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SILENT CONVERSATION

VISUAL ARTS: Bhaswati Chakravorty



Distinct, yet in silent conversation, the two exhibitions of photographs — one by Richard Bartholomew entitled *The Critic's Eye*, the other by his son, Pablo, entitled *Outside In: 70s and 80s - A Tale of 3 Cities* (till September 25) — create within the single space of the Harrington Street Arts Centre an experience of peaceful visual pleasure. It is not the peace of stasis, for both sets of black-and-white photographs provoke a sense of travelling in time. The Fifties and Sixties become real

again in Richard's images, while Pablo's hold, as if for a luminous moment, the brittle, intense, youthful life of the Seventies.

Richard Bartholomew, remembered as art critic, poet, painter and careful recorder of the art experience of his time, has been less known as photographer than his photojournalist son. But Pablo's earliest photographs travel back towards his father's black-and-white world, claiming both origin and difference. The viewer is led through Richard's photographs to Pablo's. But time travels in many directions here, and one moves forward and back again, across and over, caught in the currents and reflections generated by the images.

The first photograph, Richard's *Rati wearing a sari* (right), with the end of the *sari* billowing out behind his wife and her barely glimpsed lower hand blurring as she settles her *sari* in its last twirl, is like a keynote struck. At the centre of the routine yet graceful movement is stillness — in the woman's lowered face, chiselled by light, self-absorbed yet impersonal, its attention on the *sari*. The patient camera's eye, loving the woman and the moment, lets light from a window mould and texture the walls, face and figure wreathed in soft folds. Always gentle yet measuring, Richard's camera repeatedly captures the life inside his home, as Rati and his sons, Pablo and Robin, read and sleep, on beds, mats, chairs, with books, papers, ashtrays matches, glasses, spectacles and bags scattered around them. Light from a window or an unseen bulb, sometimes secretively angled, gives to surfaces, the wood and cane and metal, the floors and walls, the sheets and covers, an almost tangible reality, evoking the smell and feel of living in a certain time and place. In the *View of the kitchen, Old Delhi*, light streams inwards over discarded slippers through the door, letting things animate the empty space with their essential 'thing-ness', used and worn, and somehow loved — wicker seat, racks and shelves and pail.



More deliberately public, the artists' portraits and groups have acquired a different kind of historic importance, because the critic's eye is unerring in its choice and framing. The image of Husain in profile, in partial dark with his face touched by light, is almost uncanny in its mysterious auguring. Pablo's portraits and figures enshrine a different kind of history, more personal, yet documenting the spirit of a particular milieu at a particular time, evoking music, drugs, individuality, and a kind of youthful inwardness full of the moment. Innocently theatrical or moodily candid, Maya, Zarine, Pooh or Ayesha, Amita, Nommie, Yusuf and Chander, sit, lie, knit, dance or light up, gather in gangs, sprawl and chat, caught in a fragile intensity almost cinematic in sensibility and subtle drama.

Pablo's camera, too, captures the air and breath of life in the cities he explores, as his father's had done. There is something almost fantastical, even mythic, in some of Richard's outdoor photographs. But the streak of curving movement in Pablo's *A bird in my room* looks forward to a new kind of visual poetry, as does *Solar eclipse on TV*. His *Kitchen* is a still life taken from the outside, with the wall texture and light almost mannered in its effect, composed as if in reply to Richard's suggestion of limitless

space in the photograph of his kitchen.

Pablo's camera often seeks the spirit of its subject in the drama of mood and positioning, as in *My parents, Richard and Rati, at home* — the careful identification reflected in the particularity of the moment. This recurs, with a less self-conscious engagement but greater deliberation, in *A horse and matador van* (top left). With the single glow of light, the shadowed ribs of the horse, the front of the van, and the man moving on the grained surface of the pavement, the camera seems to have caught a scene from a Sixties' thriller. It is difficult not to recall, paradoxically, what Pablo will do with roads and buildings and buffaloes and water in the future, as he travels the world to capture explosions and floods and other disasters. Can his publicity photograph of Arundhati Roy, glowing serenely in tender colour, be free of the experience of his earliest portraits?

In *Outside In*, the photographer inhabits his subject's space more palpably than is discernible in *A Critic's Eye*. Not only do the two titles suggest this difference, so does the number of self-portraits in Pablo's collection. Richard is a shadow on a wall (*Self-portrait*, 1971) behind an ordered, busy desk; Pablo's torso is reflected in a mirror behind a table strewn with the disorder of impatient, youthful creativity (*Self-portrait*, 1979). He is not a watching shadow, he needs to be in as well as outside. It will be different in the future.