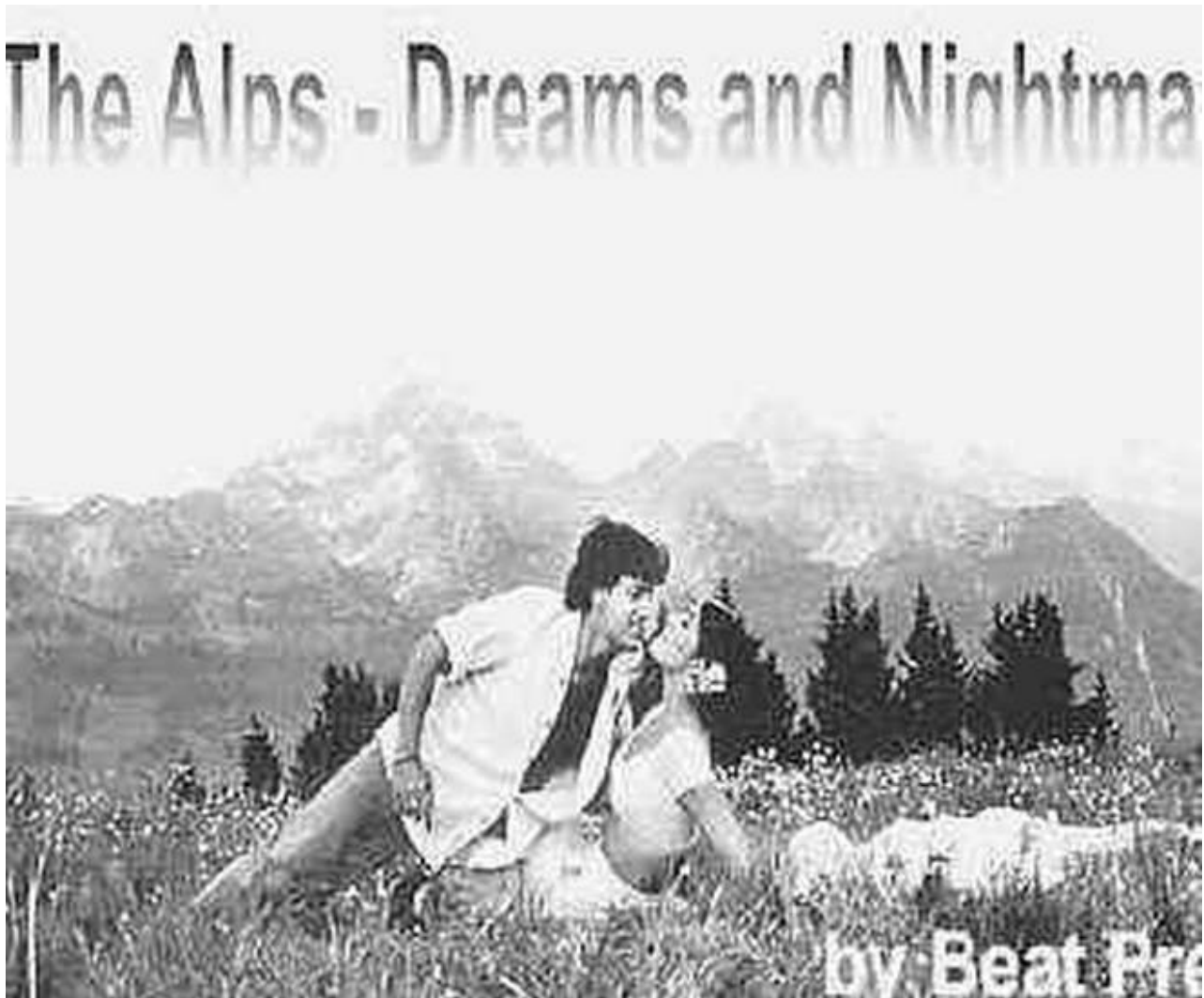


Capturing snow-capped mountains

THE thehindu.com/todays-paper/tp-features/tp-metroplus/capturing-snow-capped-mountains/article28368129.ece



THE ALPS: Dreams and nightmares, a photo exhibition by Swiss photographer, Beat Presser, is to be shown in Chennai from February 2 to 7. The exhibition of black and white photographs was made as part of a book commission on the Alps. Beat worked on the project for three months, making trips to the mountains from his base in the city of Basel. There are photographs here taken from speeding trains and from underneath precarious avalanches. There are magical stories of chasing mountain deer for days only to come face to face with it at 2,000 metres up the mountain, appearing, in the artist's own words, "like a creature from somewhere else to show its beauty". There are photos come out of great patience — waiting for hours for the moon to get on the right side of the Matterhorn for instance and photos of post colonial subjects using the Alps as exotic background — a Bollywood film crew shoot as Aamir Khan and Twinkle Khanna cavort in the lush green grass. It is snow-capped mountains that come to mind when one thinks of Switzerland and the Alps form a major part of that country's national identity. For Beat Presser the project was a way of discovering the Alps as a place and exploring their symbolic status.

Excerpts from an interview...

The title of the show is "Alpentraum". Can you explain the meaning of the term and its connotations?

It's a play with the German words "Alpen" which means Alps and "traum" which is dream. Put together it means dreaming about the Alps but if you take away the "en" it means a nightmare. The Alps are beautiful but also very dangerous both in the physical sense and also in the narrowing effect they have on your mind.

There is a sense of walking and an effect of actually being there when looking at your photographs. This may be due to the continuity that you sustain from photograph to photograph. What is the philosophy behind presenting your work in this way?

I have an interest in telling stories with different pictures. I am not interested in photographing this and that and putting it together somehow. I like to bring to the people parts of the world that they cannot see because they cannot take the risk to go there or if they do they are unable to put their experiences into proper photography. With my exhibitions I try to create these rooms where you can walk in and you are in a different world. I like to give people the possibility of escaping their reality for a while, participate in the world that I have created and take it as a memory and go along.

There is a vast theoretical discourse around photography that talks of it as being a complex political medium raising issues of ethics and power. You have mentioned somewhere that photography is a peaceful medium; this seems to run contrary to that way of thinking. Can you elaborate on your position?

I was a little boy when I started photography. I found out as I worked that I can go around the world and meet photographers and that I was always welcome there. My door is open to all photographers too. Good friendships and talks can come out of these encounters. Photography has never been something aggressive to me because we all have one goal — that is to bring moments on paper and try to distribute them to people in one way or other. There is so much technical and intellectual work involved, and so much dedication that there is no time to create non-peaceful activity. I have never seen photographers fighting and I think if we can make our wars with cameras it will be more interesting and a blessing. I wish that one day it would happen.

There are also questions of representation — as a traveller-photographer you fall in the long tradition of explorers from the west, often part of colonialist projects who have represented far off exotic places. Where do you stand in relation to this history of ethnographic representations when you photograph places other than Switzerland, such as Cameroon, Brazil and Madagascar?

First of all I am staging people the way they want to be staged. I am not going and stealing a moment. My Madagascar works were all in the 6x6 format. This means it took a long time to stage these pictures. You have to set up the light, the tripod, the reflector and so on. It is as if I am building a temporary studio somewhere. I always try to make a nice little event and make a get-together out of it. I ask people to participate in my ideas and everybody in the book wanted to be involved. (Exhibition will be on from Feb 2 to 7 at Art world. The photographer will also introduce Werner Herzog's film "My Best Friend" at The Max Muller Bhavan 6.30 p.m. on the February 7.)

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