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A history of India and beyond with renowned photojournalist Pablo Bartholomew - via his father, Richard



Amita, New Delhi, 1975. Pablo Bartholomew













An art critic in Mumbai told me that that Pablo Bartholomew, a veteran photojournalist, was a bit of a loner. I met him at his New Delhi apartment; from the balcony you can see the sharp shapes of the Bahai temple, the giant concrete lotus with its flashing red light on top—he refers to it as the UFO. It looks clean against the New Delhi skyline, as if it has only just landed. Though it is officially his home, he sees the city just as a stopping off point, a base. He is a two-time winner of a World Press Award, and travel extensively. But the familial work of his father, Richard Bartholomew, will always stand for him as a benchmark.

A Critic's Eye – an extensive archive of his father's work – melds together these two impressive lives. Curated by Pablo, who also has images of Kolkata from the 70s and 80s, the similarities go beyond the visual.

There must be years worth of Hindustan Times stacked like building blocks between Pablo's kitchen and the balcony; a funny collection to have for a man who has, to a large extent, now turned his back on the world of journalism. There are no novels on the shelves. Bare walls and empty whisky bottles are testament to a bachelor lifestyle; he is itinerant, it's obvious that he's uncomfortable remaining in one place for too long.

He was born in 1955 to an Indian mother and Richard, his Burmese father who had fled as a refugee when the Japanese invaded and never returned. India at this time was freshly independent; the Progressive Artists' Group was taking shape, and Richard, a polyglot, found himself at the centre of it.

"He was a poet, wrote short stories, directed plays, made radio programmes..." Pablo says. But what his father has been most remembered for was his role as a critic; a naturally quiet and gentle man who kept his own work in the background. This role was pivotal for the embryonic scene.

"It was a time when people needed to be given direction and the public needed to be told what was happening. [His disposition] gave him a compassionate view, rather than being a cynical critic." He provided encouragement and advice; a soundboard for new ideas, and "a source of free booze and food". The house was a hub.

The Progressive Artists' Group had been born of a time when the historical upheaval of independence and partition had created a vacuum in politics, industry and the arts. The influence of modernism from Europe had been the spark to the movement; a small collection of Matisses shown at the French embassy had inspired a handful of young men to become artists, at a time when Europe was far further removed from India than it is today.

Richard was also – quietly, unobtrusively – a habitual photographer. Over the years he built up an extensive archive documenting the cities he lived in, including Delhi and New York. The people around him, artists like MF Husain, would go on to become the giants of modern art in India. He himself was more interested in capturing the lives of his own family; a small nucleus, not the usual vast network of the extended Indian family. A little collection of outsiders.

Watching the world

When Pablo was thrown out of school at 15, he had to very quickly work out what he was going to do. He has been a photographer since then – a series that also tours the world's galleries, Outside In, encompasses his teenage diary. There is a greatly wry photo he took at this time, a spylike shot of his school through a ragged barbed wire fence. He was already photographing those around him. It was the end of the hippy era, when European kids would roam through Iran and Afghanistan and end up in India. After the high of the 60s came the eventual comedown, and so he captured the waifs and strays.

In 1975, at the age of 19, he won the World Press Award for his pictures of morphine addicts in Delhi – recently shown at the Whitechapel gallery's enlightening and original exhibition, Where Three Dreams Cross. Those same European travellers had by then disappeared behind closed doors in Paharganj, living out a desolate fantasy of the Oriental opium den.

He soon became one of India's most famous photojournalists. In 1984 he won World Press Photo of the Year for his eponymous photo of the Bhopal disaster; a baby's face encased in rubble and dust, its eyes ghostly black; a nightmare image of one of the world's worst industrial catastrophes. Six years later he was in Ayodhya photographing the demolition of the Babri mosque, which violent Hindu mobs systematically destroyed; it was chaotic, and some of India's worst riots followed, killing thousands. Pablo was very lucky to get out alive, and it was a moment that made him question the value of journalistic work.

"I worked in the media for 20 years... you get mannered, you start to produce formulaic images to satisfy expectation. The visual joy goes out of it, a rot sets in. You become a hack." He is in a self-confessed process of "de-hacking"; he refers to his early work as "a benchmark and testimony that you have to try and match again".

"With most photographers their whole career is news photography, they don't have a period where they have gone into something else, to know what they did before was good. I am very lucky to have that reference and my father's work ... a purer time."

Richard Bartholomew's work does possess a naivety and innocence that, perhaps, Pablo's later work could not afford. The world then, as now, was rapidly changing and by the time Pablo got behind the lense, the scene was a little more jaded. Richard's photographs shown in A Critic's Eye document childhood, both of a new India and a new family.

Pablo's defining quality is his apparent invisibility in his work; the openness, the unselfconscious gaze of the subject belies the familiarity and unobtrusive presence of the man behind the lense. His awareness of beauty in the mundane, his sharp eye for composition and light, his sense of humour are qualities work that stand out.

For Pablo his father's strong documentary style, particularly in America in the 1970s, had great resonance. However, it is the photographs of the family to which he is most attached. "That is your closest tie and somewhere you can be near invisible [as a photographer]. This sense of not being there is most apparent in these images."

As well as a steady stream of journalism – despite his distrust of the profession, he admits it "still runs in my veins" – and judging various competitions, he has an ongoing project photographing south Asian diaspora all over the world, most recently in France. "Family documentation is one of the great things right now," he says. "There is a lot of introspection all over the world, in terms of looking back at how we photograph these relationships."

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In 2008 in New York, father and son exhibited at the same time in two different galleries, four chelsea blocks apart. In August, A Critics Eye And Outside In will be finally under the same roof in Kolkata. The pictures are mainly of people at home, their homes away from home, and the family collected together; awkwardly, cosily. In all of these images, the

Amahel Baraclouoh

Amabel Baraclough

Where Three Dreams Cross, which includes a selection of Richard and Pablo Bartholomew's photographs, is currently on at the Fotomuseum Winterthur in Zurich until 22 August 2010

sincerity and frankness of the subject is there. Almost as if no one were behind the lense.

fotomuseum.ch

Works from A Critic's Eye and Outside In will be displayed at Harrington Street Arts Centre,

richardbartholomew.info pablobartholomew.com

Posted: 20 July 2010

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