

MUMBAI

# Red is the warmest colour



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JULY 05, 2016 13:36 IST

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In the midst of a Polish winter, Ronny Sen searches for traces of the country's communist past

In this writer's experience, photographers aren't always great raconteurs. But 29-year-old Ronny Sen disproves that. Kolkata-based Sen is in town to showcase his work made during a residency in Poland in 2015. Invited by the Polish Institute, Sen spent three weeks in Gdansk, an old port town that shares its history of communism with West Bengal. Prior to his Mumbai visit, Sen spoke about his upcoming show.

Sen's image of Poland first took form in 2013; during the time he was hospitalised for tuberculosis in Kolkata. While recuperating, the then Polish ambassador, Anna Tryc-Bromley, a friend of his, sent him DVDs of Polish jazz all the way from Delhi. "I was listening to Tomasz Stańko's album *Dark Eye*, and whenever I would think of Poland, [this music] was in my mind. The language [of the photos] comes from Polish Jazz."

Sen is heavily invested in purely aesthetic reasons for conveying a message. As he puts it, "How I say [something] is more important than what I say."

The images Sen produced during his Polish residency have a strong visual language. Most have a predominantly cool tone, successfully conveying an idea of the Polish winter that he set out to explore. This is in addition to his trademark motion blurs and soft focus shots.

A particular aspect of form that stands out — one that goes beyond what meets the eye — is the colour red. Growing up in a political household, the Assam-born Sen was introduced to the communist ideology early in life. His house in Silchar, more than a hundred years old, was the first north-east office of the Indian People's Theatre Association (IPTA), an association of leftist theatre artistes. In fact, the British would keep a close watch on the property before Independence, and often raided it looking for governance literature or arms.

"Our house was a place where ideas could propagate and everyone took part in the Independence movement," he recalls. He grew up listening to stories of the Soviet Union. "The fall of the USSR was a defining moment for all of us, everyone was involved in the communist movement." Even now, his father's library in Silchar is a repository of Soviet literature.

It's this past association that led him to look for traces of his own past in the Polish city of Gdansk.

Looking for the past

Sen's idea of Poland is laced with romanticism, fuelled by the knowledge of a communist past that it shares with Kolkata, where his family moved in the early 90s and has lived since.

Sen went around Gdansk seeking out traces of red — the colour of the communist movement — in an attempt to draw connections to Kolkata's past. Unfortunately, he admits, this was a disappointment.

After the Second World War, Gdansk was rebuilt brick by brick to erase all traces of Germanic oppression and destruction. Sen was particularly struck by how he couldn't differentiate between an original structure and a restored one. The memory of this confusion evokes another sentiment, "Look at all the old buildings in Kolkata, they are breaking the old city down," he says sadly. "Roxy, Metro, Bourne & Shepherd... they are breaking the old city down and you can't do sh\*t about it. So there are no similarities between Gdansk and Kolkata."

The work that Sen made during the residency, though, is his attempt to bring people closer; not towards a far-off land, but to the history it shares with communism in India.

#### Traces of colour

Greatly inspired by cinema, Sen's also had Polish filmmaker Krzysztof Kieślowski's works on his mind during his residency. "Kieślowski's Three Colours Trilogy had a big impact on me," Sen says. "I wanted to photograph Poland and the city of Gdansk through single shades." The thought of producing a different, more in-depth work, in case Sen had the opportunity to spend more time in Poland, is bound to arise. "You have certain fixations about certain places and all you want to do is see that. You go to old Delhi and you want to have the same Kareem's biryani that you had ten years back."

The exhibition, comprising 25 photographs, aptly titled *New World Chronicles of an Old World Colour*, is the culmination of Sen's tryst with and thoughts of Poland.

By his own admission, it is a very small short story. "I wanted to make poetic work, I wanted to make romantic images. I wanted to make images like the ones you would see in Russian short stories as kids."

For the show, Sen has deliberately opted to only vary the size of his printed photographs. "Small prints draw people closer, they are very intimate," he explains.

The work has already been part of the Delhi Photo Festival in October 2015 and will show in Mumbai for close to a month. Sen seems particularly delighted that the show is opening during the monsoon. "Bombay is very romantic, and whenever I think of romance, I think of the rains. I am very happy that the show will be opening in Bombay during the rains."

*New World Chronicles of an Old World Colour* opens on July 7 and will be on till July 28 at Tarq

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