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## CAPTURING A CITY'S SOUL

The camera lens of a visiting artist offers a fresh perspective on Hartford. By Sujata Srinivasan

Seen through the lens of her camera, Hartford, with its string of historic museums, is a treasure hunt for Dayanita Singh, a renowned Indian photographer who was commissioned by the \$43 billion United Technologies Corp. to photograph the city as part of its two-month, multi-city photography exhibition titled "Cities in Transition."

Singh's five images of Hartford will be displayed at Bushnell Park on Sept. 21, beside photographs of New York City by Chuck Close, the acclaimed American painter, photographer and print maker, and pictures of Boston taken by Mitch Epstein, the American photographer and filmmaker. Singh will explore urban America in transition, Epstein, the visual impact of old and new infrastructure, and Close, the diversity of the population.

Singh, who is visiting Hartford from the Indian seaside city of Goa, says house museums connect her with the rest of the world. "That's what I photograph wherever I go, whether it's Budapest, Bombay, Hartford or Florence," she says. "To me, going to any house museum is like entering a novel. You can sit there for the whole day and imagine

the characters, the conversations, all the generations that passed through that room, sat on that chair, slept on that bed. For me, it's a wonderful way to understand a city."

That's why to Singh, the Isham-Terry House on High Street, with its stained glass windows, ornate lighting fixtures and painted walls and ceilings from 1854, juxtaposed against the highway and the soaring new construction in Hartford, is a metaphor of a city in transition. "It moved me deeply to see this house here, right in the middle of the cross section," she says. "The portion of Hartford that I'm staying in [Columbus Boulevard] seems like a place that is trying to reinvent itself completely. It feels like it's a city that wants to erase any signs of the past. That's why I'm drawn to house museums. It gives a clue

to those shaping the city of what the balance should be."

Krista J. Pilot, director of community affairs at UTC, explains that the company wanted to bring in a "fresh perspective" to avoid stereotypical interpretations of the city, which typically focus on crime and poverty. An outsider, UTC believed, would approach the project with an unprejudiced and open mind, and hopefully see the city in a new light. "What we're looking for is Dayanita's uncensored, artistic interpretation of Hartford," Pilot says. Hartford was chosen as part of the three-city exhibit by virtue of its being home base for the conglomerate's global headquarters, as well as for its heritage and history, she adds.

"Cities in Transition" builds on UTC's public art program, launched last year as part of the company's 25th anniversary of arts sponsorship.

Singh has photographed the city from several perspectives: the rooftop of UTC's global headquarters at One Financial Plaza, the Mark Twain House & Museum, The Menczer Museum of Medicine & Dentistry in Hartford, the Butler-McCook House & Garden, and the rooftop of the Isham-Terry House, her favorite thus far.

"Isham-Terry is not just another house museum. It's the fact that two spinsters lived here in defiance of the highway being built right across their front door," she says. "They lived here when there were riots. If you look from the top, it's amazing to see what the sisters saw. To me, it becomes a metaphor of looking at a city."

Singh shies away from what she calls "photography that is too articulated." So expect to see ambiguous images that elicit diverse interpretations. "I hope people can build their own story line out of my pictures," she says.

When asked whether her photographs will contain people, she says "No. Not people that you can see. But I don't think the chairs will look empty." ■

*Sujata Srinivasan is the editor of Connecticut Business Magazine. She has edited and written for financial publications, newspapers and magazines in the U.S. and abroad for close to 10 years, including the Hartford Courant, Hartford Magazine and Hartford Business Journal in Connecticut. Prior to this, she was the acting chief of bureau for CNBC (India) in Chennai, India.*