

VANISHING POINT

*All things stand naked in the house of the eye.
When the dawn comes upon the white rose
does the lover sense, or does he know,
as back into the lanes of his eyesight he shall go,
that the rose in the eye is a rose of woe?*
Richard Bartholomew, "In the House of the Eye" (1973).

...he knew that painting, to be real, had to live the life of an inner necessity.
Richard Bartholomew, "The World of Sailoz Mookerjea", *Thought*, October, 1960.

A woman in a white sari is sitting on a bed and reading a magazine called *Thought*. The title is clearly visible – the only word that is legible in this picture of somebody reading. Behind the reader, sunlight falls aslant on the wall, and the open window through which the sun comes in casts its shadow on the wall too, cutting up the blocks of light into squares and rectangles. Just above this pattern of light and shade, we can see part of a hanging picture -frame, casting a darker shadow. In this photograph, taken sometime in the late Fifties, Richard Bartholomew (1926 -1985) – art critic, poet, painter, photographer – is looking at his wife, Rati, teacher and theatre activist, reading the magazine in which some of his longest articles on contemporary Indian art were being published throughout the Fifties and Sixties. Made in their Delhi home, this picture evokes an intimacy that is immediately transformed by that single word, 'Thought'. In the life of words and images that Richard lived, human thought often proves resistant to the struggle of making it visible or communicable. Yet, the mysterious inner life of thought, inseparable from the life of sensation, from experience itself, must remain at the core of writing and of art, just as it determines the character of love. In Richard's photograph of Rati, 'Thought' is like an inscribed caption, a word that gathers the room around itself and becomes the 'subject' of the photograph. The word on the page and the woman reading those pages anchor the image in what can be seen and touched. Her fingers catch the light as they delicately hold the magazine. Her bare feet are planted on the floor, and she is rubbing them against each other as she reads. She is wearing glasses that now look charmingly 'period'. Often lying beside her as she sleeps, with her books, handbag or newspapers, these glasses become, in Richard's many photographs of Rati sleeping, a recurring motif imbued with affectionate humour, linked to their shared, and peculiarly bodily, life of looking and reading. But, as Richard's gaze composes it into a picture, the space around Rati becomes a "theatre of the mind" – a phrase that he uses, around the same time in *Thought*, to describe the maturing art of his close friend and photographic subject, the painter Ram Kumar. The picture on the wall, the magazine that Rati is reading and the bed on which she sits are the props of this theatre, suffused not only with the light that falls on the woman, wall and bed, but also with the worlds that her reading opens out in the midst of their everyday life. And behind Richard's photograph are memories of art, of other pictures of readers and thinkers –

Vermeer's *Girl Reading a Letter by an Open Window*, Rodin's *Thinker* and, more distantly perhaps, Dürer's *Melencolia I*.

In Richard Bartholomew's life, photography was integral to the process by which "the theatre of the mind" became "the house of the eye". And in this "house", the life of the householder, lover and parent was inseparable from the photographer's and the critic's lives of writing, reading, thinking and viewing. Photography becomes a means of capturing this interlacing of life and art in "experience" (a word Richard loved to use in his writing), so that "the history of art as it is chronicled and described" is realized as part of an individual "sensibility". For Richard, this sensibility was most fully embodied in the artist-critic in whom creation and criticism were complementary. An understanding of the creative process is thus inextricable from the understanding of reality, both demanding a "purifying vision" that converts opinion, analysis and experiment "into solid foundations, into values". This is how he wrote about the role of the critic in two seminal articles published in *Thought* in 1957, and his own, largely private, photographic practice complements what his criticism publicly argues. In the self-portraits, this fusion of creator and critic is essential to the projection of selfhood, as he photographs himself variously at his typewriter, at work on a painting, and with his camera. Yet, just as his criticism combined an intuitive sympathy with artists and their work with an alert and watchful distance from them, Richard's photography was a way of exploring, as well as internally distancing himself from, the various overlapping spheres of his own life. Photography became a way of holding on to the fleeting truths of his own being in the midst of intimacies and identifications that could make it difficult to see things as they are, as they stood "naked in the house of the eye". This is the secret thread that connects the criticism, the poetry and the photography, the private and the public lives of the eye, holding together a process that Richard found best described in words he attributed to Giacometti: "to make, to perfect, to unmake, then to remake, to reperfect and to re-unmake".

In *The Cycle* – a sequence of 58 sonnets by Richard, published posthumously in 1986 – the unfolding of a passionate, but complicated, sexual intimacy is intertwined with a vital life of intellectual and aesthetic pleasures: "*To my body your mind gives / Caress its shape, informs what it defines; / Then images the love that makes the mind live.*" As students together and then teachers of English literature, writers like Shakespeare and Donne deeply informed the sensibilities of Richard and Rati, as did other poets – Wordsworth and, most notably, T.S. Eliot, whose poetry haunts Richard's writings on art. (He showed, and wrote a detailed analysis of, Ram Kumar's painting, *Homage to The Waste Land*, at the Kunika Art Centre in Delhi in 1961, when he was its director.) Echoing the earlier Renaissance poets, constantly turning each other into "images" becomes an important part of the story that Richard tells in *The Cycle*, in which the lovers recreate each other as works of art – Kangr miniature (No. 30) or photographic image (Nos. 24 and 50). This is a reciprocal game; but for

the man, photographing the woman transforms her physicality into something less real, turning familiarity into strangeness, as he finds himself split into loving creator and detached observer:

*Let me look at your picture again for though
I live within the feel of you, one half of me
Is sworn to contemplating what's before
These eyes, what in space is there, which can see
Me, and will return look, word, thought, touch,
Take me, all in all, for what I am, in the way that I
Want you to be physical. There is not much
In this photograph, this heartfelt shadow, shy
Of scrutiny. Yet it images you as my one –
A boy girl woman so very fragile,
And plain in beauty's features, yet of a charm
That possesses passion, promotes insight
And will surprise the eyes with a straight smile
As the rose does in a measure of starlight.
(No. 24)*

In this intimate theatre, it is photography, again, that permits the poet to counterpoint closeness with distance. He is both within and without the “feel” of the other person, capable of both “passion” and its dispassionate opposite, “insight”. An immense and chilling expanse begins to open up between the lovers inside the little room of this sonnet – like the light-years across which the cold light of a star has to travel before it falls on a rose. While the man is taken “all in all, for what I am” by the woman, his camera knowingly turns her into what is less than herself: *“There is not much / In this photograph, this heartfelt shadow”*.

So, photography was both a ‘making’ and an ‘unmaking’ in Richard Bartholomew’s life, to return to Giacometti’s words. It helped him fuse creativity and criticism in his public life, where detachment, together with the insight born out of detachment, was essential to being a critic. But, in his private life, photographic detachment opened up spaces and possibilities that his eye would have to contemplate with a full sense of their pathos and ambivalence. This dividedness helps us understand, perhaps, the discomfiting beauty – full of tenderness and humour, yet inscrutably disturbing – of the many photographs he took of his wife and children sleeping, rendered strangely vulnerable by their being unaware of being photographed. Analysing Krishna Reddy’s depiction of his adopted child, Apu, in a painting, Richard (who had also photographed Krishna and Apu together) writes of “the fragility of a child’s progress in theoretical space, which is life”. It is the detached contemplation of this fragility (sometimes erotic and sometimes not overtly so) that a significant body of literature and art explores through the figure of the sleeping child or woman – Coleridge gazing at the little Hartley in “Frost at Midnight”, Yeats at his daughter in “A Prayer for my Daughter” and, at the more troubling end of the spectrum, Thomas Mann’s notebook entries about looking at his sons sleeping and Sally

Mann's photographs of her own children in *Immediate Family*. Richard's many pictures of his family reading are more consoling, although in them, too, the camera's gaze is never returned by the subjects. They are photographed in the comfortingly self-sufficient world of books that lie everywhere in the Bartholomew household. In these pictures, each person's inner life, whether child or adult, is like an island, in its own little universe of lamplight, nourishing itself silently as the photographer observes and records this with tender lucidity. The low bookshelves, the pictures on the wall, the standing lamp, the ashtrays and the cigarette (most often between Rati's fingers as she reads) are, like her glasses, silent *dramatis personae* who acquire, for us today, a historical aura, as these objects do when we see them in the films of the Sixties and Seventies of Ray, Godard, Truffaut, Fellini and Antonioni, making the photographs, together with the life and art they depict, part of the *avant-garde* these film-makers embody.

Richard's invisible presence pervades the photographs of his sleeping family as an informing absence, blurring the difference between inside and outside, between being there and not being there. It is a profoundly unequal way of seeing that binds the observer and the observed in a peculiarly estranging dialectic of love and freedom. This is beautifully captured in the closing lines of Borges's poem, "The Anticipation of Love", where the poet is confronting his own thoughts while watching his beloved sleep:

*Cast up into silence
I shall discern that ultimate beach of your being
And see you for the first time, perhaps,
As God must see you –
The fiction of Time destroyed,
Free from love, from me.*

In these lines, as sleep becomes a prevision of death, two fantasies of freedom, both equally uncanny, are allowed to form in the poet's imagination inseparably: the beloved's release from the poet's love, and its natural consequence, the poet's release from the beloved's. This is what makes the final calm of the poem so disquieting, not unlike the state in which Richard's love-sonnets or his portraits of sleepers leave the reader or viewer.

To let one's life be formed by the contemplation of art through writing or photography is also to allow, in the midst of the normal and the familiar, an opening up of wayward spaces that lead the imagination and the intellect beyond the conventional limits of perception and morality. For Richard, photography provided such a plastic and amoral space within reality itself in which to attempt what he had often recognized and aspired to in the greatest Indian artists he wrote about. He found in Rabindranath Tagore's late paintings, for instance, "a theatre of sublime mime", "sublime because sin and human sensation have become purified by profound thought conceived as or converted into time". This is a process of "poetic neutralization", which takes the artist beyond good and evil to the doors of a perception that reaches the essence of a person without dispelling the mystery of

personhood (the place where Borges ends "The Anticipation of Love"): "There is nothing of good or evil reflected in that beautiful Tagore penumbra. There is no evidence of light or shadow; no shade of sadness or of joy; no limit of before or after – but just the presence, and the present, *the person as an abstract image.*" (*Thought*, 1966, emphasis mine.) Remarkably, Richard then lifts this word, 'abstract', from its usual art-theoretical context and gives it almost the opposite meaning, linking it to the unique and irreducible truth of another human presence: "I use the word 'abstract' in its original pristine sense of being quintessential and not in the sense that it is being used these days." It is as if the word itself, indispensable for anybody writing on modern art, becomes the crossroads at which contradictory notions of personhood, and therefore contradictory ways of representing personhood, meet and then diverge for Richard. 'Abstract', in its original sense of 'quintessential', affirms individual human presence. But 'abstract' – as in 'abstraction' or an 'abstracted' state of mind – implies separation, removal or disengagement, an absence or a negation that gestures towards an art aspiring to the effacement of the human. So Richard's phrase, "the person as an abstract image", begins to look like a reconciliation of opposites, brilliantly encapsulating the paradox, *vis-à-vis* the human figure and subject, at the heart of Abstract Expressionism, which many of his contemporaries were making their own as artists. But, like his best critical formulations, the phrase also suggests the difficult contradictions that constituted his own being as photographer-critic. It helps us to reflect on his ability to be there and not be there at the same time, to be always the outsider in one's innermost room, at once shadow and substance, vital yet elusive, inspiring yet removed, intimate yet unknowable, expressing his impressions "casually and responsibly", as Raghu Rai puts it, "as if he were showing you a silent mirror". That silent mirror was held up to an extraordinary range of experiences and realities, so that Richard left around 17,000 negatives, which are now like "an archive of the truth about himself". This was the phrase he used for the gallery of portraits done by the painter, Biren De, which De had kept for himself in his studio. Among them was one of Richard's own, painted in 1951 and called – in his opinion, rather "grandiosely" – *Portrait of a Writer*. Apart from writing his own astute portrait of De in an essay for the painter's Kunika Gallery exhibition catalogue in 1961, Richard made several photographs of De with his paintings – and one of him lighting a cigarette, with two other dapperly suited gentlemen at a party, a witty yet warm caricature of artistic *dandysme* done in the style of Toulouse-Lautrec and Proust. These are instances of a vital exchange, not only between Richard, the critic, and the many artist-friends he wrote about over an extended period of time, but also between his essays and his photographs. As a historian and archivist of almost four decades of modern Indian art, Richard's writings and photographs mirror the actual making of art as well as the formation of personalities through this process of making, together with the intellectual ferment around them. "This is a period," he wrote in *Thought*, "that deserves very careful watching." So, Richard's camera watched the early years of Ram Kumar's journey towards "simplicity in the interest of significance", or Husain's relentless capacity for inventing

himself anew, working simultaneously on six canvases laid out on the floor of Delhi's Shridharani Gallery for six days in 1968-69, while a whole crowd watched. Husain's *Six Days of Making* was a "joke" exhibition, the idea of which was suggested to him by Richard. He documented the show with his camera, photographing Husain crouched on the floor and painting at the stylishly shod feet of the many women who had gathered to watch him work. Richard photographed his artists alone with their paintings ("intimate sittings, sacred, candid, retrospective") and also at parties or Akademi meetings ("as much a blend of personality, indigenous whisky, tobacco as of the art we could remember and formulate"). He understood the intense solitude demanded by art, but he also believed in, and wrote passionately about, the need for inspiration and "internal criticism" through conversations among artists, writers, critics, curators and patrons through the formation of "fraternities", a version of which he would have experienced as a school-teacher in the Fifties. (His friends remember him as a keen and excellent cook, who enjoyed feeding them and their families.)

All along, Richard was also photographing ordinary life around him, in India and when he traveled abroad to America or Japan. With the publication of *Images à la sauvette* and *The Decisive Moment* in 1952, Cartier-Bresson has already begun to get into the eye of the Indian photographer. Richard was evidently aware of Cartier-Bresson's work and shares his affinity with painting. Yet, he takes his best images well beyond the essentially photojournalistic, "decisive moment" school of photography that Cartier-Bresson has bequeathed to a generation of photographers. It is with the photographs Richard made in America in 1970 -71, while on a fellowship there, that one notices him recognizing, in the life around him, the art and photography he was already familiar with in India: the work of contemporaries like Diane Arbus, Robert Frank, Richard Avedon and Garry Winogrand. But in India, looking at clouds reflected on a stretch of water as a plane flies past, at people and trees through a fine, patchworked piece of cloth, at a rain-washed street in Delhi, or the city glittering in the distance at night behind a magically lit tree, Richard's eye, stilled by a habit of thought, draws the viewer into what the British painter, Bridget Riley, calls the "eye's mind". These are pictures of a mind that are held together by an inscrutable inner logic rather than a quick and clever camera trained to catch the fleeting geometry of forms. This is best understood from what Richard wrote about the landscapes of Sailoz Mukerjea: "Sailoz did not paint field or flower or human figure. Sailoz painted his feeling for these things felt as a factor in emotion."

Richard's 1960 essay on Sailoz Mukerjea is perhaps the finest example of how his criticism, at its best, became a creative exercise that fuses art, literature and music with a profound knowledge of human nature and of life. But it also shows how writing about somebody else could be a way of finding a voice and a language for understanding oneself. Just as self-concealment is often the truest form of self-expression in writing, in photography it is the photographer's absence from the frame that could liberate him into a

kind of immanence. His is the freedom of the ghost – to be there by not being there. This is the hidden connection between criticism and photography for Richard. His essay on Sailoz, laden with whisky and weariness, is founded on the idea of empathy, of getting to the truth of the painter's being intuitively. So it compels the reader, though with the lightest of touches, to reflect on the critic's own investment in his description of "the loneliness of the supremely finite artist, always between illusion and reality". It is as if Richard, in the course of writing on Sailoz, recognizes that the link between his own "life of words" and Sailoz's life of landscapes lies in both being made "real" only when lived as "the life of an inner necessity". But the problem lay in reconciling "the simplification of colour and human forms" in a maturing artist like Sailoz with his wanting to have in all this "a measure of his own undiluted self". For Richard, this would mean going back to the two contradictory meanings he found in the word, 'abstract'. The "abstract image" of a person could either capture the essence of personhood or be a negation of it, depending on how one understood the word, 'abstract'. But what if a person experienced or understood his own essence as a negation, his own presence as a unique form of absence? What if the shadow was the substance, the vanishing an arrival? Would his "inner necessity" not be, then, to find a way of representing the truth of this effacement, the enigma of this arrival?

For someone whose adult life began with a catastrophic departure from his native Burma during World War II, followed by total estrangement from homeland, parents and family in a terrain where he would always be, and look, the outsider, the idea of a stable and located self, anchored in life, love, art or writing, must have often felt unreal, or at best, surreal. Richard's wife, as well as his close friends who survive him today, cannot remember hearing from him any details about the past he had left behind in Burma. His son, Pablo, only remembers stories of the journey from Burma into India, largely by foot, as being among the favourite adventure-stories of his childhood, told him by his father and instilling in him a permanent love for the hills and peoples of the Northeast. A great, cold silence lies around the first and last things of Richard's life – not only the early Burmese years, but also his final years at the Lalit Kala Akademi, where his utter inability to deal with the politics and bureaucracy of art brought on yet another kind of effacement. In between, lie the luminous years of writin and photography, during which Richard never allowed himself or others to sentimentalize his existence into a state of 'exile'. Yet, Amrita Sher-Gil – whom he regarded as one of the pioneers of modern Indian art – was, for him in 1972, the "Pilgrim Painter": "How restless, how curiously homeless she must have been." And Husain was "the itinerant and gypsy at heart, carrying with him the whole 'bag of tricks'". He admits in his *Thought* essays that the artist and the critic both deal with emotion, but takes this admission as the beginning of a process that must eventually discard sentiment and transcend emotion: "The attitude to art must be antiseptic." Quoting Braque and Eliot, Richard identifies the escape from emotion with the "extinction of personality". "I take art seriously enough," he writes in his 1961 essay on Biren De, "but personality, I don't

know." Just the previous year, Fellini's hero in *La Dolce Vita*, Marcello (played by Marcello Mastroianni), the eternal outsider in a city where he knows everybody, could have heard these words spoken at the *salon* of Steiner, the musician, writer and intellectual. "We must live outside of a passion," an expressionless Steiner tells Marcello, standing in front of a Morandi still-life hanging on his drawing-room wall, "beyond sentiment, in the harmony of a true work of art, in that enchanting order. We must love one another so much that we live outside of time." Then he repeats twice the Italian word for 'detached', "*Distaccati, distaccati...*" The next day, Steiner enacts Eliot's idea of the extinction of personality by putting a pistol to his head after killing his two children in their sleep (he spares his wife though). Richard and Marcello were contemporaries in more senses than one.

If criticism allowed Richard to counterpoint the extinction of personality with the magic of making, then poetry and photography provided him with stories, images and techniques for staging his preoccupation with disappearance and negation, restoring to them the strangeness and beauty that comes from working with language and with light. Richard often spoke of the best paintings as "revelations". But Christianity lent him metaphors for the bleakest of epiphanies: "*There is a crucifixion in the eye / When sight will not redeem / And Calvary seems bare...*" In the final stanza of this poem, the ubiquitous cigarette returns in a bizarre conceit, at once witty and blasphemous, a photographic self-portrait that restores the vitality of the eye:

*There is a crucifixion in the eye
more painful than death
and my hands are the thieves by me
and the cross this cigarette.
Lord, if it be Thy will, Thine;
drink to me only with thine eyes
and I will pledge with mine.*

It is the life of the Buddha, however, that looks human suffering in the face and still finds a way of enacting the "inner necessity" to depart, to make oneself absent from the familiar. But this "escape from emotion" is a release, and not a transcendence. In a series of monologues called *The Story of Siddhartha's Release* (1972), Richard makes eight people who were variously involved with Siddhartha reminisce and reflect on the enigma of his departure. For Uddaka, one of the teachers whom Siddhartha had outgrown, it was the discovery of the "triangular truth" – "the presence of change, the cause of change, the escape from change" – that turned Siddhartha into a traveller "with supple ease". "*When I raised my head,*" recalls Sujata, "*I found him gone.*"

Both Buddhism and Christianity had been part of the oblivion of Richard Bartholomew's Burmese years. In his adult life, he practised no religion at all, at least not for consolation or redemption. Art, literature and music (and perhaps occasionally, desire) had usurped that place. But two of his most

unforgettable photographs, both made in the Fifties, are suffused with an unearthly light that takes them to the threshold of the mystical. One is a brilliantly moonlit landscape framed by trees, with another tree in the middle lit from behind by what looks like artificial light. A strange waterbody in the foreground mirrors the dreamlike sky. This night-scene has the classical expanse and regress of a landscape by Poussin. Usually in Poussin, what initially seems to be just a landscape suddenly turns into a mythological painting when we notice tiny human presences placed where we are least likely to see them. In Richard's picture, too, we slowly discern two mysterious figures draped in white far into the background, one standing and the other seeming to kneel. And because of the long exposure, the figures are ghostly (Siddhartha and Sujata?), almost disappearing into the margins of the landscape as we try to fix them in our gaze.

The other picture is of a room, presumably the kitchen in one of Richard's Delhi homes, brilliantly lit by the morning sun that burns in through the half-open door. The room is long and narrow, and its receding vista leads away from the viewer to the door. On the way, we see a typewriter case, a low wicker seat or *mora*, and near the door (with a poster of the Buddha on one side), a pair of slippers pointing towards the room, all of which are placed in the path of the light. Some of Richard's 'self-portraits' show just his empty work-chair in front of an incomplete painting, or a bare room with an empty bed, a chair and a jug with a curledup photograph next to it, and on the wall, the shadow of the photographer in the palest sunlight. In this photograph, it is as if the light coming in through the door has pushed the domestic clutter out towards the walls, clearing a dazzling emptiness in the middle. But each object in the room suggests human presence and attachment. In its "manipulation of light", it is a "human moment", as Richard describes the photographer's vision in *Thought*. The picture is like an Annunciation, but without the angel and in reverse, announcing a departure rather than heralding an arrival. "*Light leaves no footprints upon the sky,*" Richard quotes from Tagore in an article, perhaps finding in the poet's lines a way of understanding the paradox of photography's relationship with absence and with light, "*It knows how to vanish and therefore remains for ever.*"

Aveek Sen
Calcutta,
December, 2008.