

Noida by night

A strong debut show captures a city's desolation, and its mystique

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Its proximity to Delhi, indeed the fact that it is steadily becoming a part of Delhi, has ensured Noida's growing prominence nationally. Like Gurgaon, the other township that adjoins the Capital, Noida is fast becoming an "engine" of the Indian economy and is now home to many businesses and industries, as well as to a large population.

Gurgaon rose to prominence earlier as an affluent hub of the IT industry and back-office outsourcing for multinational corporations—its malls and towers rising mirage-like out of flat, dusty farmland. Noida, by comparison,

has been lacking in such glamour. It lies across the Yamuna from Delhi in Uttar Pradesh and, in a way, has been a prisoner of its geography—viewed askance by Delhiites as a rustic outpost and tainted by prejudices about the badlands of UP.

All this is changing as Noida gets more shopping malls and gleaming office buildings. Yet, both Noida and Gurgaon retain the feel of a rural outpost trying to make a quantum jump into the 21st century—which leads to a situation that feels faintly absurd.

At first sight, Dhruv Malhotra's untitled colour photographs—which comprise his debut show *Noida Soliloquy*—reinforce some of Delhiites' notions of what Noida stands

for. Malhotra says he chose to live in Noida and not Delhi after he was done with college because "it is on the edges and inhabits this intriguing space that is urban and built, but also contains vast and vacant plots that are undeveloped, and waiting for something".

Malhotra captures Noida's urban landscapes in the nighttime—when there are no people to be found and when one has the space to observe and reflect upon how human activity alters landscapes. "I am attracted to still

spaces," he says. "And I find the night more malleable. I can do a lot more with no one looking at me."

The air of isolation heightens the sense of the absurd, but Malhotra is also exploring the allure of darkness. "I like the aura of the night. Everything is layered in darkness," he says. "To see (into the night), you need patience to sit and the patience to look." The seemingly easy marriage of nighttime mystique and commentary on human activity in the photos means that there is beauty in

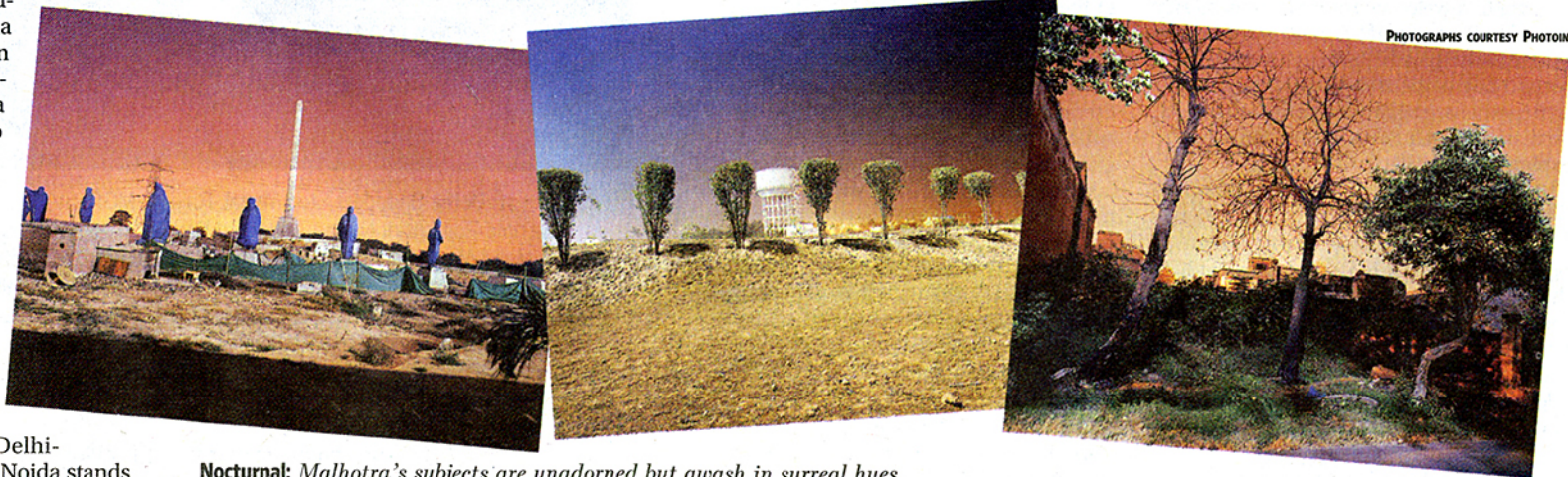
them, as well as insight.

The long exposure shots allow us to see vividly into the darkness—shrouded statues, concrete flyovers, silhouetted electric pylons, tangled vegetation and forlorn trees, all bathed in ghostly and unnatural light, paint a desolate picture. But the blues, azures and burnt reds of the sky and the over-bright halos of street lights ensure that the images are not bleak.

The photos speak of acute powers of observation and an evolved perspective—key

requirements for any good work of art. While they do carry a sense of resignation, they withhold judgement—they are fascinated by the spectacle of development, peculiar to 21st century India, that Noida presents, and they are detached without being unconcerned.

Noida Soliloquy opens today at the Photoink gallery and will be on display till 12 June. For details, log on to www.photoink.net



Nocturnal: Malhotra's subjects are unadorned but awash in surreal hues.