



**ONCE UPON A CAMERA** (Left) An image from the series 'Autopsy of the Great Indian Camera'. (Above left and below) Images from the series titled 'The Archaeology of Absence'. (Above right) A work from the series 'Persistent Circuits'

Bengal in the 60s and 70s.

In the series 'Persistent Circuits', the walls seem to have absorbed the hot, damp air of Kolkata, and through the careworn years, grown wires and switchboards. The tendrils of wires and the stout black switches hang on or sometimes off the walls, expectant of the inevitable. In 'Temp Mort', the pervasive stillness is further stilled by unmoving clocks which have told their last time. In 'Post Datum', we encounter shelves and sheaves of docu-

mentation—leave-application forms and files of arrears—which will rustle no more. The series 'Autopsy of the Great Indian Camera' finally brings us to the camera itself—one that looks at itself as it lies dismembered in frames. This idea of the camera looking at its own making brings us to the animation pieces. In 'The Phantom Camera', the ghost of the camera wanders the rooms of the factory looking at itself come together.

The animations 'Photography'

and the 'Wind 1' and '2' set out to record tiny movements and changes in the dead space, while the idea for 'Fluctuations' seems to have evolved from the 'Persistent Circuits' series—but in many ways the animations are overstating what has already been experienced, quite poetically, by the photographs that hang on the wall like a semblance of a ghost story. ■

Through a Lens, Darkly will show at Gallery Photoink till 12 February 2011

## The Snap Shut Project Kolkata once had a factory to produce the first made-in-India camera. Two literature students capture the crumbling ruins of that dream RUKMINEE GUHA THAKURTA

**A** REPLICA OF the National 35 camera sits atop a table surrounded by peeling walls. An open door hinged on cobwebs leads you in. A workman's tools stare back at you from a desk—needle files, hacksaw blades, clamps, an Eveready torch. Stillness surrounds these photographs of the premises of National Instruments Ltd, India's now defunct still-camera factory in Kolkata, which was meant to produce India's first and only still camera, the National 35. The company, which had begun to dissolve its workforce in the 1980s, was eventually handed over to Jadavpur University in 2009.

*Through a Lens, Darkly* tells us a story that has a curious similarity with many others—factories and institutes

that started out in post-Independence India with plans to break new ground in self-sustenance that eventually ran aground. In photography's own history, another notable failure is the photographic film Indu. Photographers Madhuban Mitra and Manas Bhattacharya have put together images of a factory determined to dream vividly, once. Both former literature students, they speak of their work as the last images of a shipwreck, a record of photography's own history through the camera. Dust-laden and mouldy, the images, however, record more than the leftovers of a history of technology. The large, industrial space, once full of workers, also had personal stories buried in its present rot. The artists have

carefully excavated the ruins of the space and dug out little chronicles.

In the series 'The Archaeology of Absence', we see a series of portraits of people through left-behind objects of personal significance—a poster stuck on a cupboard, a love letter, a drying towel, a hanging shirt, a steel tumbler left as if the owner might return for a sip. These are people who walked away without quite knowing it would be forever. We also get a sense of a unique working class—one that reads Soviet literature and scrawls lines by Ibsen on the walls as workers labour in humid rooms. The signs and symbols picked up by the camera—portraits of Indira Gandhi and Tagore place the images squarely in the cultural context of

