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Arthur Koestler's *Darkness at Noon*

GG Marquez's *One Hundred Years of Solitude*

Italo Calvino's *Castle of Crossed Destinies*

J M Coetzee's *Disgrace*

Milan Kundera's *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*

Paul Auster's *New York Trilogy*

Roberto Bolano's *2666*

WG Sebald's *Austerlitz*

Wednesday, August 18, 2010

## THE MARGIN IS AT THE CENTRE OF MY ART



@ BP August 15, 2010

*Pablo Bartholomew needs no introduction. But then, he does. Because his repertoire is ever increasing, prompting the photographer in him to reinvent his worldview, to visit places and people not many would want to, to keep renewing his faith on the wonders of the planet, wonders that have time and again appeared in myriad forms of hope, earnestness and even devastation in front of him, for him to lovingly and keenly capture them for eternity. Before his new show in the city along with an exhibition of photographs by his father Richard, Pablo talks exclusively to Sayandeb Chowdhury on his critic, poet and photographer father, the 'bohemian chic' of the 70s and being on the margins.*

How much of Richard is there in Pablo?

Some of it is definitely he. He was a great photographer and critic, a man who keenly observed his time and his location in the surroundings that he grew up in, in Delhi and Bombay of the 50s, 60s and 70s. He was a man of letters, a keen observer of the Bengal School — he wrote a much-acclaimed book-length critique of painter Sailoz Mukherjee — as well as the Progressive Group of Bombay, especially Biren De and Husain. I grew up in this very artistic, politically liberated and intellectually progressive atmosphere where you could have learnt so much just by being with these people. At home we use to take pictures all the time and that is how I decided to become a photographer. I have picked up photography from my father no doubt but I have remained a photographer all my life, whereas my father was much much more!

You rediscovered your father's work almost at the same time you rediscovered the photos you took as a teenager and student at St Stephen's, the works that make up the two exhibitions here.

Yes, it's a kind of coincidence. It was four years ago I went to my stack of 35,000 negatives and found that there are some pictures which look like a time-capsule of the bohemian, free-wheeling, late-hippy era life that we all had been living during the closing years of the 70s. For me, it was a very personal journey to my past, to the days I was yet to become a professional photographer. But as I looked deeper, I thought that the average viewer may not know the people but they can doubtlessly relate to the time and the culture, especially those who had that kind of cosmopolitan upbringing that we had. I suppose that the passing of cultures is something we must look at keenly because it contains a lot of what we have lost. The gawkiness of my lack of experience come across but people felt that is precisely why the pictures needed to be looked at more closely.

Going back to my father's collection was on my mind for sometime but it

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Michaelangelo Antonio's Zabriske Point

Ritwik Ghatak's Jukti Tokko Goppo

Satyajit Ray's Goopy Gyne Bagha Byne

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was only sometime in 2006 that I got the time and the wherewithal to do so. And hope you would agree that they do have in them a slice of life feel of the 50s, specially the more personalised space of a middle class home of a nuclear family, home where my father and mother were partners rather than typical husband and wife and had a lot of shared space of culture; as well as the faces and paraphernalia that made up the artistic life of the city of Bombay. Together they are a personal journey of both of us individually and together. And I hope my viewers share that journey too.

Looking at his intricate murals at Kala Bhavan, Ray asked the blind artiste Binodbehari Mukherjee how could he make such art. In reply Mukherjee reportedly said, "Empathy, Satyajit, empathy". Do you think empathy is every artiste's USP?

I am not a words person. I would call it humanity and the understanding of humanity that comes with experience. I am often humbled by what I look at and shoot. The more you see, the more you understand how to see.

Do you think it is becoming increasingly difficult to find individual character in our cities anymore ...

Totally. Urban photography is becoming like wildlife photography, you have to dig deeper and deeper into the urban jungle to get under its skin. It's no more like the past, when you just had to swing your camera this way or that way and focus and you may have got a great shot that defined a city.

But Calcutta still has some of it left...

Very much. Its decay and hence its character is still palpable. Personally Calcutta matters to me a lot. I have lived and worked in Bombay and Delhi for most of my life but Calcutta is always special. I was here in late 70s to document Satyajit Ray's making of Shatranj ki Khiladi. Those were days I would never forget. I befriended so many people many of who remained friends...

For example Sunder (actor Dhritiman Chatterjee) whom we see in the photos here...

Yes, Sundar was and is still a friend. I had spent wonderful days with him in Calcutta in those days. But my Calcutta connection goes much beyond than that. My mother's mother was a Bengali from a Brahmo community. She married a Punjabi barrister and shifted base to Lahore. My mother is hence a half-Bengali. My grandmother came back to Calcutta and had spent her later years as a widow at a house off Park Street. My father Richard, while on his way as a refugee from Burma to Delhi went through Assam and Calcutta.

Your father's work and later yours is deeply informed and influenced by the spirit and idea of migration and displacement. Your landmark works include those of the Nagas and even the Indian in the US.

Very much. Displacement inside and outside has always attracted me. I am of Burmese origin and my father travelled to Delhi all the way from Burma in those day after the War. He found a place among the artistic community and later even headed the Lalit Kala Academy. But rootlessness was inbuilt in artistic people of his age and I grew up in that footloose, no holds-barred culture and have imbibed the same restlessness that pervades my photography. So I am a refugee at heart and so I have always been drawn towards the margin.

The Naga series was also undertaken because I had heard stories about that territory from my father. He passed through all of that during his journey from Burma to Delhi. They were fuzzy but no less fascinating. So



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when I got a chance, I went back to shoot the community.

**Do you think you have reached a stage when you can say that I work for myself?**

Not really. A professional photographer can never say that he has done with professional assignments. I do not make a living by selling my photos. I have always been a mainstream media guy. So I must and need to accept assignments which pay. But yes, you can say I have reached a stage when I can choose to accept or refuse and this is where I can choose to do work that stimulates me artistically.

**What's next from Pablo Bartholomew?**

I am taking this exhibition next to China. Then, after Indians in US, I have done a series on the expatriates in France, especially those from its erstwhile colony islands in the Caribbean and the Pacific. It's currently at view at a museum in Paris. Next I want to do the same series at a small town in the UK which is said to have more Asians than white people. We know about London, but I want to see how the change augers in a small town.

**Are you in favour of film or are you happy with the digital revolution?**

Give me a hard disk that can survive a hundred years and I will commit myself to the digital world completely. Clarity and storage are still huge issues with digital photography. No photograph is forever but with a little care and technology you can store negatives for a long time. No such guarantee for digital storage.

**These days everyone is a photographer with easy availability and pricing of digital cameras. Does it bother you?**

Not really. Everyone learns to read and write. Does it make everyone a writer?