

PHOTOGRAPHY //

(A CRITIC'S EYE)

Fighting the Commonplace

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RICHARD BARTHOLOMEW'S
PHOTOGRAPHS OPEN THE DOOR
TO THE INNER SELF, BRINGING
THE WORLD CLOSE TO THE
HUMAN EYE

IN OUR RECORDED HISTORY, we remember legends for what they accomplished in their lifetime, and yet, invariably, reduce them to being just that one thing that we believe defined their *raison d'être*. Richard Bartholomew didn't escape this slotting, either. We mostly remember him as one of India's original art critics. However, 25 years after his death, his son, the gifted photographer Pablo Bartholomew, compels us to revisit his father's life and to acknowledge him not merely for his unquestionable contribution to the evolution of modern Indian art, but also his spectacular achievements with the camera. During the 1960s and 70s, Richard Bartholomew keenly photographed life as it unfolded around him – his family, his travels in India as well the United States, and his relationships with artists.

In May 2008, Pablo exhibited some of his father's photographs in a show titled 'A Critic's Eye' held at Sepia International, New York. Just three blocks away at Bodhi Art on Manhattan's 24th Street, Pablo was showing some of his own work, 'Outside In,' a visual diary of Delhi, Bombay and Calcutta in the 1970s and 80s. For Pablo, the show at Sepia International, though long overdue, was the culmination of months of labour with hours spent scanning and working on the 17,000 negatives that make up his father's archive. Many of us, however, were introduced to this body of work only a year later when the show travelled to Photoink, a Delhi-based gallery dedicated to showcasing photography. Hung on the walls were photographs of some of India's legendary artists, taken at a time when they were still struggling to articulate their creative vision.

This February, Chatterjee and Lal gallery in Mumbai will host a revised edition of 'A Critic's Eye,' with some rare, previously unexhibited photographs by Richard Bartholomew. As a remembrance, and to mark the occasion of his first major exhibition in Mumbai, a book, also titled *A Critic's Eye*, cataloguing the exhibition, will accompany the show.

In one of the photographs included at the forthcoming exhibition and in the book, there is Biren De leaning against a

wooden wall a few inches away from his painting; one hand tucked in his pocket, the other holding a pipe. In another, Ram Kumar sits pensively on a chair in front of a recently painted landscape, looking dapper in a white shirt and a crisp pair of trousers. Then there is that almost iconic portrait of FN Souza, the *enfant terrible* of Indian art, caught mid-sentence in an animated pose with his finger pointing towards the lens, almost dwarfed by his spectacular, grotesque canvases that form the backdrop. Among these and other similar photographs is a remarkable portrait of MF Husain looking prophetic in silhouette, his bare body emblazoned with light.

Besides the artists' portraits, there are prints of the domestic world that was his home; a space populated by tables, tea cosies, matchboxes, shelves, mattresses, books, and family: his wife Rati and his sons Pablo and Robin. In every image, Bartholomew manipulates the properties of light to create visual metaphors. What we see cast upon walls or imprinted upon the texture of skin are the subtleties of light flirting with darkness. This explains the motto that he often cited in his reviews, "the dark is light enough." This interplay of light and shadow animates the physical body and renders to household objects an aura of the mystical. What Bartholomew captures in his frames is really the visual equivalent of the 'non-dit' in literature, all that is unsaid, unspoken, all that flutters elusively in the space between words.

There is nothing of the 'accident' in these photographs. Every detail has been worked into the frame, proof of the kind of discipline with which Bartholomew pursued his art. It is obvious that what drove him to document the moment so eagerly was the sudden recognition of the beauty of the familiar, like in several of the photographs of his wife Rati, asleep. These are not innocent photographs taken by a bystander. They could only have been taken by someone who had access to private realms of domestic life, someone who could slip into a room and take a photograph of his estranged sons sitting at two sides of the table or the sofa, holding back their lives from each other, without tampering with the chemistry of the moment.

For Bartholomew, the most primal instrument in photography was not the camera but the human eye, which is, according to him, "the most exacting and definitive lens ever made." In a review of a group show of photography published in *Thought* in April 1960, he writes, "Photography, in so far as it is a visual art with plastic principles, endeavours to bring the world near to the human eye, an approach that is intimate, revealing, visionary."

The technical apparatus was, therefore, secondary for Bartholomew. It was the person behind the camera and the one in the processing room who were always more important. Bartholomew practiced photography with a rare discipline and passion. Not only was he well versed with the work of the best photographers of his time, having owned numerous books on photography, he also reviewed some of the early shows of Raghu Rai, Sunil Janah and the recently deceased TS Satyan. He was also extremely conscious of the process of developing film and spent hours in the dark

room in his house, manual masking and feathering his prints in order to enhance their dream-like quality.

Bartholomew insisted that what photography had to fight against was the commonplace, the mundane, the workaday; rejected, spent images that the eye, as an organ of sight and experience, cannot ignore. The good photographer's vision, according to him, is to put one's seeing eye firmly, with conviction and with technical ingenuity behind the glass, optics and the precision machinery; to concern one's self with chiaroscuro and the human moment, so as to give the eye a new way of seeing because "it is a fact that the eye does not see the nature of things as they are. It sees the use, primarily, that things can be put to."

Though a refugee, having escaped from Burma during the Japanese invasion around World War II, Bartholomew certainly made his mark on the Indian art scene. As an art critic for *Indian Express*, *The Statesman* and *The Times of India* and then-influential magazines like *Thought* and *Design*, he was privy to some of the defining moments in the history of modern Indian art and played a crucial role in the dialogue between the artist and the public—interpreting in lucid, eloquent language the growth of the modern idiom and an emerging sensibility. His close friendships with artists not only increased his familiarity with their work but also made him more attentive to their ideas and ideals.

This intimacy with artists imbues some of the photographs with an inexplicable charm. As viewers, we see each image through the lens of an insider, of someone who had access to private moments shared between friends who now happen to be legends, someone who could trespass into these inner worlds without being invasive.

Owing to space constraints at Chatterjee and Lal gallery, the scale of the show isn't as big as the show held at Photoink last year. Some images have had to be sacrificed to make space for fresher images that most of us haven't seen before. The newly included images, though, offer us an exciting glimpse into the lives of artists like Satish Gujral, Jeram Patel, Nasreen Mohammadi and J Swaminathan. Slated for display is also a stunning photograph of Arpita and Paramjit Singh hanging out with a bunch of friends, Arpita almost convulsing with laughter. Besides one figure who has his eyes fixed on the camera, Bartholomew rarely ever disrupts the crucial balance between the observer and the observed so that the subjects seem almost unaware of their being shot.

The portraits do not merely present a surface or a face but invariably open the door to the inner self, whether by



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FN Souza in his apartment in New York, 1970-71. Bartholomew's intimacy with artists imbues some of the photographs with a kind of inexplicable charm.

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way of mood or gesture. Like in the portrait of VS Gaitonde looking smugly at the lens through his thick, black-framed spectacles, shawl wrapped around his neck, or the portrait of Bal Chhabda pointing his finger toward the lens as if to punctuate a statement. My personal favourite is a candid photograph of the late Manjit Bawa seated on a chair and surrounded by rows of empty ones. He appears almost mystical, accentuated by youth, a cigarette in hand, the collar of his black coat standing stiff against his neck, his gaze fixed yet pensive, lost in thought.

It is obvious that, to his close circle of friends, Bartholomew's camera became an extension of his body, and was seen with the same naturalness. His photographs offer the viewer a rare privilege; that of an intimate window into the lives of the subjects, bordering on the voyeuristic. ■

'A Critic's Eye' will be on display at Chatterjee and Lal, Mumbai from 9 February -8 March.



SHOWCASE



'A CRITIC'S EYE' IN MUMBAI

Richard Bartholomew, the pioneering Indian art critic, successfully communicated the post-Independence artists' ideals to a public who were cynical of the daring explorations of India's Progressive Art movement. His own photographs, however, remained a private introspection. This February, Chatterjee and Lal gallery in Mumbai will host a revised edition of 'A Critic's Eye,' with some rare, previously unexhibited photographs by Richard Bartholomew. During the 1960s and 70s, Bartholomew keenly photographed life as it unfolded around him – his family, his travels in India as well the United States, and his relationships with artists. In May 2008, his son Pablo, an established photographer, exhibited some of his father's photographs in a show titled 'A Critic's Eye' at Sepia International, New York, and followed it up later at Photoink, Delhi.

'A Critic's Eye,' Chatterjee and Lal, Mumbai, from 9 February to 8 March. For more information, visit <http://www.chatterjeeandlal.com/>



'RESEMBLE REASSEMBLE' IN DELHI

Devi Art Foundation has settled into its snug corner of the Indian art world as a non-commercial institution, experimenting with the changing profile of Indian art. Their last exhibition 'Where in the World' was curated by the students of The School of Arts and Aesthetics, JNU, and the sections were called 'Outrageous,' 'Outraged' and 'Uncollectable.' This February, 'Resemble Reassemble,' brings together the works of 45 Pakistani contemporary artists from the Lekha and Anupam Poddar Collection. Curated by Rashid Rana, the exhibition will display works of, among others, Abdullah MI Syed, Adeela Suleman, Ahsan Jamal, Aisha Khalid, Ali Raza, Amber Hammad, Anwar Saeed, Asma Mundrawala, Attiya Shaukat, Ayaz Jokhio, Ayesha Zulfiqar, Bani Abidi, Ehasan ul Haq, Fahd Burki and Farida Batool.

'Resemble Reassemble,' 19 January to 10 May, 11:00 am - 7:00 pm (Mondays closed). The Devi Art Foundation, Sirpur House, Plot no. 39, Sector 44, Gurgaon. Entry is free. For more information, visit www.deviartfoundation.org