

AS CLEAR AS NIGHT

DHRUV MALHOTRA prowls the dark alleys of Noida with a camera, street lights and the night for company, searching for the soul of this upwardly mobile suburb, writes ANNIE JOHNNY

While the world sleeps peacefully, a nocturnal being prowls the darkened streets of Noida. Travelling alone, he makes his way to the underside of big bridges and flyovers, walks through dark vacant places, capturing a hidden, surrealistic side of this urban landscape. Noida has received a bad rap in the years since its inception, with architects and urban planners complaining about the pace at which the industrial-residential suburb of New Delhi has developed. But those who know it well see it as one of the burgeoning centres of India, a place teeming with

people and growth, full of life like only some parts of the National Capital Region are. If you went only by its reputation, Noida would seem like the last place to capture moments of urban beauty, but under the cover of darkness, the satellite town has proved the perfect subject for 24 year old amateur photographer and self-professed insomniac Dhruv Malhotra.

The best of Malhotra's work has been selected for his first exhibition, entitled *Noida Soliloquy*, which is on till June 12 at the Photoink gallery, run by Devika Daulet Singh. Daulet Singh and Photoink have a reputation for finding and

promoting some of the most unusual and visually inventive photographers in India.

It took Malhotra more than three years of wandering the streets of Noida with his Mamiya 6x7 and tripod, but the results are excellent. He has already built up an impressive body of work.

Photographers are known to wait hours for the perfect light for their shots. Famously, the street photography of French lensman Henri Cartier Bresson relied on what he called "the decisive moment", when activity and light would combine for a perfect instant, and the best photograph could be taken. Malhotra,

however, is shackled by no such constraints, preferring to rely on the simple light cast by street lights to illumine his work. "I prefer the tungsten night for my work," says Malhotra, referring to the tungsten filaments of the large street bulbs that line the roads of Noida.

Perhaps the first thing I noticed about the photos were the prominent deep orange hues which suffused so many of them. I assumed that the pictures had been treated because of this. But Dhruv smiles and says, "The orange you see is cast by the tungsten street lights and nothing else. None of these

photos are worked on."

"I exposed the film to light for some time. Some of the pictures that look like they have been taken in the day have been taken after an exposure of almost 12 minutes," says Malhotra.

Much like the legendary Hungarian born French photographer, Brassai, who used to wander the streets of Paris late at night clicking photos, the night almost compels Malhotra to take up the camera. "There is an element of mystery to the night. It is silent and secluded, with very few people around. Daylight reveals everything, but at night not everything is evi-

dent immediately. If you want to look at something you need to put in a certain amount of effort. There is little that is readily available. The night casts longer shadows and that makes things more poignant. It is just so much more beautiful than the day. Why would I want to sleep?" asks Malhotra.

But it's not just his love for the night that makes him keep hours the central characters in vampire novels relish. Malhotra has been suffering from insomnia for some years, but it is only now that he has come to appreciate

Capturing Noida by Night

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that this chronic inability to sleep worked in his favour.

"I was always in love with the night," he laughs, "and then this insomnia kicked in. When I saw the photographs that emerged from my late night-wanderings, I began to believe in this circular chain of circumstance."

Perhaps it was his background as an outsider that helped him see the beauty of spaces that most of us have lived in for years. Malhotra grew up in a much smaller town, Jaipur. When he shifted to Noida in 2007, he found the capital both bizarre and intriguing.

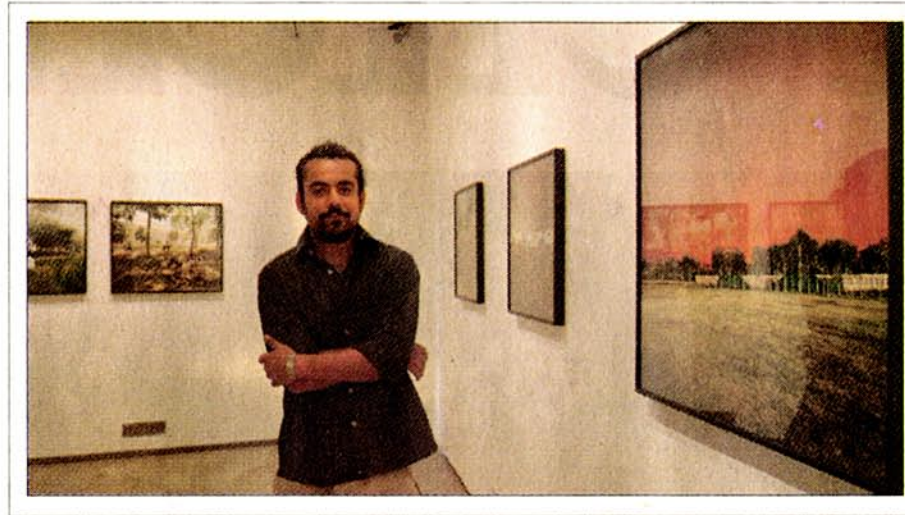
"It's a strange place. Everything seems so filled with activity. Everywhere you turn around you see construction — from big building complexes to flyovers. But if you walk around you find these vast stretches of vacant plots right in the middles of these, far removed from everything. It is this duality of spaces that interests me. A big flyover won't interest me. It is the space under it that enthrals me," he says.

When he was out on these

photograph expeditions, he would start off from home around 12 AM, sometimes on foot, sometimes in his car. "I found every isolated corner of Noida beautiful and mysterious. I don't think it was me who sought this place out. I feel very strongly that it was the town itself that found me," says Malhotra. "Over time, I found the night was more comfortable for my work. I bought myself a tripod and started off seriously," he says.

As is to be expected, the authorities managed to do their bit to ensure these compelling photographs would never see the light of day. Noida's reputation of being unsafe is well-established, so to have a solitary man walking down the darkened alleyways of Noida at midnight, when people are scared to venture beyond the familiar even during the day, attracted some overbearing police attention.

"Initially it was a bit difficult. They would stop and question me. When I told them that I was just taking photographs they would take it as a joke. *Raat ko photo kheech raha hai?* Then



Photographer Dhruv Malhotra at Photoink gallery, Delhi Photo: Aastha Saxena

I explained the dynamics of night photography to them. And of course having a press card helped (which he got only in 2008, after contacting Photoink). After a while they resigned themselves to it and let me be. They were pretty quick to point out, however, that it would be my own responsibility if anything were to happen to me," says Dhruv. "I remember, when I started the project my dad gave me a gift: a can of pepper spray!"

Malhotra soon began to hope his work could find its way into an exhibition, and he contacted the director of Pho-

toink, Devika Daulet Singh. "I was struck by the desolation in his photographs. That he lived in Noida and photographed it only at night was also intriguing," says Devika Daulet Singh. "He is part of a new generation of photographers, who are exposed, opinionated, looking for new ways to photograph the familiar and discover the unfamiliar," adds Singh.

It was Dhruv who came up with the title for the exhibition. "Soliloquy is a term from theatre which is used when the actor is in solitude or a trance like state. And be-

cause that's how I felt when I looked at the pictures I had taken, I suggested the title," says Malhotra.

Daulet Singh is not the only one whose interest has been roused. The amateur photographer has found some fans in collectors and many first time buyers.

"I'm very pleased with the way people are responding to this body of his work. He hasn't romanticised the night, which is the general opinion. A great number have liked the 'almost day' experience of the night in many of the photographs. Some have

liked the surreal aspect in the work. Acclaimed photographers have responded very well to his work and both collectors and first time buyers have acquired his work," says Devika Daulet Singh

Malhotra's work has also been short listed in the Hyères festival, the international festival of fashion and photography held in France. His next series of photographs, *Sleepers*, will be displayed in October at the Brighton Photo Biennial.

"*Sleepers* is a body of work which grew out of this (*Noida Soliloquy*). The photographs are of people sleeping, but it's not just about them. It is also about the space around them. The person who is sleeping is not some bum who just landed up at that place. They belong there. These spaces are their habitat," says Malhotra.

As the conversation ends Malhotra readies himself for our own photographer and you see a hint of hesitation. It seems the only time he doesn't like the camera is when he is in front of it.

Noida Soliloquy will be on view until June 12 at Photoink gallery.