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Daily Stories

An ode for Richard

By [Simon Digby](#)



Richard Bartholomew was a friend who died nearly a quarter of a century ago. I forgot until the current exhibition of his photographic prints at PHOTOINK in review in *Tehelka* in its issue dated 21st February.

The catalogue of the exhibition is a small book, not far smaller than the reputation of Richard Bartholomew's as one of the greatest Asian photographers of his time. His landscapes and townscapes as they stood in the late twentieth century. As for the often desolate environments are incorporated in his work with an empathetic and of any condescension.

The introspection and austerity of Bartholomew's prints invites comparison with the work of the twentieth century, Lionel Wendt from Sri Lanka. Wendt and Bartholomew but Wendt came from a more privileged and sheltered background. Richard Bartholomew whose identity has now been all but obliterated in contemporary Myanmar. He was only twelve years old when following the Japanese attack, he and his mother survived the horrors of the retreat in which many thousands of Indians and Chinese through trackless and parasite-infested rain-forests and swamps to seek refuge in Assam. I think that this experience shaped the world around him. Richard and his mother settled in Himachal, and Richard ultimately found his way to St Stephen's College.

Bartholomew's prints of everyday scenes are often static as if in a frozen moment of time. They exploit the textures of objects to achieve an astonishing richness of texture. For example, the rows of loop-backed chairs at Tibet House, New Delhi. One of his works, "A barefoot woman on the streets of New York 1970-1971", is an image of astonishing bleakness; the environment of the unfrequented "Merchandise Mart" emphasized by the diminutive image of the lone barefoot woman.

To understand these prints as a major record of the rapidly evolving Indian cultural scene one must pay close attention to the work of India's creative artists and writers have been recorded by Richard's unique vision, and so many are no longer with us.

The contemplative images of the prints are at odds with another quality in which Richard excelled, journalism. He earned his living as a photographer employed by leading Indian dailies. I particularly value the advice he gave me more than half a century ago on photographing scenes - holding a reflex camera high above the head and calculating the necessary angles when one is not positioned as a street photographer have been inherited by his son Pablo, famous for filming the Babri Masjid episode.

My friendship with Bartholomew dated from 1957, when I came to the University of Delhi on a modest grant. I moved into a flat just across the street from Richard and Rati Bartholomew, and I spent many hours in their company, both private and professional.

Richard taught me how to print from negatives. The darkroom in his flat was truly dark only during the night when I listened to his comments and acted as a spare pair of hands for him. He showed me how manual masking and feathering created the dream-like silvery lights and velvety black shadows of his prints. He was truly a great friend. A little brochure he gave me listed the friendships that he shared with the greatest modern Indian writers and painters, among them Dom Moraes and M.F. Husain. I also found handwritten notes that they wrote after his death in 1985. The note by Hussain faces a magnificent photo of the painter in his studio.

I last saw Richard in 1982; the year of the Festival of India in the UK, where his son Pablo was among the chosen Indian artists. Richard stayed in my flat for some nights. I remember that Richard suddenly looked up for a few moments at a water clock of Almora before the houses were built." He was of course right and the remark was a testimony to the sharpness of his

The exhibition of Bartholomew's prints is currently on at MGF Hyundai Building, Jhandewalan, New]