

SCROLL INTERVIEW

‘I know how exactly this story is to be told’: Ronny Sen on taking on drug abuse with ‘Cat Sticks’

The movie, examining the lives of Kolkata’s brown sugar addicts, marks the photographer’s directorial debut.

by *Devarsi Ghosh*

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Rahul Dutt as Pablo in *Cat Sticks* | Craigmor Films

On a rainy night, three men make their way through an industrial wasteland and take shelter in an abandoned aircraft. They are looking for their next fix of brown sugar, or smack, an adulterated form of heroin. **Ronny Sen’s** *Cat Sticks* begins with these three characters – Pablo, Ronnie and Deshik – but soon brings together disparate people from various parts of Kolkata, all linked by their addiction.

“It is a story of a few hours on one particularly night”, Sen said. “One could say it’s almost a real-time movie, though there are certain departures into surreal areas at some points.”

The ensemble cast of *Cat Sticks* includes Joyraj Bhattacharya, Kalpan Mitra, Rahul Dutta, Sreejita Mitra and Tanmay Dhanania. Scored by British composer Oliver Weeks, the film is currently in the last stages of post-production.

A photographer from Kolkata, 31-year-old Sen has won international acclaim for his haunting images, many of them in **stark and grainy black-and-white**. This aesthetic he **also brings** to his directorial debut *Cat Sticks*, shot entirely in monochrome. He has also released a photo book featuring the film’s stills and photographs.

Sen chose drug addiction as the subject for his first film as it was something he saw all around him when growing up in Kolkata’s Salt Lake in the 1990s and 2000s. Many of his friends and acquaintances were brown sugar addicts, some of whom lost their lives to the drug. “I know these people first-hand, I grew up with them, I knew how exactly this story needs to be told, and no one would do it better than I can,” he said.

Most films on drug addiction miss the mark, Sen said. “This film came from a place of concern inside me,” he added. “Most Indian films involving drug addiction may be well made but they are often nonsensical when it comes to their understanding of addiction, the effects of certain drugs, and the kind of life an addict lives. I guarantee that my film will at least be 100% honest about its subject. There are no lies in it. These are the stories of people I knew, people who existed.”



A still from 'Cat Sticks'. Image credit: Craigmores Films.

This proximity to brown sugar addicts, called “patakhori” in Bengali, gave Sen an insider’s perspective of their life experiences, which he said are rather unique. With that came a vast repository of stories. Urged by his friends, Sen wrote a 17-page treatment for the film, which he later developed into a screenplay in three months along with Soumyak Kanti DeBiswas, an actor who was last seen in Q’s 2012 Bengali film *Tasher Desh*.

“The name *Cat Sticks* comes from the brand of wax matchsticks that the addicts use to smoke smack,” Sen said. “When you smoke smack, you need a uniform flame that can only come from a wax matchstick.”

A poster for the film has been designed by Polish artist Lech Majewski, with the film’s name in a custom-made typeface and text that resembles silhouettes of buildings and high-rises on a dark night.

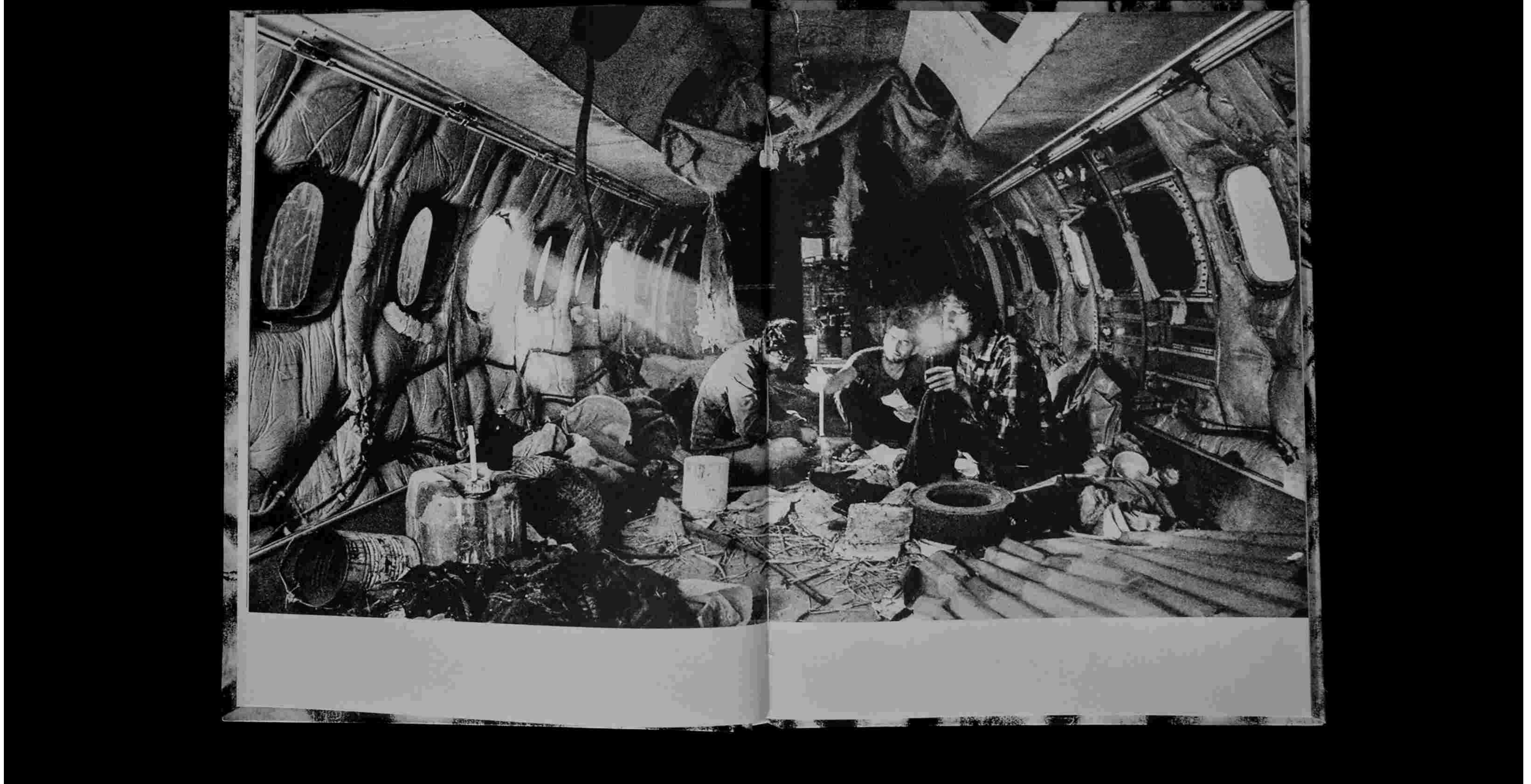


'Cat Sticks' poster. Image credit: Craigmore Films.

Cat Sticks was shot in lesser known parts of Kolkata, its outskirts, industrial areas in Howrah, and an abandoned film city in Midnapore, where they found the aircraft that was used in the opening scene.

“The script’s first line starts with the junkies inside the aircraft so we needed that at any cost,” Sen said. “We stripped down the interiors, got rid of the seats, the furniture, and redid it all with rocks, grass and other paraphernalia related to clandestine living.”

Shooting took place over 18 days in February and March last year and the movie was filmed entirely in the dark. “We had a lot of problems with locations,” Sen said. “Once, a murder happened at one spot, so we had to figure out another location instantly.”



A still from 'Cat Sticks'. Image credit: Craigmores Films.

Sen has frequently turned his lens to drug addiction and wants to capture users as as everyday people with families, friends, dreams and ambitions. Every year, he works on one photography project to commemorate International Day Against Drug Abuse and Illicit Trafficking (June 26). For instance, [a 2012 photo-feature for the BBC](#) tells the stories of recovering addicts.

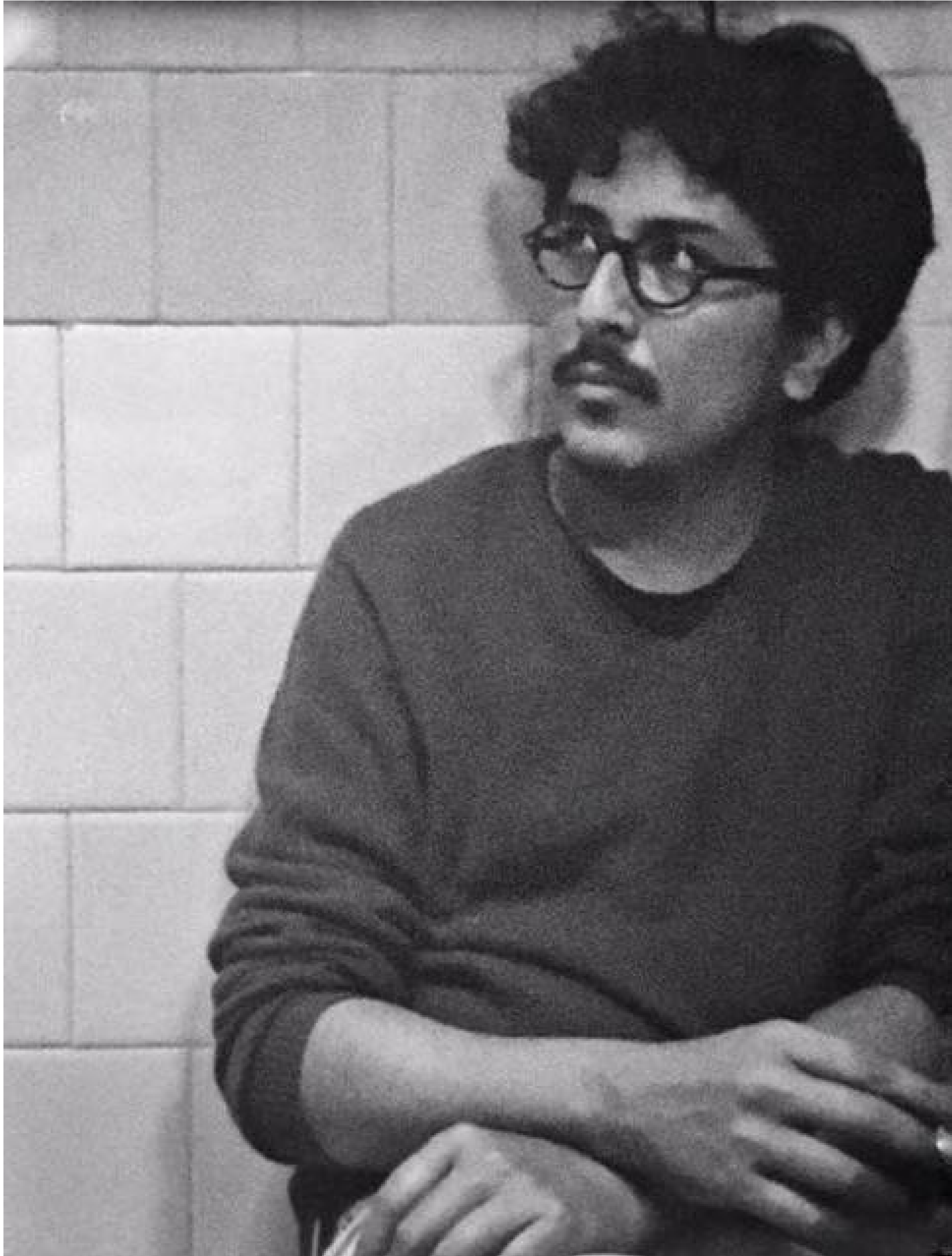
How do these people open up time and again to Sen? “With my work, I have always tried to bridge the world of addicts with regular people,” Sen said.

People usually think of addicts as recluses who get high all day, or who overdose and die, but there's more to their lives, Sen said. "That [overdosing] is the end result. How did they reach there? They had stories too. A life has ended. You need to know how that happened."

Drug addiction is not a choice, but "a disease like cancer or diabetes" that can happen to anyone. "Brahmin, Dalit, no one is spared. And no one feels the need to document their stories because a junkie's life is expendable."

For Sen, *Cat Sticks* is not just an artistic exercise but also an angry letter to the city in which he grew up. "Around 2005-'06, a new drug called Halogen entered Kolkata," Sen recalled. "It was a heavily spiked, synthetic form of brown sugar. Countless, up to lakhs, smoked it over the next few years and died. In the early to mid-2000s, during the construction boom in Kolkata, you would find several rag-pickers on the streets. They disappeared within the next eight years. Where did they go? No one is investigating."

But Sen said he is not out to blame the narcotics department, the government, or the law enforcement for being unable to control the proliferation of drugs in Kolkata. "I am not being an activist," Sen said. "Let's just say I am invested in ensuring that these stories don't get lost in time because no one is telling them."



Ronny Sen.