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# The Seer And The Seen — Ronny Sen

Bridging the gap between a photographer and photojournalist, Ronny Sen’s works make for poetic form of storytelling and a compelling documentation of our times. His most captivating series *End Of Time* - on the coal town of Jharia, Jharkhand, where underground fires have been burning for more than a century - recently won him the Getty Images Instagram Grant 2017.

By [Rohini Kejriwal \(https://designfabric.in/people/rohini-kejriwal\)](https://designfabric.in/people/rohini-kejriwal) on 30 November, 2017



Red Road, Calcutta, 20th September, 2014.

Kolkata-based independent photographer Ronny Sen has a distinct visual vocabulary that has set him apart from his contemporaries. His camera accompanies him faithfully as a tool to express himself on the journey of life, capturing the moments of chaos, people, places, life itself in all its glory and bleakness for posterity. His works have been featured in many a national and international publication, and he has also won numerous awards and grants, most recently the Getty Images Instagram Grant.

*Design Fabric* speaks to Ronny about his evolution as a photographer, stories that led to his absorbing photo series, and Calcutta as his constant muse, among other things:

**What was the early relationship with your camera like?**

I started photography because I had to stay alive and it was a life and death situation. Photography kept me busy and away from a lot of the things that I had to avoid. In a way, this obsession with images was overpowering other things and slowly, steadily, I got hooked to the medium. It wasn’t a conscious choice - it just happened in a very organic way. After a year or two, I realized I felt very close to my camera.

**As a photographer seeking to express himself creatively, what principles do you live by?**

When I started photography 12 years ago in India, one had to rely mostly on photojournalism, commercial photography, fashion or wedding photography to make a mark. But I was only always interested in a few stories that I wanted to tell in my own way. I didn’t want to make photography into a career but slowly,

after practising for a couple of years, I realized it's the only thing I enjoy. Most of the initial struggle was to find a unique language and consistency in my work to tell a story, which took a lot of time. After that, I started trying out different things, which meant many beginnings as well as dead ends. Even now, I get bored easily with doing just one kind of work.



The Tamed Crow, Salt Lake, Calcutta. 2011

***Do your photographs serve as a personal documentation or is it beyond you?***

It depends on a project. The relationship with photography is like that with anyone - it's never constant and it goes through ups and downs. At times, it's about someone else, at times, it's just about you.

***How do you view your responsibility in sharing the world as you see it?***

I don't know. To do photography, one should have very valid reasons. You cannot keep producing work for the sake of it. It has to be biological and come from the body. The responsibility comes from various factors - the politics you believe in, a kind of urgency that you feel, the society you want to live in.

***Coming to politics, your coverage of the student protests at Jadavpur University (JU) in 2014 gave the world some strong images. Does that sense of activism and urgency to document what must be documented drive your work?***

I don't mix activism with my practice as a photographer. Things might overlap, and obviously there's a certain kind of politics embedded in the things I do. You cannot avoid politics in any work. Any photographer or artists who calls their work apolitical is telling you a lie because even if they consciously avoid politics, it's always going to be there in whatever you say or do. There's a certain politics I believe in, which reflects in my work.





A compelling image from *Don't Breathe: Travelling Unreserved on the Indian Railway*, a series that revolves around people travelling inside the unreserved general compartments of Indian Railways

With JU, it was a cumulative effect of many government policies. So there was a certain madness and intensity in which the students were carrying out the protests, which were prolonged for a long period of time. So everyday, I'd go over to the university, hang out with the students, and captured the rallies. I remember there was a high point during the protests when almost 1 lakh students showed up, it was raining and everybody was on the streets. Personally, it was great to capture that energy because the young have always inspired me as they're the most vulnerable and to me, vulnerability is power. So I got to learn a lot from the experience.

There was a certain urgency to make those images. I was going to these protests, taking images from my phone and uploading them online and they were getting shared. People who were doing solidarity rallies across the world were using my images to make posters and banners. Students and activists were using my images on Facebook and circulating them. So this huge sharing in an almost viral nature had its own impact.

***What was the inspiration in 'New World Chronicles of an Old World Colour', which was shot during your art residency stay in Gdańsk City Gallery, Poland?***

When I was doing that series, I had never been to the Soviet Bloc countries that had disintegrated after USSR fell. Back in Calcutta, we had a very romantic idea about these countries. I remember meeting a girl from Belarus at an art fair and was excited to know that she had heard the same Russian short stories in her own language that we heard sitting in Calcutta. That was very weird for both of us - that we both shared similar memories in childhood through these stories.





*'New World Chronicles of an Old World Colour', shot during Ronny Sen's residency in Gdańsk City Gallery, Poland*

Poland is all about melancholia - there's an underlying pathos in it, which I wanted to create visually. The vocabulary of this series was inspired by Kieślowski's *Three Colours* trilogy, which had a huge impact in the way I looked at Poland. Since there had also been an oppressive Communist rule in Bengal, followed by an overthrowing of the government, it was a strong connecting factor that I wanted to respond to in my way.

***One of your most compelling series has been End of Time, for which you also won the Getty Images Instagram Grant. Was it challenging to capture the bleakness of the Jharia coal mines?***

When I was working at the Jharia coal mines, I wanted to maintain a certain distance from everything while also having a proximity to the subject. I wanted to know what happens in a post-apocalyptic world and what remains when we have extracted everything from the earth. Jharia was a story of the failure of different organisations and a suffering that was more than 100 years long. What happens after all this suffering -the dust, the smoke, the fire that's consumed everything - is what I tried to depict.



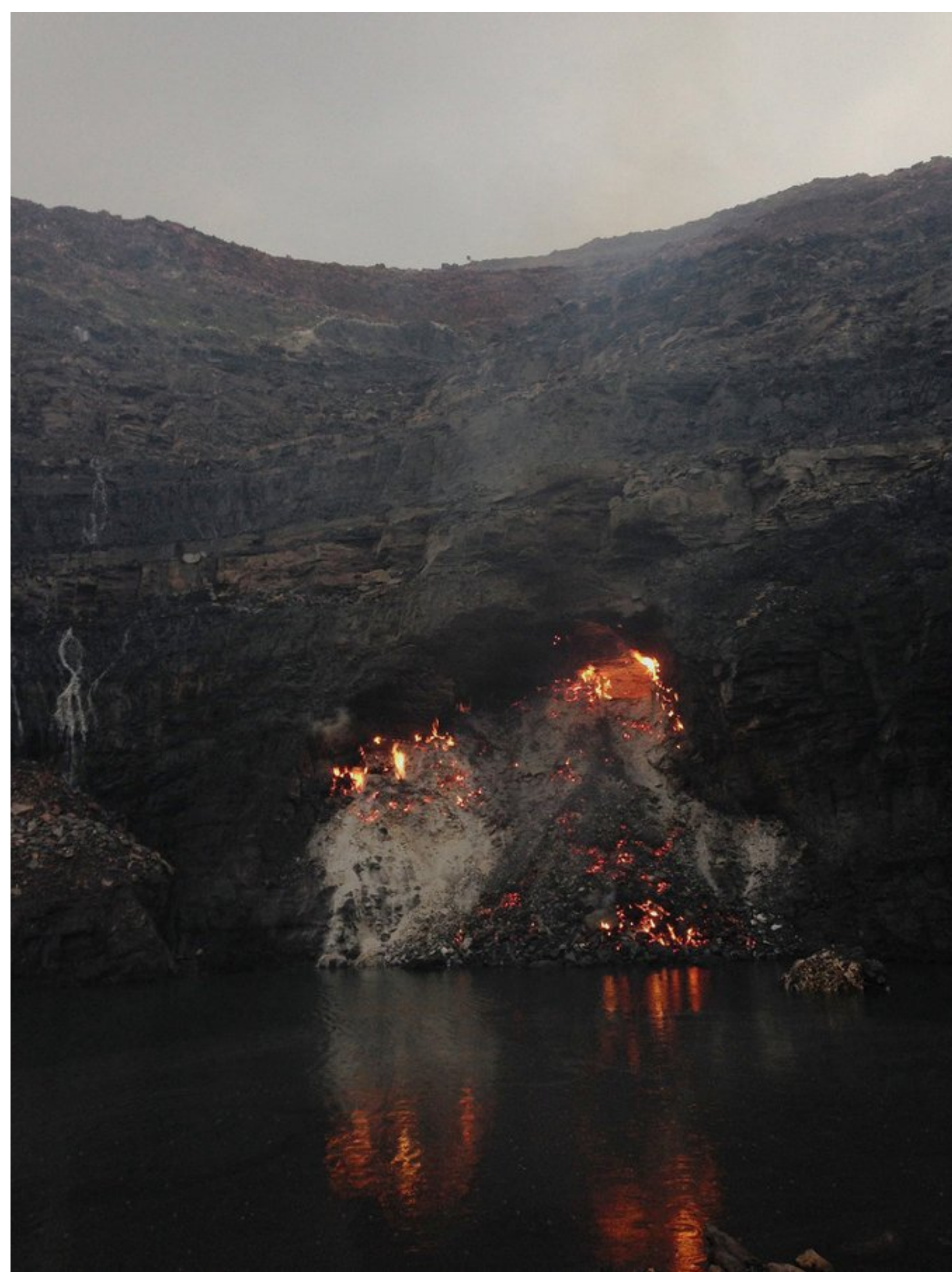
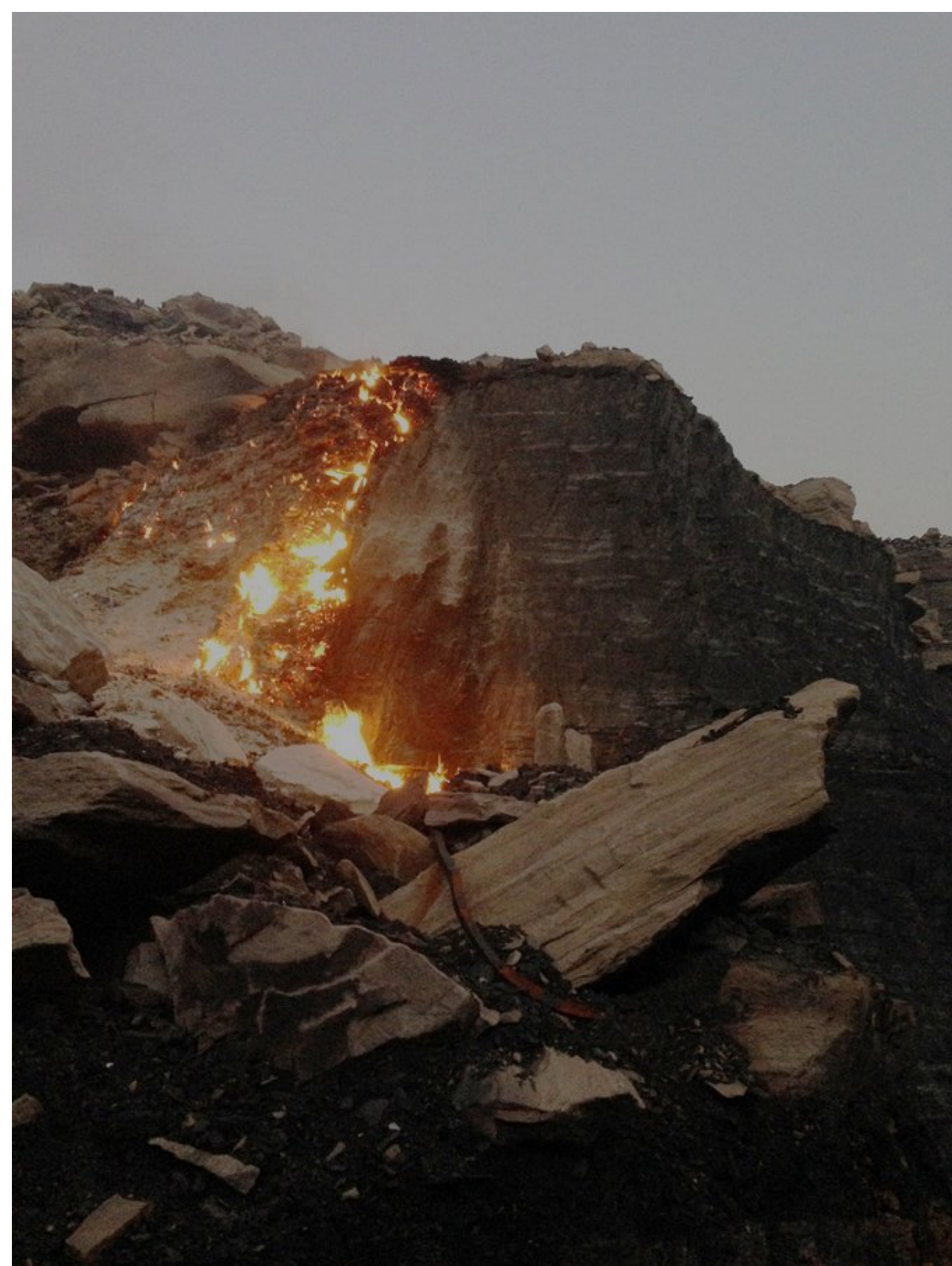


Photo series 'End of Time', by Ronny Sen.

***So does your overall process differ from project to project?***

All my projects are different from each other, which is what excites me. I don't want to be a photographer who is always repeating one thing because it becomes like a game. So if you look at my Cambodia series *Khmer Din*, it's black and white whereas the Jharia work is done very differently. Each project has its own life and character in terms of content and form.

***How does the Internet-driven world that we live in affect your work?***

Being connected to the digital world is very integral to the life we all live. Instagram has given a lot of people an audience that wasn't there before. When all the pillars of photography like the mainstream media houses, galleries, biennales, and museums are breaking down, the digital media has a lot to offer. But what exactly that is is something we're all trying to understand. We need a couple more years to really get there. I won't say I'm happy or discontent because it'll take some time for us to see where it all settles down. Right now, it's all up in the air and the good, bad and ugly are all mixed up. When this process slows down, there will be sedimentation when you can see the top of the line work with more clarity.





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Photographs from Ronny Sen's series *Khmer Din*, shot in Cambodia, 2013

***One of your biggest muses seems to be Calcutta, where you have spent a large part of your life. What is it about the city that has you hooked?***

A friend once told me that a city can consume a photographer in its limited capacity. But Calcutta is somehow still struggling to get its foot back. There are no galleries in the city except Experimenter, which is doing good work. What it was in the 60s and 70s has lost its charm because of the local media and newspapers who can't understand which artists to write about. So it's kind of a

mess. But it doesn't mean that there's no practice here. On the contrary, there are a lot of exciting photographers and artists I admire in Calcutta. Sadly, it's all happening in anonymity.

The city cannot consume me, and I'm happy that way because I can be obscure and work the way I want to. I couldn't leave the city because I've spent my whole life in Salt Lake and am dependent on the space. I go back to the same tea shop, have the same set of friends for the past 30 years. I'm suffering with the city and don't wish to leave.



Twisha and Ronny in Tinchuley, 2011

***Interesting. Who are the contemporary photographers whose work inspires you?***

There are a lot of inspiring photographers like Sohrab Hura, Munem Wasif, Madhuban Mitra and Manas Bhattacharya, Tenzing Dakpa, Kapil Das...Outside the country too, there are many photographers I have loved and who had a huge impact on me. I'm a guy who can obsess about a photographer for a long time and it can get really scary.

***And what are you currently working on?***

Currently, I've written and directed a full-length feature called *Cat Sticks*, which we finished shooting last year. It's a black and white film about the underbelly of Calcutta and the story revolves around the desperate encounters of a few brown sugar addicts on a rainy night. We're still doing post-production work and it should be out in 2018.

Other than that, I've been shooting commercial assignments for Royal Enfield, who told me to travel the length of the country and shoot whatever I want for six months. I've travelled the entire coastal belt from Bombay to Calcutta and am making images for that. Maybe I'll make a book or zine out of it in the near future.

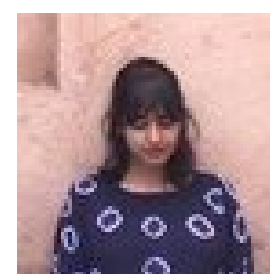


Untitled from the series The Highway Star, commissioned by Royal Enfield in association with India Foundation for the Arts. © Ronny Sen/Royal Enfield

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