

Reema Gehi  
@timesgroup.com

# In the name of the father

Photographer Pablo Bartholomew's book on his father, acclaimed art critic Richard Bartholomew, is an attempt to exorcise ghosts that haunt him. *Mirror* gets a first look

**A**lmost 27 years since artist, photographer and acclaimed art critic Richard Bartholomew passed away in tragic circumstances in 1985, his photographer-son, Pablo Bartholomew has compiled a voluminous book on his work focussing on art criticism from 1950 to '80s.

In a revealing afterword of the *Richard Bartholomew: The Art Critic*, the 56-year-old Pablo recounts, "A stroke took him, at an official meeting at the home of the head of the arts' organisation he served then. Those around him thought it better to let him lie and rest and not take him to hospital. So he lay there unconscious without medical attention and was brought home hours later in that unexplained state..."

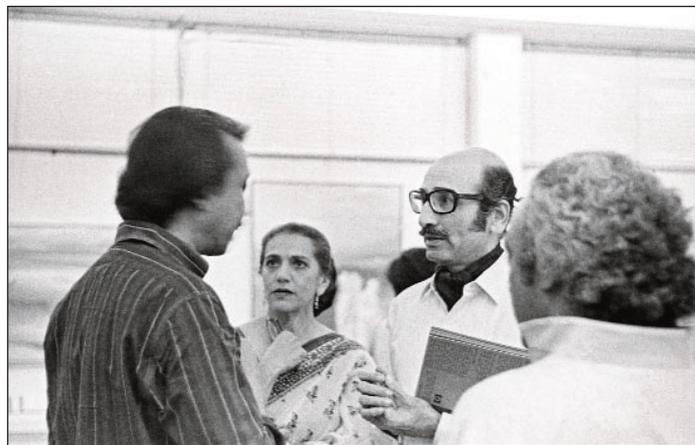
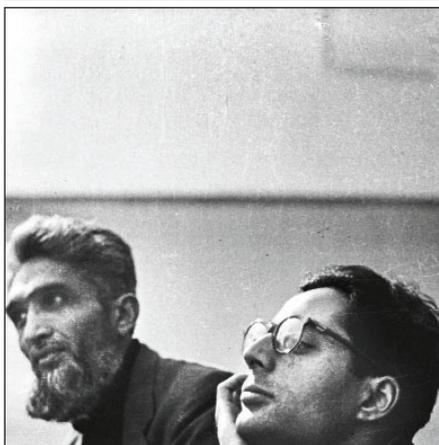
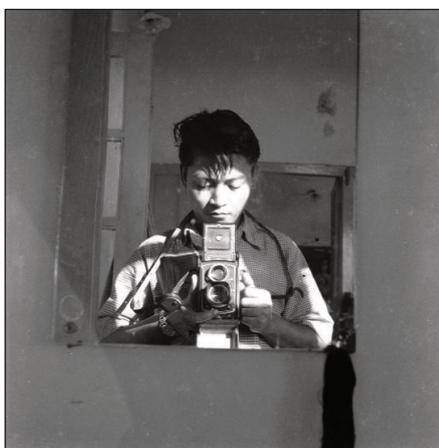
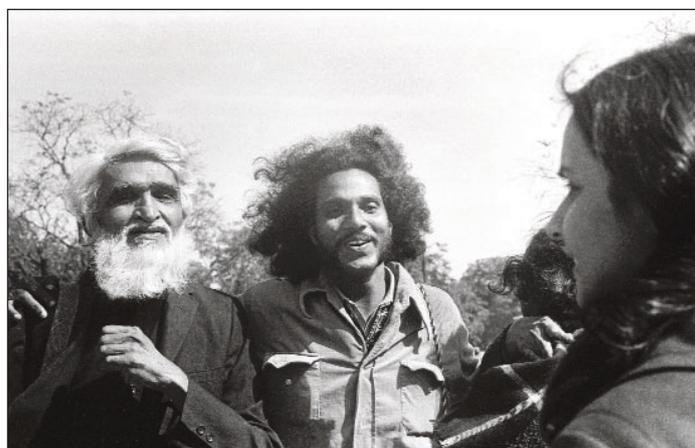
After slipping into coma for 10 days, Richard left his body. A year after his death in 1985, Pablo put together an exhibition of his father's Indian and American street photography, in Delhi and Mumbai, as a tribute of some sort. "It was my way to deal with him," he says over the phone from his Delhi residence.

Three years on, Pablo tried to make peace with Richard, a man with whom he shared an informal relationship. "He was an easy guy. I was the difficult one," he adds. Difficult as he may be, Pablo went on to explore the North Eastern region of India, trying to find traces of his father — once a young Burmese boy displaced by the Second World War, who walked into India to escape the Japanese. "It became a ten-year project which temporarily filled an emotional void, but never really answered enough," he reflects.

Somewhere, Pablo knew it was imperative that he put Richard's writings out. Yet, it took a decade for the family to reconcile. "My mother edited the book, but she was not ready to commit entirely to it, which slowed down the process," he says. "Then, like my father, she too suffered a stroke. The project was on hold, till I took it upon myself."

It took three years to find the visual material, and put the one-kilo book together. "Not all of my father's writings were in one place. Newspapers and journals across several libraries had to be searched, which took time," he points out. After a publisher who sat on the project for four years backed out, he decided to publish the book himself in association with The Raza Foundation. A formal launch is slated for September 26 in New Delhi.

In many ways, this compilation of Richard's incisive writing backed with subtext makes a readable history of modern Indian art, and addresses issues of art and the state. In Pablo's words, "It talks about the giants of modern Indian art; some of



(CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT) MF Husain, Viswanadhan and Madhu Jain at the Third Indian Triennale, 1975  
Pablo says he was always more interested in Richard's photography. Seen here in a picture dated 1960  
MF Husain and Ram Kumar  
Jehangir and Shirin Sabavala talk to Biren De and GR Santosh at Shridharani Gallery, 1970  
Tyeb Mehta and Rati Bartholomew at Shridharani

suggests that Richard had no favourites. He was particularly fond of work put out by Ram Kumar, Satish Gujral, MF Husain, Kanwal Krishna, Sailoz Mukherjee, Jeram Patel, A Ramachandran, and Jagmohan Chopra. And it is they who benefited most from his writings.

One of the most engaging chapters in the book — *Politics of Art* — discusses his battle with the state policy in Delhi during his tenure as secretary of Lalit Kala Akademi. "I think he fought for the artists, the budgets, and the kind of shows that he put together for exhibitions abroad. And of course, see that the Triennale happened on time," says Pablo. "There was no blemish on my father's name, but it killed him."

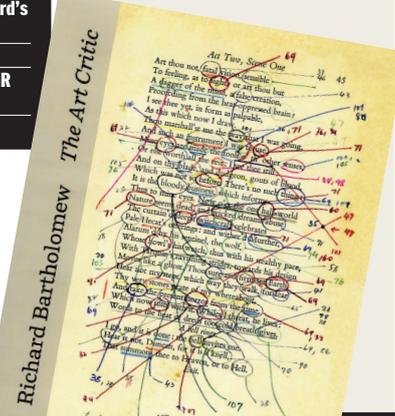
He admits that he was always more concerned about his father's photography.

**I don't think my father launched any careers. However, he was instrumental in explaining to the artists what they were doing. When they went wrong, he wasn't easy on them**

Perhaps, that's why he chose to document his Richard's exhaustive pictures in a coffee table book — *A Critic's Eye* — in 2009, while his recent edition was waiting to be tackled. "But this is the more important one," he says. "It has history, it is a standard in writing. It is a benchmark on how and what criticism should be. I think it will be an important landmark in decades to come."

But on a personal level, as he admits in his afterword, it "is to appease the ancestral spirits, exorcise many ghosts that haunt me and make peace with his past that shadows mine."

**A PAGE FROM RICHARD'S COPY OF MACBETH MAKES THE COVER, AND FEATURES INTENSE SCRIBBLINGS THAT THE FAMILY HAS FAILED TO DECIPHER**



them repeatedly, so that you can track and map their journeys."

Since Richard was an artist himself, he knew the craft intrinsically, could write as a practitioner, and elucidate complex ideas eloquently and simply. Yet, Pablo, believes, "I don't think my father launched any

careers. However, he was instrumental in explaining to the artists what they were doing. When they went wrong, he wasn't easy on them. But when they turned out something good, he appreciated their work and contextualised it."

For instance, he says, there are

several pieces in the book that reprimand some artists, and in subsequent reviews, he appreciates the direction that they have taken. "So it was never about showering idle praise, nor was it just negative writing," he explains. This no way