

# Adil Jussawalla, a photo never taken

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**THE EXHIBITION** «Enlightenment from an Unlikely Envelope: Archives of Adil Jussawalla» is dedicated to the Indian poet, curated by Deeptha Achar and Chithra KS at the Kerala Museum in Edappally, Kochi, India (until 24 March)

**Enlightenment from an Unlikely Envelope: Archives of Adil Jussawalla**  
*Edited by Deeptha Achar and Chithra KS* Kerala Museum in Edappally, Kochi



When you're born in Mumbai, you inevitably love the sea, strolling along Marine Drive and gazing at the silhouettes of ships on the horizon, their slow motion, the sound of their sirens, the burden of

dreams and expectations they carry. Adil Jussawalla, born there in 1940 (then called Bombay), has also always loved ships. From an early age, seeing them gave him a sense of freedom. In the 1990s, he also began cutting out and saving images and newspaper articles about steamships, vessels, and boats of all kinds. It was more than a simple hobby, so much so that in 2006 he collected them in a personal scrapbook. Ships were also among the favorite subjects of his early photographs. A moving imagery that could not fail to permeate his poetry over time, from the poem " *Picnic*" to the entire collection " *Shorelines*" (2019).

"Ships moored in the water. A long line of ships on this hot afternoon, still as houses abandoned for the day. There are things you can't see in the photograph: the tower with the crooked roof, a sunken garland, the ships have come with the view," writes the well-known author of the anthology *New Writing in India (1974)* in the poem " *View in Trying to Say Goodbye*" (2011 ).

*The exhibition Enlightenment from an Unlikely Envelope: Archives of Adil Jussawalla*, curated by Deeptha Achar and Chithra KS at the Kerala Museum in Edappally, Kochi (until 24 March), is dedicated to this brilliant and highly refined Indian intellectual, poet and critic, as well as photographer with a background in architecture and a master's degree in English (obtained at Oxford during the years he lived in England, between 1957 and 1970). The exhibition is organised in collaboration with the Guild Art Gallery in Alibaug, Mumbai, which hosted the first stage in spring/summer 2025.

Articulated in a greater number of sections, this documentary exhibition, introduced by the video conversation between the poet and the writer and director Rustom Bharucha, explores the links between his photographic practice, his life as a writer and the environment that surrounds him through texts and manuscripts of his poetry books *Land's End* (1962), *Missing Person* (1972) and *Trying to Say Goodbye* (2014) which earned him the prestigious Sahitya Akademi Award, as well as documents relating to the works *The Right Kind of Dog* (2013), *Maps for a Mortal Moon* (2014)

and *I Dreamt a Horse Fell from the Sky* (2015), embellished with scrapbooks, notes, lists (partly photostat copies), contact sheets, books from his library: there is also the black and white image taken in 1970 by the photographer Pablo Bartholomew which frames a part of Jussawalla's bookcase in his apartment in Cuffe Parade, a residential and commercial district in South Mumbai, with an open window onto the architecture.



Adil Jussawalla

Among the personal items—a wristwatch given to him by his mother Mehera, envelopes of negatives, boxes of Kodak photographic paper, and envelopes containing airmail letters sent from India to his London address (35 Nevern Place)—underscore the archive's crucial role not only as a resource for reconstructing the author's multifaceted biography in the constant intertwining of private and public life, but above all as a key element for retracing an era of great cultural ferment. "The emphasis is on connections and moments in which ideas, images, and events can be interpreted as a set of intersections," the curators write. Speaking of archives, in 2023, the author himself donated a significant number of articles, including editorials and reviews, published in publications such as *Debonair*, *Deccan Herald*, *The Afternoon Despatch & Courier*, and *The Daily* to the Archives of Contemporary India (ACI) at Ashoka University. Although he came from Mumbai's elite Parsi background, Adil Jussawalla has always confronted "the dark side of the city with humility, interacting, documenting, reflecting", a reality that emerges in many of his works.

Among the photographic works on display – at the age of 13 his aunt Gool Mehta gave him his first camera, a Kodak Baby Brownie, with which he immortalised his family, picnics during the holidays in Sinhagad, of which several shots from 1953 are exhibited, and also everyday scenes in Mumbai – there is also *AA School of Architecture, London* (1957), the sequence created during his first year of architectural studies in London and among the colour series *Fire Temple, Bombay* (1967), *Kathakali Rehearsals in London 2* (c. 1968), *Worker, Mumbai* (1999), *Castaway City (Shorelines)* (2019), as well as the work on the Parsi community and the photograph of the bougainvillea that bloomed on the balcony of his house for over 35 years, also mentioned in the poem *Have I Heard It Right, I Wonder*.

It seems that in the 1980s, in Genoa, Jussawalla photographed transvestites in the alleys of the city center, twenty years after Lisetta Carmi's extraordinary shots, but these images are not part of the exhibition. As for the title of the exhibition, *Enlightenment*

*from an Unlikely Envelope: Archives of Adil Jussawalla*, it is taken from his poem "Ellora," in which he describes coming across an envelope filled with negatives of photographs he had taken in the Ellora Caves, the complex of 34 rock-cut temples (a UNESCO World Heritage site) dating back to the 6th-11th century AD, carved by Hindus, Buddhists, and Jains. "You, being yourself, will never be captured by the camera, at least not by mine. I, being myself, will continue to capture from all angles.

When we're done, when I'm done, fifty years from now, after I've cleaned out the closets, sorted the files, pored over the negatives for signs of mold, will illumination fall from an unlikely envelope, fall before me just like that, a photograph I never took but was taken for me, showing you with your eyes quietly closed as usual, and me with my eyes open, looking away from you, taking a last photo of a flower or a child in the available light, at peace with myself? Has this ever happened? As Deeptha Achar and Chithra KS write, "In a way, part of the poem is a reflection on recording and archiving and explores the act of taking a photograph. This line seems emblematic of the archival impulse to preserve and organize, and sometimes to find hidden gems, new configurations, unexpected directions."