



Charged with light

VISUAL ARTS

Soumitra Das

The highly charged, eerily beautiful photographs of Trent Parke exhibited at Bose Pacia (*Minutes to Midnight*, June 13 to 28) are defined by light. He uses Australian sunlight (very harsh and very sharp) and artificial lights, like a powerful torchlight or flashlight, as an artist uses paint to create mesmerizing images of the outback down under, ravaged by firestorms, plagues of vermin, and one of the worst droughts in living memory. For two long years, Parke travelled 90,000 km to create a body of black-and-white photographs that give the lie to the notion of Australia being a young and innocent island nation. Parke developed these rolls of film almost everyday while he was travelling.

His photographs expose the racial hatred and poverty in Australia like never before, and little wonder he was the first Australian photojournalist to become a full member of the Magnum Photo Agency. Yet even when his lens is focused on a young aboriginal mother and her child with the men on motorbikes behind her, the boys speeding for kicks or going on a binge, the dreamlike light is the protagonist of his photographs. The images are rooted in reality, but they break out of the mundane to reach a dimension that Jimi Hendrix succeeded in reaching through the use of his voice and the guitar, revolutionizing our ideas of what to expect of music.

Even something as simple as the photograph of a group of men wearing stetsons caught in the pelting rain looks like an apocalyptic vision because of the huge bank of clouds rolling behind it, and an unearthly light shining through it. One can feel the heat rising from the ground as the fat raindrops hit the street surface in another photograph. His underwater photography is just as miraculous. Jellyfish swish around like ballerinas in long tutus, while faceless, dugong-like men float around like wonders of the deep inside aquariums. It is the magical light that transforms these mundane images into unique visions.

Thus, a man stepping out of the shadows of a building burns with white heat in the blinding sunlight. Similarly, Parke's presumably nude self portrait in the outdoors, and the flying possum become incandescent with the aid of a torch and a full power flash. Parke often makes use of long time exposures that reveal what is not visible with the naked eye. Two men sleep inside mosquito nets while a giant pig hanging from a tree smoulders in the background. Flying foxes, or cave dragon like formations in the sky. It is at such moments that the dividing line between the real and unreal melt away, and we are confronted with the stark beauty of the image.