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Rust by the riverside

A photography exhibition looks for hope in the midst of decay

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The Found Objects — Last Planet is a two-part exhibition of photographs by Sanjay Bhattacharyya and Paritaj Aggarwal, currently on at the Religare Art Gallery in Delhi. If Bhattacharyya has chosen rust as his muse, Aggarwal has chosen the river. The harshness and depressing bleakness of one highlights the bejewelled hues of the other. And if corroded machinery and thick tar slicks are pointers to industrial decay and their ruinous effect on the environment, the choice of the river, Narmada, easily India's most political water body, carries its own poignant message. Curator **Anam Nath**, better known for rescuing old hotels and transforming them into elegantly appointed hotels that

make up his Neerama chain, talks about how the show ties in with the larger theme that inspires his restoration work — fighting a culture of waste.



Tell us a little bit about the exhibition.

There are two parts to the exhibition. Found Objects is the title of Sanjay Bhattacharyya's work. For someone who can paint light, shade and texture exactly as he can imagine them, the thrill of finding these very things in the street, open for all to admire, has been immense. He shares this with viewers at no cost to the planet. The second part of the show, by Paritaj Aggarwal, both celebrates and mourns the Last Planet. His work captures the submerged river bed of the Narmada where millennia-old rocks sculpted by its holy waters will now not do us any. To be sensitive, this new way of 'showing' will give them new eyes and thereby new ways of 'seeing'. It will teach newcomers that art can be seen in everything. You don't

need to use resources, money, materials to create the great abstract works of Gauguin and Rothko when pearls lie strewn about in waste or when Henry Moores appear in nature.

What was the idea of withholding the names of the photographers until the show opened?

It was to protect the artists from the clichés people get into. They certainly had expected ideas about Sanjay — as if he had no right as an artist to re-invent himself! (The Delhi-based artist is known for his realistic themes in water-colour and oil on canvas). And Aggarwal is not quite known to the Delhi cognoscenti. (The unassuming, Indore-based Aggarwal is a free-lance photographer whose recent work includes experimenting with the Nataraj). The tragedy of anonymity was better. A handful



of critics and commentators were asked to comment, which they did — rather tactfully — keeping open all their options. Had they been bigger names, the enthusiasms would have been less restrained and more forthcoming.

Your engagement with art is multifaceted — restorer, author, curator...

I have been involved with the arts for a long time. I bought my first Tyeb Mehta and a Ghulam Sheikh when I was in my twenties. I ran the Art Today gallery for seven years. All the arts are related, and this was as painterly a show of photography as abstract photographs can get themselves to be. Come to think of it, this exhibition also seems to spring from the same Neerama movement



Sanjay Bhattacharyya uses rust (above) and Paritaj Aggarwal, the Narmada (above right), to voice environmental concerns.

Is the ASI happy with your converting old palaces into hotels?

The ASI has never made any comment. The government hardly ever celebrates private initiatives, because it thinks of private enterprises as an incursion into its sphere. Whenever government has aided us — in Punjab, Rajasthan, and in the south — we have been forthcoming. That is a new model India should seek, where the government only facilitates and we just go ahead to act and do. It is only wishful thinking for now. In India at least, the government thinks that only it can own the country and its citizens are irresponsible interlopers who need constant monitoring! The truth, quite sadly, is that no one holds back progress like the government system; policies and attitudes continue to do, a