

## Under the Weather

Sharbendu De's lonely, atomized characters are part of a cautionary tale about climate change, states **Meera Menezes**.



**Sharbendu De.** *Lonely Man*. Inkjet print on Hahnemühle Photo Rag Bright White. 36" x 54". 2021. Commissioned by the National Taiwan Museum of Fine Arts. Image courtesy of the artist and Shrine Empire Gallery.

If there is one colour I associate with the pandemic, it has to be blue. The light blue of surgical masks, the cool blue of sanitizers and the blues that colour my mood with each wave of the pandemic. Encountering Sharbendu De's blue-tinted photographs in his first solo, *An Elegy for Ecology*, at Delhi's Shrine Empire Gallery, seemed an eerie extension of my experiences of these two Covid-afflicted years.

Mounted from the 9<sup>th</sup> of December 2021 till the 19<sup>th</sup> of February 2022, with Ravi Agarwal as the curatorial advisor, this body of works was first shown at the 2021 Asian Art Biennial in Taiwan titled *Phantasmopolis*, in the section on Asian Futurism. However, the photographic series was originally conceived of in 2016, triggered by the toxic levels of air pollution that De witnessed in Delhi. It was then that De sought to find a visual vocabulary to articulate the pressing issues of climate change.

On display are a series of photographs, many of which depict carefully constructed, surreal scenes of masked protagonists alone in their homes, inhaling oxygen from cylinders. As if to recreate the natural world indoors, they are surrounded by lush vegetation, which only serves to accentuate the artificiality of their surroundings. In *Lonely Man*, a man in night robes has his feet immersed in a plastic swimming pool, a glass of whisky and the ubiquitous oxygen cylinder offering a modicum of comfort, while a rabbit and a swan provide companionship. *Family* depicts a couple sharing a bed but little else, each hooked to their individual supplies of air. A woman plays chess with herself, immersed in her inflatable pool in *The Temptation in the Garden of Eden* (After Jan Brueghel the Elder), a sense of ennui swirling around her, while a masked woman pleasures herself in a lotus-filled pool in *Emerging Ecologies*. A sense

of anhedonia and exhaustion is also writ large on the faces of the inhabitants peopling the frames. Offering a counterpoint to these constructed mis-en-scenes are cityscapes shot in the documentary mode, which portray our urban jungles and pea-soup air. One of the most evocative works in the show is, ironically enough, *The River Weeps no more*. For what might appear like the Yamuna wrapped up in mist is actually a shot of the river on a smoggy, hazy day.

The overwhelming feeling that these images convey is one of alienation, caused by the protagonists' self-enforced incarceration. In De's imagining of our futures, Oxygen would enter "the commerce of human relationships". But equally, the viewer detects within the frames a sense of nostalgia and a longing for a more 'normal' life, filled with simple pleasures. De would, however, prefer to describe it as 'solastalgia' or the existential distress caused by negatively perceived environmental change. The titles of his photographs also provide clues to the points of reference for some of his works – *The World Without Us* (after Weisman) refers to the eponymous book by Alan Weisman while *The Great Derangement* (after Ghosh), is an obvious reference to Amitav Ghosh's non-fiction tome on climate change.

De carefully constructs each scene much like that at a film set, mounting the stage for action with a crew of lighting designers, gaffers and a production manager. He dreams up each character and gathers the requisite props, none of which has been photoshopped. Even the fauna that functions as a metaphor for multi-species co-habitation is real. If the Coronavirus crisis is a harbinger of the climate change catastrophe that awaits us, then De's images point to a future that might not be so fantastical after all. /