

Witnessing the apocalypse

Ronny Sen's exhibition on the coal mining town of Jharia takes a deep look at environmental degradation



Fire Continuum—Ronny Sen's second solo exhibition—is on view at TARQ upto September 29.

Jharia is a dusty, forgotten mining town adjacent to the relatively famous Dhanbad better known for the Indian School of Mines and lately as the setting for the feature film, *Gangs of Wasseypur*. Jharia has witnessed numerous mining accidents and disasters, but nothing comes close to the dystopia that the landscape now is. Fires in underground coal fields that had been raging for over a hundred years, were literally fanned by open cast mining.

Cracks in freshly built houses, cattle and trees swallowed by the earth and pulmonary and skin diseases running through generations often constituted the Jharia stories I heard while growing up Dhanbad in the nineties. On May 24, 2017, father and son, Rahim and Babloo were claimed by land subsidence. And when I visited the spot hardly a week later, life, I saw, went on. Other than a heap of dark sand that residents used to stuff the chasm with, there was no sign of the terrible tragedy. I had stood hardly three feet away from the spot

and found myself unable to breathe. At the Tarq gallery this inability to breathe returns as I see the photographer in my mind's eye walking on treacherous terrain, often too close to fire pits and blasting sites.

Ronny Sen who won the Instagram Getty Award started shooting the Jharia landscape in 2014 and shot nearly 12,000 images on his iPhone 5 camera, which is why the photographs are in 'portrait' format despite recording a landscape. He has captured the inevitability of a rapidly changing landscape, while attempting to make sense of this unreality through art. These photographs underscore the universality in humankind's relationship with its home planet and its spine-chilling repercussions.

Sen was perhaps unprepared for what he witnessed in Jharia and the shock transfers to you. These photographs evoke strong reactions—if you are familiar with the place, utter despair clutches at your heart, if not, these images of terrible, terrifying beauty fill you with morbid intrigue. In both cases, they evoke an immediate desire to witness the place, to inhabit the stories in this world that you gaze through a haze of ephemeral smoke, lace like streams of water and dark,

sweltering dust. The clay, as blistered as the coal mine worker's skin, is mummified and a seed in its womb would lay anhydrous.

The hills are manmade piles of coal, excavated at the price of lives and livelihoods of at least five lakh people who call Jharia home, and who have now been termed 'encroachers'. The open cast, reminiscent of a crater on the moon, is a gaping, blazing, hungry wound. A coal scavenger who gets to work early, around 4.30 am, cuts a lonely, translucent figure, and walks a steep gradient as diligently as a mountain goat. Once the clock strikes ten, babus in white Ambassador cars would arrive, and he must complete his job before that.

These are pictures of absence. In the eyes of the woman who lost her husband in a mining accident, in the stance of the little boy wrapped in a shawl you see the absence of hope, the absence of childhood. In the empty, falling building structures you see the absence of home. Christopher Pinney writes in his essay, "...what Ronny Sen offers is not the documentation of the precise moment when time ends but the sense of the endlessness of a time that has unraveled, a time that has un-moored itself

from ordinary events and duration, a time that is no longer connected in obvious material ways to the space in which it unfolds."

Piles of extracted coal are being moved closer to residential settlements, possibly to drive residents away. Much talk has happened about 'rehabilitating' those displaced by these fires. But the 'new' quarters have no schools, clinics or crematoriums in the vicinity, and are located far from avenues of employment. Ironically, this thoughtlessly built shelter to the residents of the ghost town of Jharia is a spectre itself, and as full of decay and desolation.

Smita Sahay is a writer and poet residing in Mumbai.

Where Tarq, F35/36, Dhanraj Mahal, C.S.M. Marg, Apollo Bunder, Colaba

When Upto September 29
11:00 am - 6:30 pm | Tuesday - Saturday |
closed on public holidays

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