

# Still life

**PHOTOGRAPHY** It is just not the journey of photography in India, but a show that examines an industrial space and the workers relationship with it.

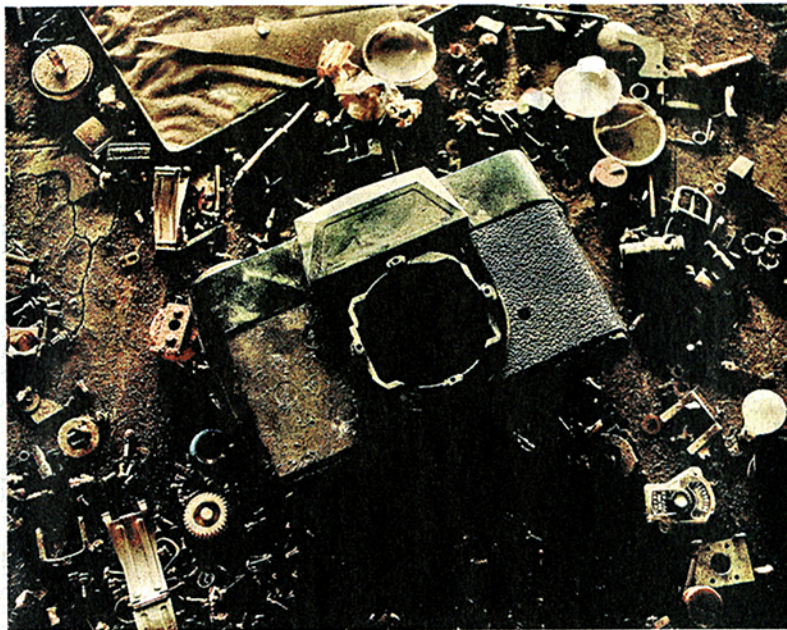
**SHAILAJA TRIPATHI**

If not as many as the ones rooted in immediate settings, a significant number of photography exhibitions on in the city at any given time, has nostalgia at their centre. "Through A Lens, Darkly", an exhibition by the duo of Madhuban Mitra and Manas Bhattacharya at Photoink Gallery, also has past in its focus. It harks back to the years of 1978-79, when National Instruments Ltd. Kolkata, was brimming with the dynamism and the energy of giving India its lone, indigenous 35mm still camera 'The National 35'.

India's first and only still camera factory credited with giving birth to the iconic low-

cost camera lies silent now. After the PSU undertaking was declared a sick industry around the 1980s, the company began to dissolve its workforce and in January 2009, it was handed over to the Jadavpur University for establishing a new campus. The pictures of various wings and department of the space trace the tumultuous journey of the now defunct camera factory.

The camera was originally made in Germany and after the technology became obsolete there, the infrastructure and the design sold to National Instruments, Kolkata. Called National 35 Sprinty BC, it was said to have been



**ZOOMING IN** *The National 35mm Camera lying in the factory and a shirt hanging in the machine shop, the main space of the factory.*

sold in huge numbers between 1979 and 1980. Calling the development revolutionary, Madhuban says, "It wasn't a great camera. The technology had become obsolete in Germany but the vision was to become a people's camera as it was very cheap. But ironically it didn't become that. Lot of people still have working 35 mm

camera and in fact we found a stock of unsold cameras lying in the factory." The camera and its various spare parts found in the factory make an appearance in an installation of six pictures that are part of the show.

The one showcasing just the body of the camera — all hollow with just a hole and akin to a carcass — seems to

be the story of the gradual death of the National 35mm camera.

## Clicking the past

In 'The Phantom Camera,' one of the photo animations being shown in the exhibition, the camera placed on a tripod is shown moving in different spaces inside the factory premises. Appearing

to be an anthropomorphic figure, it looks and clicks those very spaces where it was once manufactured. The technology at play in these animations is stop motion animation wherein an illusion of movement is created by weaving a series of images in a continuous sequence. "Everyday for a year, we would come back to the same

space with nothing having changed. Time we thought wasn't linear here but cyclical and if you notice there is no end and no beginning in these works. Also, there were discreet subtle movements which we thought, couldn't be captured through still camera," explains Manas.

Invited by the Jadavpur University to capture the

space just the way it was in before the institution began to renovate it, the team was struck by the 'pockets of the private' that existed in such an industrial space.

A shirt hanging in a corner in the factory workshop or a towel, a typical Bengali 'gamcha' left to dry in one of the rooms makes the viewer feel that the person who occupied the space left it suddenly without knowing that he would never return.

"By the mid 1980s the company had stopped production altogether and by the mid 90s, the company shut shop. Gradually during the process lot of workers were laid off. Even till January 2009, the company had 64 employees," says Madhuban.

"The peculiar thing about the factory is that through this vast eerie place one comes across various configurations of personal objects in a strange manner. It seems they just got up and left otherwise why would anybody leave something as private as a love letter behind," adds Manas referring to the photograph of a love letter written in Bangla.

**(The exhibition is on till February 12, 2011)**