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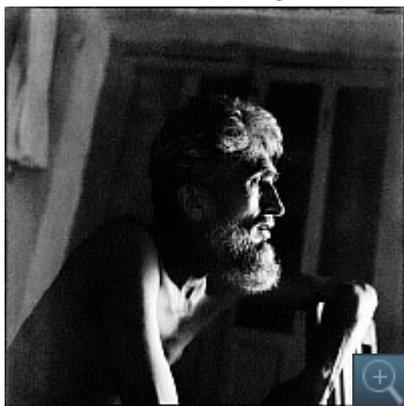
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Critic and photographer Richard Bartholomew brings back memories of yore

27 Sep 2008, 0121 hrs IST, Uma Nair, ET Bureau

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Auction catalogues can be the stuff of anticipation and excitement for a critic. When an auction catalogue weaves in rare [photographs](#) that hark back to the yesteryear it brings back the nostalgia of the black and white age of a period of [portraits](#).



MF Husain captured by the camera of Richard Bartholomew

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Christie's South Asian and Modern Contemporary Art Catalogue for the September 16 auction at Rockefeller Plaza in New York staged a coup of sorts with the inclusion of a series of vintage images of India's modern masters in the hands of critic and [photographer](#) Richard Bartholomew.

Imagine Syed Haider Raza sitting back and enjoying the puff of a cigarette with the smoke swirling through the air in front of his handsome visage. A pensive and poignant Ram Kumar flanking his painting that echoes

a Picassoic penchant. Almost unraveling like ancient heroes on a quest, this world of India's greats shimmers with rings of the labyrinthine passage of time, when life was about solving visual riddles of creativity, lovingly battling a sphinx-like world of a few humble wants.

At first, the surpassing strangeness of his subjects may provoke a knowing smile, as if this were just another postmodern meditation on a moment. On second impression, it becomes clear that Bartholomew was that braver thing—a critic with an epicurean eye, a modern albeit classic visionary.

When you espy the bearded petulant profile of MF Husain in the 1960s this could be the reincarnation of a shaman: Bartholomew's photographs have the otherworldly clarity of a talisman-like trance. A critic once said: "In a trance, the imagination can travel freely where it wishes, turning up truths obscured by a pedestrian reality. It can find a symbol in every object, a moral in every action. Everything connects. Past and future become present, without beginning or end."

Not surprisingly, Bartholomew's images have depth of intensity and metaphorical implications. Abstract guru, J Swaminathan's countenance is like a pure meditative moment in dignity; reaffirmation then of the rarefied air of modern art in its cocoon of hidden embers. Look then at the iconic mastery in the image of

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FN Souza in his studio, this image brings in powerful feelings, memories, and forms that have largely left [art](#) in today's market driven world—such as a love for allegory, symbols, and storytelling.

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Of course, it is clear that Bartholomew was one who wanted to awaken the vintage vitality of art. But few with this ambition make works that do not somehow seem dated. Bartholomew's works attract so much interest because he appears irreducibly contemporary—while tapping art's grander traditions.

The conceptual starting point of these photographs is the embryonic moment of specific differentiation—that tensile instant when these artists were tender human beings; not yet the prisoners of the [market](#) and the world was open-ended.

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From this beginning, Bartholomew explores degrees of distinction, shorn of any artifice, no theatrical backdrops or locales; just straightforward shots capturing, creating numerous visionary sequences that embody the trials and aspirations of the spirit struggling with its creative condition.

With the shaman's power to possess, Bartholomew appropriates various iconic narratives and objects—as a room, and its bric-a-brac which contain elements from the studio of simplicity, and attempts to distill their worlds. There is a fetish-like joy and fire in these images. But the fire in their worlds is warming. Memories are made of these.

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