

Art



Hit snooze "Untitled" by Dhruv Malhotra

## Dream state

Dhruv Malhotra shines a light on people sleeping outside at night, says **Sibi Arasu**.

In author China Miéville's *The City & the City*, the plot unfolds in two cities that occupy much of the same geographical space, but whose citizens live completely separate lives. The inhabitants of one "unsee" those of the other, allowing for the coexistence of both. Photographer Dhruv Malhotra, a fantasy and sci-fi buff himself, captured this idea of unseen citizens in what he calls "the null zone" in his second solo exhibition, *Sleepers*.

In *Noida Soliloquy*, his first photo exhibition, Malhotra captured the aesthetic strangeness of Delhi's suburban sprawl by photographing the empty spaces there at night. The show was nominated for a Škoda Prize for Contemporary Art. Selections from both the series are on display at Chatterjee & Lal, as part of the Focus festival.

*Sleepers*, while also shot at night, is a series of images of people sleeping outside in various places and postures, most of them because they have to, but some by choice. "I had already noticed my interest in the sleeping figures when I was shooting for my earlier show. This interest progressed

continuously and after five years has now evolved into its own," Malhotra told us. "I feel this is a progression, a logical next step in my work."

The images, which Malhotra shot in Delhi, Noida, Gurgaon, Jaipur, Goa and Kolkata, use the night as a stark backdrop for social contrasts. For example, an image of a sleeping form beside a covered monolith of a statue in Noida lends itself to multiple readings: the juxtaposition between the vulnerability of the statue and the person guarding it; the amount of money spent on symbolism versus basic needs.

"Through *Sleepers*, I have tried to engage with questions of progress, modernity and what I'd like to think of as the otherworldly," said Malhotra. The long exposure times – anywhere between seven minutes and two hours – give the images a surreal quality, with great light intensity never seen by the naked eye. Malhotra credits his Mamiya 6x7 medium-format film camera: "With a digital SLR, I might be able to shoot similar images, but I wouldn't be able to push the boundaries of my compositions and

exposures as much as I can with the Mamiya. Besides, even when there is movement, or if the subject awakens, the 'moments of waking' translate into film in a desirable manner," he said. On assignment, Malhotra walks around with a five-kg sandbag, a tripod, his camera and pepper spray.

By casting the common sight of sleepers in a surreal glow, Malhotra succeeds in raising questions about the circumstances that force his subjects outside. As an expert of sorts in observing those asleep, we asked Malhotra why he thought people slept at particular sites. "There's certainly an element of logistics involved in where people sleep. A lot of the people I photographed were guards or migrant workers who slept near their place of work," he said. Despite its semi-conscious subjects and dreamy landscapes, Malhotra's *Sleepers* is a wake-up call to observe the reality of our city with fresh eyes.

The show is ongoing at **Chatterjee & Lal**. See Exhibitions.