

Sunhil Sippy's vanishing Mumbai | 'EASTWARD' at Galerie Mirchandani + Steinruecke

The photographer's first solo exhibition, *EASTWARD: Explorations Along Mumbai's Eastern Seaboard*, distils years of walking the seafront, recording a side of the city that is rapidly slipping from view

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Dockworkers at Darukhana, 2013 (archival inkjet print on Hahnemühle photo rag) | Photo Credit: Sunhil Sippy

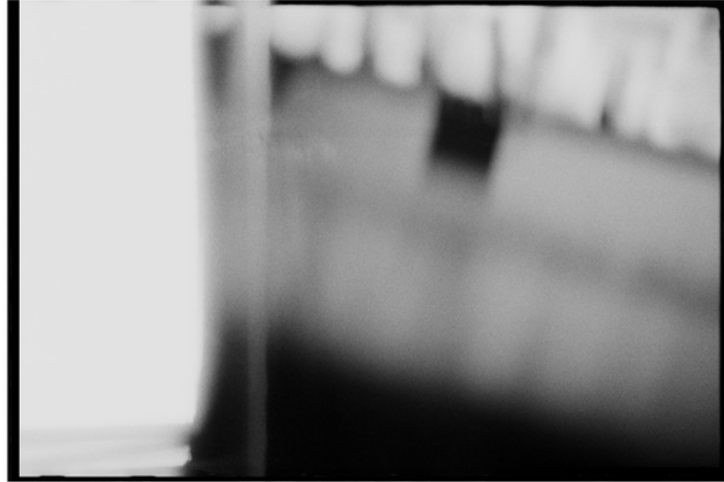
Mangroves under threat of vanishing along Mumbai's eastern seafront, salt pans stretching across the horizon that may soon give way to housing societies.

Photographer Sunhil Sippy's first solo exhibition, *EASTWARD: Explorations Along Mumbai's Eastern Seaboard*, documents a lesser-seen part of the city, giving visitors a sense of beauty in decay and the resilience of nature.

Many of the exhibition's images depict spaces in transition; landscapes suspended between abandonment and development. "I wish there was a bench to sit there for an hour and feel it," theatre actor Sanjana Kapoor told Sippy after visiting the exhibition. Others have called the images "haunting". Much of the reaction to this stark yet deeply human body of work lies in how Sippy approached the archive and its curation.



Photographer Sunhil Sippy has been visiting Mumbai's Eastern Seaboard for over a decade | Photo Credit: Courtesy Sunhil Sippy



Darukhana, 2015 (archival inkjet print on Hahnemühle photo rag; from 35mm B&W Negative) | Photo Credit: Sunhil Sippy

The show is the result of a journey with no theme or agenda in mind. His images were shot over 12 years without a fixed plan, accumulating gradually through repeated returns to the eastern seaboard — the final project, *Eastward*, emerging retrospectively rather than by design.

What strikes first is how differently Sippy shoots Mumbai. The images are raw, the resilience of nature taking over decay a resonant one — trees coil around crumbling structures, roots penetrate concrete, and mangroves persist at the edge of urban expansion. Yet, the human element, of labour in the margins of a constantly moving city, is never far from the frame, reminding us that these too are inhabited spaces.



EASTWARD: Explorations Along Mumbai's Eastern Seaboard at Galerie Mirchandani + Steinruecke | Photo Credit: Courtesy Galerie Mirchandani + Steinruecke

Breaking free of the studio

Sippy comes from Bollywood pedigree. He is the grandson of producer G.P. Sippy (think *Sholay*). He admits that while his western style of storytelling probably did not work in the early 2000s when he made his debut feature film *Snip!*, its visual language helped him transition to advertising, where he remains much in demand. His commissions include ongoing archival work for designer Sabyasachi Mukherjee, Chatterjee & Lal, and the Film Heritage Foundation.

Sippy grew up in London and would visit industrial sites connected to his family's steel business during childhood. He remembers the visual intensity of those environments — furnaces, heat, fire and cranes. When he returned decades later, he found abandoned, decaying spaces instead. The contrast between memory and present neglect heightened his interest in time and fragility.



Sewri, 2013 (archival inkjet print on Hahnemühle photo rag; from 6x6 B&W negative) | Photo Credit: Sunhil Sippy



Hay Bunder, 2025 (archival inkjet print on Hahnemühle photo rag; from 6x6 B&W negative) | Photo Credit: Sunhil Sippy

But the photographs in the show are not attempts to visualise personal memories. Like his two photobooks, *The Opium of Time* (2022; an exploration of life on Mumbai's streets) and *RACEDAY* (2026; a decade-long documentation of Mahalaxmi Racecourse), *Eastward* is the work of a flâneur intuitively observing his muse: Mumbai.



EASTWARD at Galerie Mirchandani + Steinruecke | Photo Credit: Courtesy Galerie Mirchandani + Steinruecke

His photography journey, he shares, was born partly as a reaction to the arrival of the digital format. The shift from 35mm film to digital monitors allowed clients and agencies to scrutinise and influence the creative process on set, diminishing the chain of trust that once existed between director and cinematographer. “I was shooting in the most constructed atmosphere. With the most perfect light, the most perfect everything,” he says. “But when it came to my moment, after everyone had set up theirs, I wasn’t getting time to craft a narrative.”



Wadala Salt Pans, 2019 (archival inkjet print on Hahnemühle photo rag) | Photo Credit: Sunhil Sippy



Darukhana, 2015 | Photo Credit: Sunhil Sippy

He began walking the streets of Mumbai as a response to the controlled environment of the studio. "I needed to break out of that environment," he says. A brutal accident while shooting a road safety commercial in Noida in 2012 became the inflection point for the final shift. "It took multiple surgeries and six months before I could properly wear a shoe again. Walking was extremely painful, but it was the only thing that was going to heal me. That's when I really started taking photography much more seriously."

A living, unfinished process

Eastward arrives at a moment when much of the eastern seaboard stands on the cusp of transformation. New infrastructure links are connecting Mumbai's eastern and western halves. For Sippy, however, the issue is not development itself. "It's how they get developed," he says.



Untitled, 2024 (archival inkjet print on Hahnemühle photo rag) | Photo Credit: Sunhil Sippy



Vashi, 2025 (archival inkjet print on Hahnemühle photo rag) | Photo Credit: Sunhil Sippy

Yet, his photographs are not literal documentations. Instead, they function as silent witnesses. “It is an impressionistic recording of a time; it is not message-driven,” he says. What is important for the archivist is how the city is revealed and the many layers viewers are free to experience on their own. He has revisited these images over years,

only printing those he is repeatedly drawn to, even if they were initially considered imperfect.

Sippy has now been walking the eastern edge of Mumbai for years, returning repeatedly to the salt pans, shipyards and abandoned factories. The process has brought a sense of time and quietness to the way he presents the work, even in images of dockyard workers walking to work in what would, in reality, be a chaotic bustle. "For me, photography is a meditative practice," he says.



Kalwa, 2024 (archival inkjet print on Hahnemühle photo rag; from 6x6 B&W negative) | Photo Credit: Sunhil Sippy



Cotton Green, 2024 (archival inkjet print on Hahnemühle photo rag) | Photo Credit: Sunhil Sippy

Sippy works with a Hasselblad SWC that doesn't have a viewfinder. "You hold it and observe. And it's magical because you just see the space with your eyes, you feel the environment. You don't frame it, you click the shutter and let go. There's a sense of surrender." He scans the negatives himself, the resulting image often a beautiful discovery of trusting his camera, perhaps harking back to the pre-digital era trust that once existed between director and cinematographer.

EASTWARD is on view at Galerie Mirchandani + Steinruecke, Fort, Mumbai, till July 15.

The writer is a freelance journalist and co-author of Rethink Ageing.

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