Life in the land of color and sand
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BOOK REVIEW

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Take a look at the full-page picture on page 70 of Rajasthan (see photo bottom right). The caption reads: "Woman selling bangles." At first glance it does indeed appear to be simply a sweet lady contentedly sitting in her jam-packed bangle shop. But look again! There are seven photos there, we think--maybe more. Count them. We did, or tried to. Several times. And we are still not sure we have it right. Pauline wants us to look twice, thrice and scrutinize--and we just can't not.

To compose these compelling art conglomerates, Pauline rips, cuts and tears up her photos (sometimes precisely, sometimes crudely), pastes them together, and photographs or scans them as collages. Because the photos used in each collage are so intentionally similar, it is often difficult to tell where one photo stops and another starts. The mix is part realistic and part visionary, with the distinction between these two almost impossible to precisely discern. In the seven pictures presented on this two-page spread, all taken from Rajasthan, there are at least 32 photos. Can you find them all?

Pauline's approach is radical, even in the world of fine art, which is primarily defined by creative risks. But if you let her compositions grow on you, they work. In the end, you are left with a bit of the inspiration she surely felt when she was right there in Rajasthan having the time of her life. Rajasthan, which means "the land of kings, " is India's second largest state and comprises about one-tenth of its land mass. Much of the region consists of dry plains swept by sandstorms of the Thar Desert. In Pauline's photo compositions, we see what she saw in the rugged yet ever-cheerful faces of the people who there. They are in love with color--even in a monochromatic world of sand. They are in love with life; it seems everyone is always celebrating. And they are in love with their personal traditions. Even today, the Rajasthanis maintain a proud cultural identity that sets them apart from the rest of India. Pauline also likes Rajasthan's history, especially as she witnessed it sung in folk

songs, told in tales and poetry and paintings. It was this spirit of poetic myth that enticed her back there again and again and eventually compelled her to tell the story of her adventures in pictures.

By her own admission, the logic of her organization of images in the book "may appear a little strange." As she puts it: "The pages are linked by the spontaneous way in which I found my images. To me, Rajasthan is visual splendor. My memories are based essentially on the surprise of the moment, and this explains why I have limited the text. Every one of my senses was triggered by overwhelming impressions of colorful people and amazing places. I wanted to remember it all. My bags, like a magician's, were filled with a wild assortment of small mementoes."

It's no surprise that Pauline is setting new precedent in the world of book design. It's in her blood, so to speak. She was born in Paris into a family of painters. Now she lives in the Netherlands where she practices and teaches art, having studied art-bookbinding at the Ecole de la Cambre in Brussels, as well as painting and drawing in Holland. Pauline has been traveling to India since 1988. Rajasthan is her first book. She promises it will not be her last. We recommend it.

Rajasthan costs $65 and may be ordered from the Assouline website at http://www.assouline.com or by calling toll free: (888) 879-1936.