

SHRINE EMPIRE

presents

An Elegy for Ecology

By Sharbendu De

Curatorial Advisor

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The human-nature relationship has become central to the contemporary ecological discourse. The boundaries of what is 'human' and what is 'nature' are also in question. The long isolation of nature from the social contract has led to unhealthy lives, and technocentric ravaged landscapes. The histories of separations and of treating the "planet as capital" has culminated in new emergent emergencies, as Covid -19, climate change, sixth extinction, air pollution, which only help accentuate the ever-present interdependencies. Post these crises, the human species may biologically survive, but its emergent psychological and physical embodiments may leave it transformed into another 'being.' It is in the interstices of possible potential futures of the human condition that Sharbendu De locates his practice in.

The 'Solastalgia' these current works allude to - "the homesickness you have when you are still at home," is not a state of faraway places, distant times or sci-fi alienations- it is present in almost immediate and relatable spaces, as environmental conditions deteriorate. They act to jolt one out of complacent denials. The dystopian landscapes depict impending times when "oxygen has entered the commerce of human relationships." The dark, dreamlike photographs are set in domestic spaces, where lone individuals struggle for their survival, refraining from human company, to avoid sharing the scarcest resource of all- clean air. They seemingly narcissistically pleasure themselves, accompanied by metaphoric objects and domesticated animals - rabbits, ducks and pigeons (with a disclaimer that none were hurt), as if seeking solace in multi-species relationships. Are these ontologies of new humans, made of loss, estrangement, and despair?

Such a meticulous and engaged artistic endeavor underpins an in-depth consideration for the state of the environment. The multitude of literary references it holds, reflects an engagement with the vast growing contemporary literature on the ecological condition. The artist's pursuits as a researcher as well as professor of lens-based media is also evident. He has taken us on other important journeys of imagination earlier as well. The set of staged photographic series Imagined Homeland had led us to the borders of Northeast India. The images were an outcome of seven years

of interaction and collaboration with the local forest community to co-imagine the futures they want for themselves.

Constructed or staged photographs have a long and illustrious tradition starting from the early seventies. Releasing the photograph from its 'documentary' moorings they became documents of an artist's deeper enquires. The photographer as imaginer, also became a storyboard creator, set designer, and director. Here, each image is pre-imagined, carefully setup, with props, lighting, models, in pre-determined locations, as in a film-set. They invite a reflection into the artist's intent, motivations, and imagination. The images unravel time, not as linear narratives, but as complex cyclic resurgent visualities which keeps appearing and re-appearing long after one's physical encounter with them.

Today, all global is local. The immediate is everywhere. These images can be from everyplace, anywhere. They are not directly political but testimonies of lived human conditions, yet they hold the politics of the moment in their layered presence. As the global and local intermesh, the indeterminable flows between the past and the present, the here and elsewhere – all markers of the Anthropocene, an era where many previous planetary boundaries are being broken by human agency and what we know is unsettling and uncertain. Like air, this moment diffuses and circulates, in an ether of past-present and futures, merging them into a continuum which challenges all simple causality and linearity. Airborne pollutants are not just particles, but are centuries of mined earth, excavated by millions of human desires in desperate pursuits of an elusive happiness. They reflect the broken promise of a techno-capitalistic trajectory. A young Marx had written about the body of the fish becoming alienated from its extended body – water, when it is polluted by industry. This body of work is a reminder that we need to reconfigure and repair our estranged relationships with nature if we are to have any hope for our futures. It may be the Zen of life.

- Text by Ravi Agarwal

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Disclaimer: No animals were hurt in the making of the series.

Artist Bio:

Sharbendu De (b. 1978, India) is a lens-based artist, academic and a writer. In 2018, Feature Shoot recognised De as an Emerging Photographer of the Year. De received grants from the India Foundation for the Arts (2017), Lucie Foundation (2018), Prince Claus Fund & ASEF (2019), MurthyNayak Foundation (2021) and KHOJ (2021). He was shortlisted for the Lensculture Visual Storytelling Awards (2019) and Lucie Foundation's Emerging Artist of the Year Scholarship (2018) among other nominations.

His latest conceptual series An Elegy for Ecology (2016-21) dealing with the subject of climate change and human position in the anthropocene, premiered at Phantasmopolis at the Asian Art

Biennale, Taiwan (2021). His former conceptual series Imagined Homeland (2013-19) on the indigenous Lisu tribe from Arunachal Pradesh has received critical appreciation.

De has exhibited across Asian Art Biennale, Taiwan (2021), Vadehra Art Gallery (2020-21), SHRINE EMPIRE Gallery, New Delhi (2020), PhEST, Italy (2020), FORMAT, U.K. (2019), Serendipity Arts Festival, India (2019), OBSCURA, Malaysia (2019), MOPLA, Los Angeles (2019), Voies Off Awards, Rencontres d'Arles Festival, Arles (2018), Indian Photography Festival, India (2018), Tblisi Photo Festival, Georgia (2018), Goethe-Institut (Mumbai & Delhi; 2016 & 2017), Photo Kathmandu (2016), Econtros da Imagem, Portugal (2016) and Diesel Art Gallery, Mumbai (2012) among others.

He has an MA in Photojournalism from the University of Westminster (2010), London, and a Post Graduate Diploma in Journalism from the Indian Institute of Mass Communication (2004), New Delhi. He taught photojournalism at AJK MCRC, Jamia Millia Islamia (2011-18) and presently teaches photography and visual communications at Sri Aurobindo Centre for Art & Communication, New Delhi, among several other institutions. He also writes on the subject alongside his art practice. De lives in New Delhi.

About Shrine Empire:

Shrine Empire was created in December 2008 from a merger of two existing entities. Prior to this, both had worked together on exhibitions in India and Singapore separately, known then as The Shrine Gallery and Empire Art. Shrine Empire is based in New Delhi and its directors, Anahita Taneja and Shefali Somani have envisioned the gallery as a platform for presenting and promoting contemporary visual art practices. Since its inception, Shrine Empire has consistently focused on encouraging a dialogic approach with a range of emerging and eminent artists with sustained, innovative and engaging practices, and curators in order to produce exhibitions and special commissioned projects. The mission of Shrine Empire is to promote artists, curators and art-writers who are invested in redefining the boundaries of contemporary art practice. The various curatorial narratives that have emerged from the space over the years have made Shrine Empire known for its critical engagement with political and social concerns of the contemporary.

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