

Sheila Rock: a spiritual journey

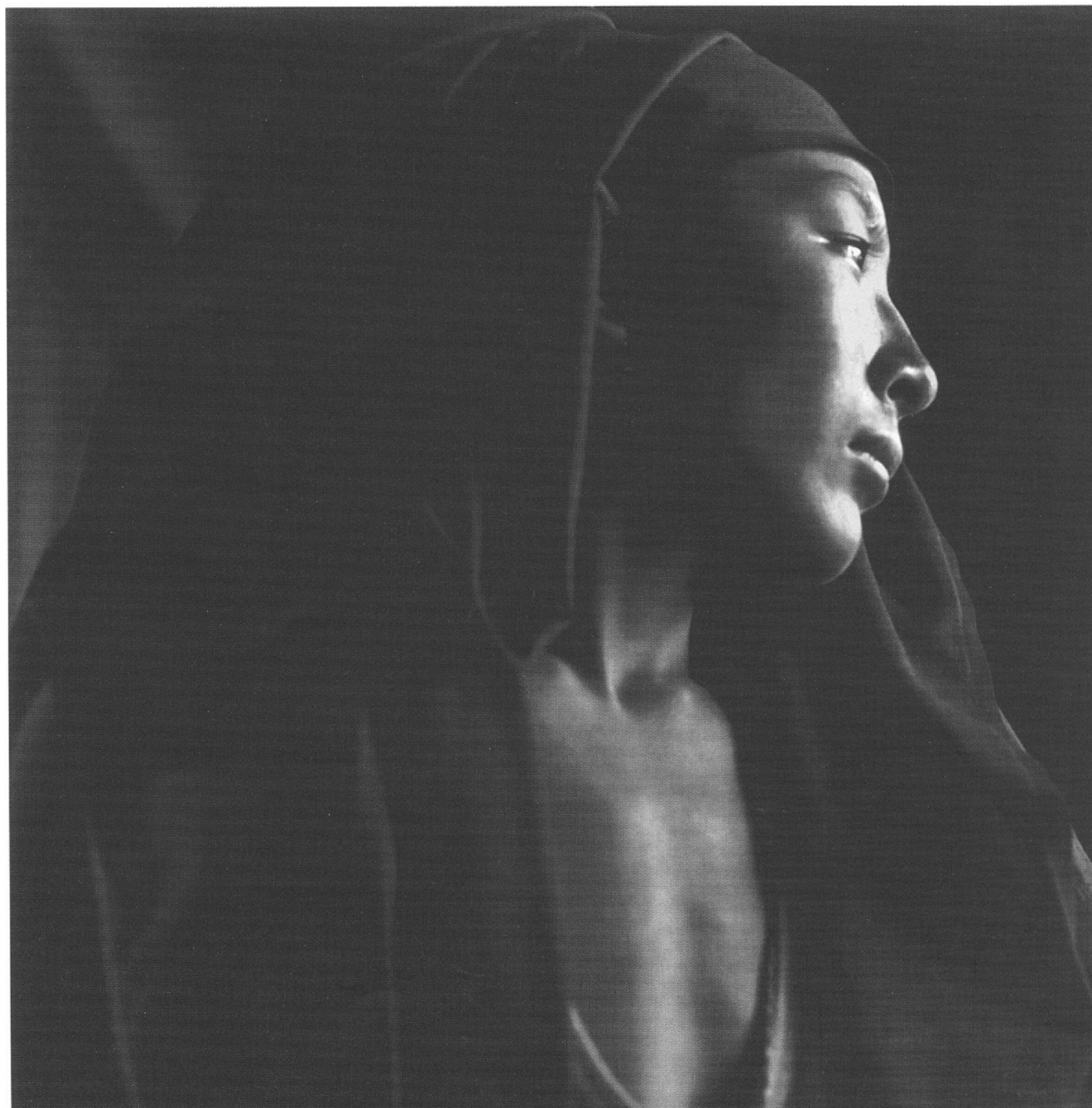
Despite working for the past two decades in advertising, editorial and the music photography, Sheila Rock's commercial work has retained the spiritual quality of her personal work. She talks to Nadia Marks

Sheila Rock's beautiful photographs have appeared in numerous publications in Europe and America, and her work is in the permanent collection of the National Portrait Gallery, London. Some of her pictures recently appeared in *Spiritual Beings*, an exhibition in New York, and the Photographers' Gallery is showing photographs taken from her latest book, of life at the Sera Jeh Buddhist Monastery in Mysore, India; the home of some 5000 Tibetan-Buddhist monks, including many who fled the original ancient monastery in Tibet, when it was destroyed by Chinese tanks in 1959.

"I started the project long before I thought it could be a book", says Sheila. "I'd gone to Sera by accident in 1998 on a personal spiritual exploration and, when I left, all I thought about that year was returning." As a photographer, Sheila feels it's very important not to focus only on her commercial work, but also on personal fulfilment in what she does.

"I thought it would be interesting for me to spend time in the monastery, as a life experience, and also to photograph the faces which were haunting me from the last time I was there."

Sheila went back once again and took more pictures, because everyone who saw them felt they should be turned into a book.





"The idea of a book attracted me a lot, not because I thought it would be yet another good thing for my portfolio, but much more because I would be able to give back something to the monks. I want my photography not to be a completely selfish act." This was a fulfilling and interactive project, which took over four years to complete and involved

several trips back to Sera.

"A friend of mine worked in a big publishing company, and was very encouraging about the idea of a book", Sheila explains. "But, unfortunately, the people he showed my pictures to, the ones who made the decisions, decided this was not a commercial book so they didn't want to publish it."



However, as luck would have it, someone Sheila knew was about to start a job as the head of the Theological Department at Columbia University, which has a press and publishes religious books. "She fell in love with the pictures and proceeded to take on the project. She felt that if she could get

the approval of Robert Thurman, who is America's foremost expert in Tibet, then the book was a *fait accompli*." Thurman saw the pictures, loved them, and not only approved the project, but also wrote the book's foreword.

"I then went back to do more pictures, and the book started



to develop in a sort of organic way. I was lucky that I had Geshe Genden Gyatso helping me through the whole project, and one thing seemed to flow into the next. Geshe is a title which denotes a higher level of monk, for which you have to undertake almost 20 years of spiritual study."

Sheila flew to Goa to meet Genden Gyatso, and he took her to the Dalai Lama. "It was the most incredible experience. We went to a monastery where no western people were allowed to go but, because I looked Tibetan, I was able to infiltrate with no-one paying any attention to me. Monks from all over India had come there and I was able to wonder around freely, taking pictures."

Sheila had as her translator Tashi, Genden Gyatso's young nephew, so she was able to communicate with the monks. He would go up to them and ask if she could do their portraits and to begin with, that was what she did, quite tight portrait shots. "Even though their faces were exquisitely beautiful, in terms of photography, I started getting bored of doing tight head shots, and began searching for other equally interesting things around the monastery", she says.

Sheila began by photographing the places where the monks

slept or meditated, shooting still-lives of personal items. "When I came back and showed them to my editor, she loved them and felt it expanded the whole project. Each time I went back, I took a different camera, because I thought that with each one I would get a different feeling in my pictures. When you work on 35mm, it's really quick and spontaneous, and then a lot of the 120 shots were done on my Hasselblad, which is lightweight and easy to pack in my backpack." Sheila also bought herself a very light titanium tripod, which was easy to transport. "On my last trip, I took my Wista which, by 5x4 standards, was also pretty compact, and that provided a different feeling again."

The strange and surprising thing, Sheila thinks, is that when she eventually finished the project and went back with all her variations on the subject, the pictures that most people seemed to go for were the portraits. "So much of my work is trying to glamorise everything, and that can be very artificial. This project was real, and you could see it in the faces of the monks. They were just themselves. You could see a real joy and a projection of the inner spirit, which captivated people.

"Perhaps, at the end of the day, I am a portrait photographer", she says thoughtfully, "and that is what I do best. My agents wouldn't necessarily say that, but that is how I see myself. I do try to connect with the person I photograph. Even in a commercial job, I try to get some kind of emotion and spirit from whoever I'm photographing. We are all spiritual beings."

Nadia Marks

Until 7 April, prints from Sera - the Way of the Tibetan Monk show in the Print Sales Room at the Photographers' Gallery, 5 Gt Newport St WC2. 020 7831 1772. Mon-Sat 11.00-18.00, Sun 12.00-18.00.

The Photographers' Gallery represents prints from Sera - the Way of the Tibetan Monk, ISBN 0-231 12890-8. Pub Columbia University Press.

Large scale prints from the Sera project will be on show 17 June-17 Sept, at Fondazione Italiana per la Fotografia, Palazzo Brickerasio, Turin, Italy.

