

Tread Lightly On this Earth Talk

INTRO

My name is Sonia and I am a creative professional and multidisciplinary artist/photographer from Birmingham. I use the photographic medium to create visual metaphors that address social and environmental issues. My inspiration stems from contemporary situations, which I further explore to create new ways to view the world in its current climate, inviting the viewer to look at the world as it is but from another point of view. With my photography I have a passion for communicating stories related to the impact of climate change and anthropological stressors on the planet. I believe when art is aligned to a certain cause then it becomes a visual arm to bring about change.

This project was conceived during the pandemic of Covid-19 and lockdown in 2020. This particular year was a time of awakening for me, I was reading the book by Giles Hutchins, "The Illusion of Separation, exploring the cause of our current crisis" ... and I was frustrated to see how the world was going, how we were depleting and destroying our only home. Nature is speaking to us, but are we listening? We live in an artifice that we are separate from nature, that we will not bear the consequences of our damaging actions on earth. We fight for what we perceive to be equality in every area of our lives, but we don't fight for equality with mother nature. We live under the illusion that we are superior to the natural world, despite attempted education about co-creating with nature from Indigenous peoples. This led to my research of ancient wisdom from Sikh & Hindu theology to address contemporary issues, such as the way we live, consume & act. If we don't stop taking without giving back, it's quite possible we're going to destroy everything, including ourselves.

I have always had the urge to make photos with a purpose and so my project, The Illusion of Separation was visualised.

The project- The Illusion of separation

The greatest Illusion in this world is the illusion of separation and is ultimately the cause of the negative human impact we continue to have on our planet. In this series I am researching ancient wisdom from Sikh and Hindu theology to address these contemporary issues, such as the way we live, consume and act. The Goddess Maya means illusion, that which is temporary and is the one who blinds everything in illusion, but at the same time, she's the one who shows the truth. She's the source of all illusions, stating that we view life through a series of distorting veils that prevent us from seeing "actual reality.

Maya has multiple meaning in Indian philosophies, Sikh theology explains that everything in this world is an illusion (Maya). Maya is assumed to stand between human and reality, producing error and illusion in the human mind, and creating difficulties in the individual's progress to a state of knowledge and bliss. Sikhs see the temporary distractions of the material world as an illusion, or Maya. As a philosophic category in the Indian tradition, maya is interpreted variously as a veil or

curtain concealing reality. The concept of Maya is beautifully explained by the metaphor of a rope appearing as a snake in dim light. Maya created a phenomenon of appearance of the rope for snake in dim light, which is the result of ignorance created by our mind. In the bright light, the misconception and fear is gone with true knowledge of the rope.

I am interested in exploring these veils of Maya (an illusion) where we consider our separateness from our environment and the universe as absolute. The problem lies with us and our own consciousness, we continue to deplete and destroy the very nature that we are so intrinsically a part of. Humankind is but one thread within the web of life so whatever we do to that web, we do to ourselves. All things are connected and all things are bound together. We are one of the many shapes nature has taken but Maya, the veil of illusion masks the truth of our reality. We need to address this disconnectedness and the damaging impact the human species is having on this planet of ours. To evolve past this illusion and our dominance over this planet in order to be beneficial to the whole.

In Gurbani, The Sikh Holy Book, maya is also equated with wealth (material goods) as also with the sense of attachment to worldly possessions. Most often, the term denotes delusion, since under the spell of maya, the mind is not able to distinguish truth from falsehood, the ever-lasting from the momentary, the essence from mere appearance. In a word, maya in Sikhism connotes avidya, that is ignorance and also refers to the "grand illusion" of materialism. From this Maya, all other evils are born, but by understanding the nature of Māyā a person begins to approach spirituality. Most people are believed to suffer from the false consciousness of materialism, which leads to worldly entanglements. Sikhism encourages people to respect and live in harmony with the environment, including animals and plants. The Sikh Holy Scripture states, "Air is the Guru, water is the father and Earth is the great mother. Day and night are like two nurses who look after us"

As described in the Guru Granth Sahib, The Sikh Holy Book, the ecological basis of Sikh tradition rests in the understanding that the Creator ('Qadir') and the Creation ('Qudrat') are One. The Divine permeates all life, and is inherent in the visible creation around us, from the wind that blows across land and skies, to the water that flows through rivers and seas, to the forests and fields that humans rely on for food and shelter, as well as all the creatures of land and sea that depend on the earth for sustenance. The Sikh Gurus teach that there is no duality between that which makes a flower grow and the petals we are able to touch and sense with our fingers.

I have a quote here from Albert Einstein... A human being is a spatially and temporally limited piece of the whole, what we call the "Universe." He experiences himself and his feelings as separate from the rest, an optical illusion of his consciousness. The quest for liberation from this bondage [or illusion] is the only object of true religion. Not nurturing the illusion but only overcoming it gives us the attainable measure of inner peace. - Albert Einstein

Perhaps the disconnection doesn't stem from the fact that our new creations are so far 'advanced' or 'otherworldly', but that we collectively separated ourselves from nature as we progressively ranked ourselves 'above' it and made nature the grand 'other' that we exist outside of and is subsequently outside of us. A collective dissociation that would be akin to deciding that the head has outgrown the arm and no longer has any identification with it. Humans, plants, and animals are all fundamentally the same – all life on Earth is 'made up' of the same six essential life ingredients (carbon, hydrogen, nitrogen, oxygen, phosphorus and sulphur) therefore our shared origin exclusively remains to be the Earth.

Is it the Great Ego of collective humanity that, looking upon our 'advanced' creations, finds it easier and easier to build upon and twist systems of belief that we are 'above' our own natural reality and source of existence?

CONCLUSION

THE CAUSE FOR ECOLOGICAL IMBALANCE

The human mind, by being self-conceited, loses communion with Nature, and ultimately with God and his creation of the natural world. The economic structure of the society is based upon Maya (wealth). It plays a significant role in all spheres of human activity, including religion and politics.

People of faith make up over 80% percent of the world's population. Our religions teach us to care for the earth and each other; we seek to live by these values. Right now, however, the world is deeply out of balance and we are frightened and concerned. The most vulnerable among us are suffering while ineffective or authoritarian governments, polluting and extractive industries place our planet at great risk. We have an opportunity now for bold transformation, to build a life connected to each other and the Earth. The mainstream environmental dialogue can be strengthened by voices of spiritual traditions that not only represent sizable populations but also inspire us to a deeper environmental sensibility and action. Our planet is a divine gift deserving of our utmost respect and care. As climate change threatens our world, it's time for us to embrace this shared belief. Within spiritual unity lies our greatest chance for environmental redemption.

"Storytelling is how we will understand the extent of the climate emergency, and the required solutions.

The environmental crisis is one of overconsumption, carbon emissions, and corporate greed. storytelling can enable a united global response to the environmental crisis. Unlike numbers or

facts, stories can trigger an emotional response, harnessing the power of motivation, imagination, and personal values, which drive the most powerful and permanent forms of social change. For instance, in 2019, we all saw the images of Notre Dame cathedral erupting in flames. Three minutes after the fire began, images of the incident were being broadcasted globally, eliciting an immediate response from world leaders. That same year, the Amazon Forest also burned, spewing smoke that spread over 2,000 miles and burning over one and a half football fields of rain forest every minute of every day—it took three weeks for the mainstream media to report that story. Why did the burning of Notre Dame warrant such rapid responses globally, when the Amazon fires did not? Although it is just a beautiful assortment of limestone, lead, and wood, we attach personal significance to Notre Dame, because it has a story we know and can relate to. That is what propelled people to react to it, while the fact that the Amazon was on fire elicited nothing.

“Stories are fundamental to how humans observe and interpret the world. The time is now to tell stories that not only shine a light on the ecological and humanitarian challenges we face but also provide inspiring solutions that are within our reach. We don't always need visionary leaders, we need all members of society, citizens, and communities who are working on the ground to make things happen.

Through my visual storytelling of, 'The Illusion of Separation, my aim is to communicate and evoke an emotional response to the root causes of our current social, psychological, economic and ecological crises, armed with a vision of how we can come together and become active in working with nature to move beyond these crises. This co-creation of a better future begins with finding the courage to remove the veil. The Zen Buddhist teacher, Thích Nhất Hạnh reminds us: “We are here to awaken from the illusion of separateness.”