

Invisible Presence

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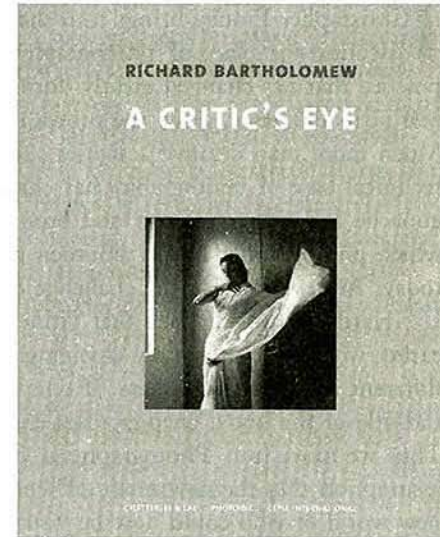
RICHARD BARTHOLOMEW: A CRITIC'S EYE

By Chatterjee & Lal

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This book has been several years in the making. Archiving and selecting the photographs by Richard Bartholomew which were exhibited recently at Photo Ink Gallery, New Delhi, must have been an arduous job, since Richard would not ever have even thought of exhibiting them. It is Pablo's tribute to his father, long awaited, taking place twenty-four years after Richard's sudden, untimely death in January 1985. This is, as Pablo comments in his Afterword, a 'resurrection' of a life that had passed away unsung. It also incidentally and ever-so-casually recreates that world of innocence which we were privileged to experience by living in the mid-twentieth century.

Richard's creative expression spanned many facets. First of all, he was a poet and a writer of remarkable essays, an art critic and artist, curator and the Secretary of Lalit Kala Akademi towards the end of his life. The photographs somehow got buried somewhere in all this plethora of good things; people (like me) tended to forget that he was



also a photographer. Yet ironically it is these pictures which now possess a palpable presence of his persona and his poetic vision. This is why the book becomes important because this aspect of his life's passion bears the stamp of his quiet yet doggedly persistent presence—a presence that is so discreet that you might not notice it at all, but it is there in the pictures.

The book opens with a half-finished painting in his summer studio in Almora, 1957. Someone has just vacated the chair with sunlight spilling over from the windows, but he returns to his seat in the next, mixing tubes of paint. His auto-portrait includes deliberately the old typewriter next to him as he reflects pensively, smoking a cigarette. So, we observe, he observes himself in the roles of writer, artist, and photographer in a third frame. The (only) family photo is with Rati and little Pablo, dog and camera case, opening into new vistas beyond rooms; but it is carefully taken at a low angle to give himself height—as occurs again later in the shot of his friend Rakshat Puri towering over the sands.

The photographs of the family surprise me: they are tender but so discreet, close but distant. Richard may be the father but here he is the photographer—both the insider and outsider. Rati tossing her light cotton sari over her shoulder is eloquent poetry through her simple gesture while other pictures are intimate, gently intruding into private worlds. . . Rati deep into reading *Thought* while rubbing her toes, Rati reclining with little Pablo tickling his mother, the buoyancy of two boys playing with water in the shower, then morose at breakfast, estranged from each other as they sometimes were. Each picture evokes an ambience, a mood, poetry, a sometime innocence. It was an unusual, casual bringing up. Books, magazines, cigarettes litter the house, with always a camera to play with as Pablo mentions—these created the Bartholomew household in which the boys grew up. But there are never any family *group* pictures; they remain observations of individuals in their separate worlds of fantasy.

The trend today is to read meaning into casual family snapshots; but it must be said of Richard's pictures that they are never 'casual' though they seem to be. They are studies into character, creating it by the simplest of means: stillness and observation. The number of photographs taken of members of his family sleeping, Rati, Pablo, Robin, alone in their vulnerability, tells us something. Oddly they are somewhat akin to *Still Life!* A lizard is observed, silhouetted against the dark window as Robin sleeps. To quote from Aweek Sen's insightful essay which serves as introduction to this book:

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.

The family apart, Richard's studies of artists with their work are invaluable as documentation. He had this knack of understanding (with compassion) the quirky weaknesses of character. At seeing me hesitate before a picture I recall him smiling with the words, 'Well the colors need to be *loud* when a person is *deaf!*' Take his portrait of F.N. Souza gesturing with his right hand, those fierce wild eyes of his corresponding to the many-eyed demoniac monster in his painting. Take Bhupen Khakar grinning beside his poignant *Man in the Blue Lagoon* and you see the connection. A dapper Sabavala is sandwiched between Krishnan and Biren De both smoking. Artists and critics in discussion at Gallery Chanakya brings you the mood of the 1960s. Pablo Bartholomew writes to recall that era:

It was a time of naïve growing up, when idealism was high and corruption low. I remember as a kid that a Husain, Ram Kumar or Biren De could be bought for a few hundreds of rupees. But now, its another story. . .

Other spheres exist in his pictures, of quotidian realities. They remind us of a different India in the 1960s, familiar yet strange. Ramshackle buildings, a deserted gully in Benares, sedate cars crawling



Self Portrait with Rati and Pablo, Almora, 1959.

on Parliament Street Delhi that now blares with traffic, a line of sleeping rickshaws in Musoorie. Poignant is the view of *A Tented Classroom, Gujarat, 1968*, its makeshift patches and disorder in contrast to face the opulent interior of *Tibet House, 1969* where Richard worked for some years. Like the Tibetans he too shared a history of leaving behind his country of origin, Burma, to find refuge and a home in India. Ironically it was this assignment with Tibet House which brought him an Indian passport!

In the last eight years of his life when we became friends there was no trace of his practising Buddhism or Christianity. Vestiges remained however, in his compassion, his view of things, most of all in his use of light which streams in through window panes to transform rooms and people like the magic of Vermeer's paintings. Light shines down from above to a sleeping little Pablo, it pours down a shaft along a dingy lane, it suffuses the walls of his studio in New York with a translucent sheen. In the stillness of this room with a water jug, a cane chair, the palest shadow is cast on the wall of the photographer! And so like the painter Van Eyck he signs himself in, with his invisible presence.

Light is a visitation, dazzling in the *Thunderstorm, Old Delhi, 1959*, observed from his terrace. It is ethereal on a calm *Moonlit Night, 1959* where the grand scale of nature is set off by two fugitive figures in the distance. In his essay Aweek Sen writes with eloquence of poetry's influence, of Wordsworth and Donne and especially Eliot's *Wasteland*. He brings us Richard's own sonnets, published posthumously in *The Cycle, 1986*. He quotes Luis Borges, speaks of films, of music, of criticism, and how all this honed his pictures. At the end he gifts us Richard's quote from Tagore on the paradox of light:

It knows how to vanish and therefore remains forever.

The publishers, three separate institutions, are to be congratulated for their discrimination in publishing this little book. Pablo has worked hard on the selection of pictures to bear the imprint of his father's presence. This book is small in size but holds great treasures. It is a pleasure to read, to ruminate on poetry, philosophy and pictures. Richard's photographs possess a calmness, distilled by a certain purity. They recall a time of leisure which has vanished, of a more tranquil world which made 'seeing' all the more possible.

Geeti Sen, a cultural historian, writer, and formerly Chief Editor of publications at the India International Centre, is the author of *Feminine Fables: Imaging the Indian Woman*. She is currently researching a book on photography in India.