

15 May — 15 July, 2026

# Sunhil Sippy

## EASTWARD

explorations along mumbai's eastern seaboard

### Introduction: Biography and Contexts of Practice

Sunhil Sippy's photographic practice engages with questions of time, landscape, and the lived experiences of Mumbai, inviting viewers to encounter the city through his distinct sense of its rhythms and changing moods. Rather than treating photography as a purely documentary medium that records the visible world, Sunhil approaches the photograph as a site with many layers: a place where histories of time and space converge, where narratives are revisited and repeated, and in which the essence of a place becomes prominent. His work moves across themes of landscape, environmental decay and fragility, and the relationships between living and material bodies and the spaces they inhabit.

Although closely associated with Mumbai following his move to the city in 1995, Sunhil's early life was not spent in India. Raised in London, educated at boarding school in the United Kingdom, and later studying in the United States, his initial relationship to Mumbai developed through periodic visits rather than continuous residence. This distance is significant, as it informs the particular way Mumbai emerges in his work as a sensorially charged and remembered association. Among his strongest childhood impressions were visits to industrial sites connected to his family's steel business in Wadala and Kalwa. For a child, these were overwhelming environments, filled with furnaces, extreme heat, fire, cranes, wire rods, and the scale of industrial labour. As visual as these spaces were, they were equally marked by feelings of intensity, and it is this atmosphere that remains within Sunhil's artistic language. Decades later, returning to the factory in Kalwa, he encountered not the vitality of childhood recollection but an abandoned shell marked by decay. The contrast between his memories and the present neglect of the space sharpened his interest in time and fragility; Wadala and Kalwa persisted as sites suspended somewhere between memory and material change.

Sunhil has noted that although he encountered industrial spaces such as Wadala and Kalwa as a child, the photographs in *Eastward* are not attempts to recover or visualise personal memories. His fascination with these sites developed gradually over time rather than emerging from nostalgia or direct recollection. Instead, the project attends to the present conditions of Mumbai's eastern seaboard: ecosystems of decay, development, abandonment, urban expansion, and industry. What persists from childhood is therefore not memory in any literal sense, but an orientation toward certain atmospheres and material intensities. His practice resists picturesque notions of beauty, finding visual and conceptual force instead in infrastructure, damaged landscapes, and transitional urban zones. The result is a body of work grounded in an ongoing sensitivity to this neglected yet critical side of the city where time, labour, and transformation remain visibly entangled.

## Reworking the Archive: Image and Process

Perhaps the most compelling aspect of Sunhil's practice is that his archive was never deliberately constructed as such. Unlike photographers who often work toward a predetermined series or systematically construct a body of work, Sunhil describes his work as emerging from an instinctive and subconscious draw to particular spaces. His images were shot over many years without a fixed plan, accumulating gradually through repeated returns to the eastern seaboard and other industrial and transitional landscapes of Mumbai. In other words, what has later appeared as a coherent project emerged retrospectively from sustained attention and repetition rather than prior design and planning.

This process is also reflected in the way Sunhil stores his materials. Digital files and negatives are organised only by year rather than indexed by subject or location. The archive, therefore, remains provisional and partially unordered. Revisiting this vast repository became an act of searching rather than retrieval. Without extensive labelling, finding earlier images involved what he describes as an "archival trudge": a slow meandering through folders, files, and negatives. This trudge produced unexpected encounters; in looking and searching for one particular image, another one would surface. Sunhil's practice invites viewers to understand the archive as an unfinished visual field, where images remain open to return, reordering, and new meanings across time. The archive thus becomes generative because it moves beyond fixed structures of order, becoming a continuously evolving space.

This practice ultimately reframes the archive as a living and unfinished process. It is made through accumulation, rediscovery, and the larger story being told. Rather than a static repository of the past, it becomes a site where photographs continue to transform in meaning. In this sense, *Eastward* remains open-ended; it is not a completed statement but an evolving body of work, where images connect, speak to one another, and form a slow and ongoing narrative.

## Working Through the Photographic: Process and Materiality

Grain, texture, and the tactile qualities of analog lend Sunhil's photographs a physical presence that highlights imperfections and tonal irregularities. The materiality of the photograph reminds viewers that they are objects in themselves, in addition to being images. This tactility is particularly significant in a project concerned with urban and industrial residue, decay, and weathered environments; the material surface of the photograph echoes the worn surfaces it depicts.

Sunhil has worked largely in the 6x6 analog format, which limits the number of exposures produced. This limitation encouraged greater intentionality at the moment of shooting. With fewer frames available, each image demanded concentration, and the editing process became more exacting. At the same time, analog photography allowed for accidents and flaws that digital processes often eliminate. Double exposures, damage, and chemical irregularities introduced forms of contingency beyond Sunhil's full control. Significantly, some of the most important works in this exhibition are images that were initially rejected and set aside, only to be recognised years later for their tactile and atmospheric power. For instance, a large double exposure image of a tree had originally been dismissed because of its heavy flaws, only to be reconsidered as integral to the final selection, showing that images acquire meaning over time.

In his more recent photographs, Sunhil has increasingly avoided the use of the viewfinder, choosing instead to look directly at the landscape or subject rather than through the camera's mediating frame. This subtle technical shift carries significant conceptual weight. It opens the image to intuition, bodily responsiveness, and chance. The photograph is no longer entirely pre-arranged through the eye of the photographer, but shaped through a more immediate encounter between self and world. In this sense, his practice moves away from photography as a framing of the visual and toward photography as sensation. Affect becomes central here: the image emerges not simply as representation, but as a record of mood and the intensities that pass between photographer and place. What enters the frame is not only what is seen, but what is felt in the moment of exposure. One might recall Roland Barthes' suggestion that certain photographs wound or pierce the viewer through details that exceed intention. Sunhil's images often work in precisely this register: they highlight atmospheres, disturbances, and emotional intensities that cannot be fully composed in advance. By avoiding the viewfinder, he allows the viewer access to a more intimate visual consciousness shaped as much by affect as by sight.

Colour and black-and-white operate differently within his aesthetic. Sunhil's colour work is especially important for articulating the startling coexistence of abandonment and hyper-development in Mumbai. In his colour photographs, tall and sparkling buildings loom over derelict and decaying spaces. Rusting sites, overgrown spaces, and neglected terrain appear beside the towering contemporary city, often seemingly ignored by it. Many of these colour images were made at night using long exposures and flash, producing surreal atmospheres and heightened tonal contrasts. These might initially appear poetic or dreamlike, but what they depict is entirely real. This tension is one of his most distinctive achievements. The city of Mumbai is immediately recognisable yet strangely transformed. Colour intensifies this proximity, rendering the tones of concrete, foliage, night light, and corrosion with a directness that resists the romanticisation that often comes with darkness and night.

By contrast, the photographs in black-and-white operate through a more otherworldly and reflective register, where the immediacy of colour gives way to duration, repetition, and atmosphere. If colour insists on the present reality of these spaces, black-and-white abstracts them into a more meditative visual field. Repeated elements recur across the frames: dogs appear stark against trucks and sloping terrains, introducing softness into otherwise harsh industrial environments; knotted trees and exposed roots echo the contorted bodies of labour; rocks provide moments of stillness and stability; flat surfaces of water glimmer through dust and grit. Towers, poles, and bridges emerge and recede across the series, sometimes sharply delineated, at other times barely visible within Mumbai's dense particulate air. Here, atmosphere itself becomes a medium of vision. The city is perceived through haze, grain, shadow, and tonal uncertainty, producing images that feel suspended between revelation and disappearance. In this sense, black-and-white does not simply remove colour but reorients perception, allowing these landscapes to appear emotionally charged.

### **Temporalities of the Unseen City**

Temporality offers one of the most productive ways of understanding *Eastward*. The photographs in the exhibition do not treat time as linear progression—old city replaced by new city, industry superseded by development—but as a dense layering in which multiple histories coexist within the same frame. Drawn from an archive of several hundred images made over more than a decade, the project reveals time as accumulation: repeated visits, changing light,

altered structures, and the slow sharpening of feeling. Sunhil has noted that some sites had to be returned to many times before yielding an image worth keeping.

What emerges, then, is not the singular decisive moment of the capture, but a temporality of patience and repetition. Shipbreakers, cement loaders, salt pan workers, abandoned factories, dumping grounds, and pipelines are all brought into view: these neglected and otherwise hidden worlds of a city. Though geographically close to the celebrated western skyline, this eastern universe often remains unseen, eclipsed by a city increasingly imagined through redevelopment and reconstruction.

Many of the images dwell in transitional zones where categories collapse. A derelict structure may also be a habitat for vegetation; reclaimed land may carry traces of older ecologies; industrial terrain may hold sudden pools of reflective water. Trees coil around concrete and metal, roots push through damaged surfaces, mangroves persist at the edge of expansion. Nature here is a resistant force that survives within hostile environments. Beauty emerges precisely through this coexistence of development and decay, growth and exhaustion. To borrow from Robert Adams, beauty in photography often lies in an image's ability to create coherence without denying damage, fragility, sorrow, or endurance. Sunhil's photographs achieve this by holding decay and resilience within the same frame, inviting new ways of seeing landscapes shaped by precarity.

The presence of bodies is equally central in his photographs. Bodies appear as workers, as expressions, as silhouettes, as animals like dogs, or through traces of labour embedded in materials and infrastructure. They are never isolated heroic subjects but part of wider systems of weather, industry, and urban transformation. In this sense, the images resist spectacle and easy drama. Their force often lies in minor, easily overlooked details: a dog poised against a truck, a sheet of water catching light through industrial grit, an electricity pole fading into haze. Such elements redirect attention away from the obvious subject and toward the quieter textures of urban life. If, as Susan Sontag observed, photography can teach us new ways of seeing what habit renders invisible, Sunhil's images do precisely that, drawing the viewer toward fragments and peripheral encounters that disturb familiar readings of the city.

### **Conclusion: Beauty, Record, and What Persists**

Sunhil is, above all, a photographer of attention—of the detail passed over, the moment not yet named. What holds his practice together, across decades and across subjects, is a commitment to the quietly observed. His images rarely rely on spectacle or overt declaration. Instead, they work through trace, atmosphere, and careful observation—inviting viewers to slow down and recognise histories lodged in surfaces, spaces, and gestures. In an era shaped by rapid image circulation and accelerated urban change, such slowness is its own form of beauty.

His contribution to photography lies in this expansion of what the photograph can do: it can function as a living archive, as temporal meditation without nostalgia, and as ecological witness. What he offers is an affective encounter with the city of Mumbai: these photographs ask viewers not simply to recognise Mumbai differently, but to *feel* it differently. *Eastward* ultimately offers a philosophical proposition about the city: that urban life is composed not only of visible structures, labour, and environment, but of overlooked temporal worlds whose persistence quietly sustains the present.

Sunhil's photographic practice demonstrates how the medium can exceed documentary convention to become a form of historical, philosophical, and ecological inquiry. Through his engagement with archives, he reveals memory as fragmented and contested rather than fixed. In attending to bodies and environments, he frames human existence as relational, vulnerable, and materially embedded; consequentially, his treatment of temporality shows the present to be layered with haunting residues of past worlds and striking anticipations of uncertain futures.

— Anisha Palat