





EXILE

Words: Gemma Padley

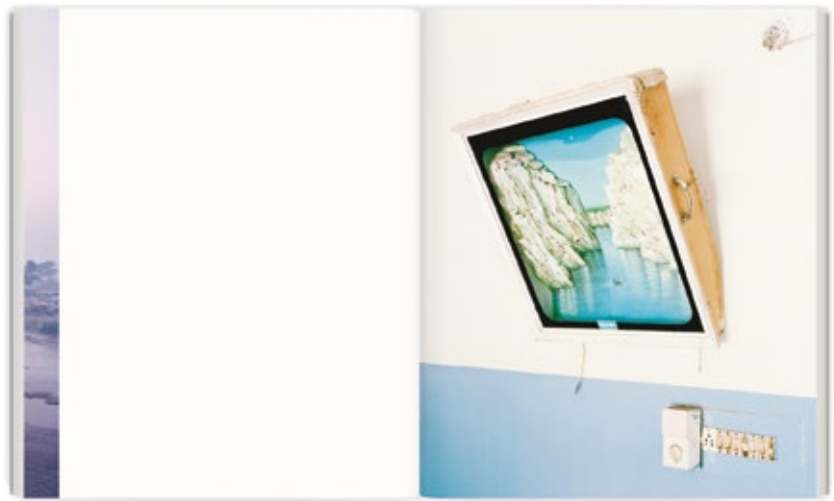
Photography: Vasantha Yoganathan

The elegiac third instalment of Vasantha Yoganathan's long-term project *A Myth of Two Souls* sees its protagonist exiled in this spellbinding tome.

There are some photobooks so absorbing you can curl up with them for hours and allow yourself to drift deep into the worlds presented, forgetting that you are in fact experiencing a very deliberate and highly stage-managed depiction of something rather than the thing itself. *Exile* by Vasantha Yoganathan is such a book, not only because of its pleasing design (the carefully folded cover and pages are soft to touch, and images spill over from one page into the next as though they are frames in a film), but because the images – and the story they tell – are so captivating.

Exile forms part of the series *A Myth of Two Souls* – Yoganathan's modern retelling of the ancient seven-chapter Indian myth, *The Ramayana*, first recorded by the Sanskrit poet Valmiki around 300 BC. That it is accomplished, both aesthetically and in terms of content, should come as no surprise – *Exile* is the third photobook or 'chapter' in a series of seven, and like its precursors, the finish is meticulous from cover to cover. It is also the eighth book from the Paris-based independent publishing house Chose Commune, founded and run by Yoganathan and his partner Cécile Poimboeuf-Koizumi in 2014.

Books one and two, titled *Early Times* and *The Promise* respectively, address the beginnings and early development of the Indian epic, which the

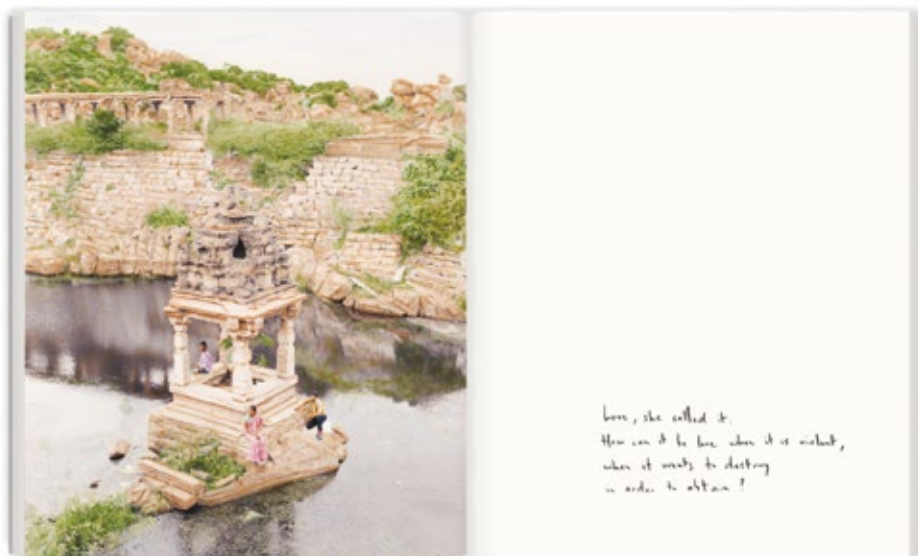


publisher describes as ‘one of the founding epics of Hindu mythology.’ The first book focuses on the youth and education of the young Rama, son of King Dasharatha, and Sita, the daughter of King Janaka, who are destined to fall in love but do not know each other yet. The second celebrates the couple’s love. Book three picks up where book two left off: Rama has been banished from the kingdom and is forced to live in exile for fourteen years. Later, Sita and Rama’s brother Lakshmana will join him in the forest.

In *Exile*, Yoganathan teams up again with Indian writer Arshia Sattar with whom he worked on his second book, published in April 2017. Short passages of text appear sporadically throughout, almost as haiku, adding narrative context, but also deeply moving and thought-provoking in their own right

(indeed, *The Ramayana* has been continuously rewritten and reinterpreted throughout time, says the publisher). One passage, for example, reads: ‘Love, she called it. How can it be love when it is violent, when it wants to destroy in order to obtain?’ It is a joy to see such care taken with the inclusion of text alongside images, so often (regrettably) an after-thought. Unlike in the previous two books, these passages are handwritten, creating a powerful sense of intimacy throughout *Exile*.

Once again we are invited to experience Yoganathan’s unique visual language – a muted colour palette and soft light – but also hand-painted photographs alongside vernacular images, all of which he employs to blur the boundaries between what is real and what is fabricated. With



its carefully managed edit of enthralling landscapes, intimate portraits, and intricate close-ups, *Exile* whisks readers off into a magical, dreamlike world suspended between truth and fiction. It is a breathtaking, heady mix, and one gets the sense that Yoganathan's confidence builds with each book, just as the potency of this ancient tale deepens to match the story's growing pace.

There is still much to do. Yoganathan has been travelling from north to south India since 2013, retracing the journeys that the epic's heroes made, and at the time of writing he has four more trips planned. *Exile* is a pause in this epic journey – a chance for reflection – and by the final pages readers will be itching for more.

Exile by Vasantha Yoganathan, published by Chose Commune, September 2017.

45€

Softcover with Japanese binding, 51 photographs and 192 pages.

www.vasantha.fr
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www.chosecommune.com