

What happens beyond the pools of light?

Sunil Khilnani

Dream Villa

Dream Villa

Sunil Khilnani

The Indian night began to change sometime around 1900. The first electrical generating stations, in Darjeeling, in Mysore, in Calcutta, were chugging into action, their current flowing into the first lightbulbs. In houses, factories, and then on the streets: electricity fizzed through the Indian dark. The night sky would never be the same again.

Nor would Indian colour. City by city, electric colour-fields grew. Night now fell with candy brightness. A new kind of Indian colour was born: modern, post-electric colour.

Dayanita Singh long rejected the temptations and punishments of coloured India. Spooling colour film into her camera did not come naturally. *Dream Villa* (Steidl, 2010) takes further her first venture into colour, *Blue Book* (Steidl, 2009); and she comes at it now through the veil of night.

But there is no Indian nocturne here. The harvest moon, the moonlit meadow, the starry sky, the big dark tree rustling in the monsoon wind – the pastoral world is all gone. These photographs honour the tube light, the street light, the flash light, the head light. This is a man-made, human-coloured Indian night.

Soft light oozes from obscure sources, chilled beams and remote spotlights pin down their wraith-like subjects. Light of different qualities collides and jostles in these pictures – releasing colour from the dark night, as contact with air turns brown dye into indigo cloth. Surfaces seem molten, sticky, seeping slowly in strange oily shades. Colour floats out of the black murk. The shades, all unfiltered, are quite unnatural: digital greens, irradiated red, uncanny golds.

Dream Villa's light and colours are disorientating, not comforting. Is that fat fruit in leafy trees? Are those real fronds, or tin cut-outs painted over? A gash of light: an opening at the end of some long dark vista?

At night, in the illuminated city, the script of the daylight world is smeared over with neon. How to read by this light? Perhaps by searching the darkness, what's left of it – exiled now to corners, settling at the *Dream Villa's* edge. At night, the rich grow richer. Their lamps, like their taps, are always on. What happens beyond the pools of light?

