stunning landscapes

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INDIA TODAY/ROHIT CHAWLA

Chawla's portrait of author Vikram Seth appeared on the cover of India Today in 2013, when the country was debating section 377



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Chawla has shot around 200 writers from across the globe, including acclaimed British playwright Tom Stoppard

## For art and photography lovers

Three Tasveer exhibitions to watch out for

Building on a successful year, Tasveer Arts will kick off its new season in September this year. Among the big exhibitions will be that of Stuart Freedman's photographs, called The Palaces of Memory — Tales from the Indian Coffee House. The British photographer, who came to India in the early 90s, captures his journey across the country through the famous coffee house in Connaught Place, in Delhi, which had served as his refuge and which had harkened him back to his childhood in London.

Tasveer will also present an exhibition of the black and white photographs of William Dalrymple, The Writer's Eye. The renowned travel



BAS MEEUWS/TASVEER

writer has shot powerful portraits and landscape shots, which are also out as a part of a book.

Yet another of Tasveer's interesting upcoming shows is Mughal Botanicals, which will feature contemporary Dutch photographer Bas Meeuws. Meeuws uses digital photography techniques to create contemporary flower pieces that echo the work of the early modern masters. This exhibition will showcase his new Indian flower pieces, along with a selection of his classic Dutch works.

Tasveer has also published Rohit Chawla: The Inspired Frame (Rs 1,900), a book which reproduces the images from the exhibition, and which has text by art historian Rupika Chawla



This photograph from 'The Inspired Frame' brings to life Gustav Klimt's Portrait of Adele Bloch-Bauer I, with actor Chitrangada Singh

ROHIT CHAWLA/TASVEER

portraits the 'Quiet Portraits'. They are bereft of anything. Zero styling, almost no make-up. I don't like to shoot my people stylised, in a way that is not true to them.

### 'Eyes Wide Shut'

The eyes and the creases of the skin were done by the documentary photographers in the '80s and '90s. My thing with the eyes is just the opposite. In my series 'Eyes Wide Shut', I have shot 100 of the greatest celebrities and personalities of this country with their eyes closed. When

a portrait is shot with the eyes of the subject being open, you are almost inevitably drawn to them, and they becomes the focus. I am in the process of redefining my quiet portrait, and I have done away with the eyes.

You can tell a celebrity or a politician to turn around and move around, but the minute you ask them to close their eyes, they are very reluctant to do so. Be it an SRK or an Aamir Khan — they are used to being so vigilant. Everybody in this current digital environment in this country wants to be looking out, ever vigilant. So if I ask someone to shut their eyes for 15 seconds, they'll tell me 'Yeh sab aap mujhse kyon karva rahe





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From Chawla's 'World of Wearable Art' series

ho' ("Why are you getting me to do this?"), as if I will usurp their throne! So it was fun doing something like that. I am trying to simplify my photos completely. I am shooting artists in their studios, I am bitten by the reality bug. People are obsessed with portraits and how they look. My thing is to make the portrait as representative as possible of the person in real life. It's poetry of form. Why did I like Avedon? Because he created the most simple portraiture style to shoot. I have also done a series called 'Goa Style', about the people found on the streets of Goa. Some of my other favourite fashion portraits are from a series called 'Wanderlust'.

### 'The Inspired Frame'

Everyone was trying to run away from everything Indian, so it was like cocking a snook at everyone, bringing that sensibility back. I'm all for traditional Indian sensibility and styling, and I had a partner in Tarun Tahiliani, so I could do Ravi Varma. It was a collaborative process, Tarun helped me in my journey from paint to pixel.

When you are translating something into a third dimension from something flat and yet trying to maintain the ethos of the original work, it is challenging. There is this painting of a girl playing the sitar. When Ravi Varma painted the sitar he could paint it how he wanted, but when we took a conventional sitar, it was too small. So we had to

specially create one, which was one and a half times the size of the conventional sitar.

In the case of (Gustav) Klimt, it was particularly difficult because the clothes were very layered, and one had to create some of them in Plaster of Paris to maintain the form. So there was a lot of hard work involved. It wasn't lazy photography. Everything was created — every prop, every piece of jewellery.

### His most celebrated photos

My increasing obsession is creating political art. One recent photo I had shot that went viral was with Ai Weiwei. He is the world's biggest artist-activist. I took him to a beach in Lesbos (in Greece), which was similar to the beach (in Turkey) where the little boy Aylan Kurdi was found, whose photo changed the perception of the Syrian refugee crisis. We convinced Weiwei to lie on the spot like the boy. The minute I put up the picture, the Washington Post picked it up, the New York Times picked it up. It focussed attention on the refugee problem all over again. It is my most celebrated photo, something I had done for India Today (in 2016).

I had done something with Vikram Seth (writer), in the peak of the anti-(Section) 377 agitation (in 2013); I put him on the cover of India Today looking like a convict. That had also gone viral. ○