

Road to perdition

Kolkata-based photographer Ronny Sen's show explores the grim cost of callous consumerism

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Brown forests, lakes of fire. Burning mountains and broken temples. Empty villages – all consumed by toxic fumes. In photographer Ronny Sen's rendition of Jharia - a coal mining town in Jharkhand, the earth seems to come alive of its own accord. Sprouting neither greens nor grain, it implodes and explodes as though in rage, unable to contain the fire that has been burning in its belly for over a century.

Fire Continuum, the title of Sen's new ongoing show, refers to this man-made phenomenon that has rendered Jharia – once an abundant forest, into a dystopian terrain over time.

Bleak future

Discovered as a coal belt in the late 18th century, Jharia became an important mining centre by the early 19th century, changing several hands in ownership in due course. First owned by the royal family, then the British, changing to private buyers post-Independence to finally the government of India, when Indira Gandhi nationalised all collieries in 1971. With increased demand for coal, the safer underground mining moved to the upper surfaces, becoming a threat to both livelihoods and the environment in the region. Today, Jharia stands as a living example of human greed.



“What happens when all of it [mineral resources] ends? Is it going to be things like water?” he wonders.

Stripped of almost all signs of identity, the 40 caption-less images become a study in obscurity and abstractness, which could be from anywhere in the world. “I have nothing new to say about Jharia if I do a documentary piece. People know about the miseries. But if I want to talk about a larger sort of an issue, then I have to take [the] refuge of fiction...” he says.

Sen discovered this “else” when he visited Jharia in 2014 as a fixer/translator for French film-makers Jean Dubrel and Tiane Doan na Champassak, working on their documentary – *Jharia, une vie en enfer (Jharia, a living hell)*. For the three months, the trio commuted to and fro between Dhanbad and Jharia daily, commencing at 4 a.m. and working until 7 p.m. Jharia's apocalyptic, ever changing landscape completely overwhelmed Sen who initially had no intentions of photographing it. In what became a sort of serendipitous art residency, he made over 12,000 images on his iPhone5.

Myriad forms

“I could've done six shows and six books on Jharia. I could do a book only with portraits, only with landscapes...there



were like multiple ways of looking at Jharia,” relates Sen. Earlier published as *End of Time* (2017), a book by Delhi based non-profit Nazar Foundation, the work also won the 2016 Getty Images Instagram Grant. The show – “a difficult to edit” project for Sen, feels closest to what he thinks of the work. The images seem like Sen's im-

mediate and involuntary reaction to the space, unspoiled by the excesses and burden of pre-shoot reces and research. It's simply what he saw and how it made him feel on first contact.

The show incorporates two photo-grids, where the action unfolds like a flip motion book laid out page by page. This heightens the

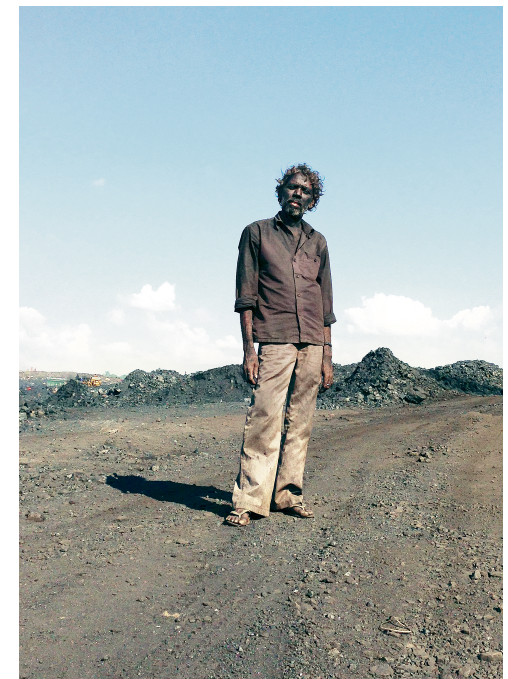
sense of continuum as also that of ennui. The third architectural grid includes an image of the housing provided by the Jharia Rehabilitation & Development Authority (JRDA). Placed alongside other decrepit structures on purpose, Sen reiterates the negligence of the government that has allocated a 200 square-foot room for a family

of six/seven in the middle of nowhere. With the fire beneath one's home, the exodus of lakhs of residents isn't exactly unimaginable. And yet, the ones who still live off the coal mines have no option but to stay. Sen's Jharia poses a problem that is not just environmental but also social, political and economical. The few portraits share a

morbidity that varies in emotion and style. The crisp boldness of the man staring into the camera contrasts with the desaturated image of the man with the disfigured face, turning away. At the gallery's upper level, one wall displays a delicate portrait of a woman – her face filled with helplessness, while on the wall across, a

child stares at a growing tree, his face glimmering with slight hope. The works feels cold, distant and devoid of redemption. Like an effective antipode, it is deliberately so, reasons Sen. “Cynical works are not made to make the world lose hope.”

Fire Continuum is ongoing at Tarq, Colaba until September 29



Mine and yours: From the series *Fire Continuum*. Archival pigment print In an Edition of 8 + 1 Artist proof 9 x 6.75 inches, 2014. ■ © RONNY SEN

