

Out of the Night

Photographer RONNY SEN'S first film chronicles a generation struggling with drugs in seedy Kolkata.



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Photographer Ronny Sen. (Photo by: Subir Halder)

Photographer-filmmaker Ronny Sen's *Cat Sticks* begins with the line: This is for my dead friends to come back from the night.

The story of a generation of drug-users in the late '90s and early 2000s' Kolkata, where Sen grew up, it talks about drug abuse that killed many of his friends. Along with an exhibition of still photographs documenting life in the Jharia coal mines that is currently showing in Amsterdam, the film has won him international accolades and the praise of critics. His latest show, a solo exhibition at the Tarq in Mumbai, is a selection of horizontal landscapes shot with his phone that offer a stark commentary on environmental degradation.

None of that might have happened, however, if Sen himself had not come back from the night.

When he walked out of rehab in 2006, his father gifted him a small digital camera. That's how he began his career as a photographer. His portrait of a man suffering from tuberculosis in Jalpaiguri was selected for an international award in 2006, when he first began clicking photos with that small digital camera. I too had TB and I was there wandering when I saw this man, says Sen, who was born in Silchar, Assam, in 1986 and moved to Kolkata with his family in the early 1990s.

In school, he says, he wanted to be with the bad boys and got into drugs. The brown sugar addicts in his film are creatures of the night like he was, shooting up in dark nondescript corners to escape life.

All my life I wanted to be free and that's why I did drugs, Sen says. We are defeated people and I had to fight a lot. I had low self-esteem and after I quit drugs, I built my life brick by brick.

Cat Sticks, which will be screened at various international film festivals, is not exactly autobiographical, he says. Rather, it's an ode to the friends he alienated on the way to recovery and others who died from illness or overdose. In the portrayal of these addicts, there is the truth of his life. You are here to tell the stories of those who are on the margins and whatever medium it is, it is a story you want to tell, a story you believe in, he says.

Like his photographs of miners and the destruction that surrounds them, Sen's film is also a cry of protest from the underbelly, a place he knows by heart.