

The simplicity behind their faces of fame



IMAGINE A bare-bodied Husain — black eyebrows, white beard — standing in front of his work that he had given to Indian Airlines in the '70s. Then think of Francis Newton Souza at his apartment in New York, standing next to one of his famed Heads. An unusual moment in the life of India's finest abstractionist Nasreen Mohamedi — demure and delicately poised — all these images are part of a historic show at New York's Sepia entitled "A Critic's Eye". The critic is none other than

the late Richard Bartholomew who discovered and wrote about the famed Progressives long before the world woke up to Indian art.

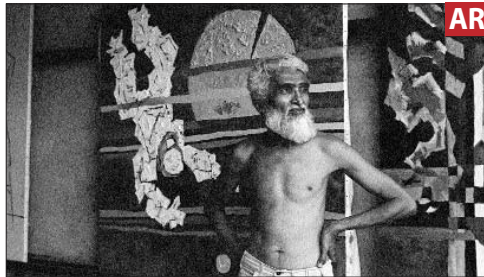
Black and white images that reveal the camera as a tool that have fundamentally reshaped the human condition, and the inner eye. In a series of still lifes, images of the family and two handsome night shots, these works bring to the eye an insight that is singular and precious; historic and far from the faces of fame that change countenances.

A set of studies that move away from the churn of images, that roll out in relentless profusion; today, it's hard to imagine how Bartholomew (father of Pablo Bartholomew) understood both Indian and West-

ern culture when it wasn't constantly chasing its own shadow.

Bartholomew was no passive observer, even when he captured his wife reading Sad Sack and Pablo reading Photography — a magazine you can look at the date and actually mouth a Warholian "wow" The images talk to you in their own silence, they tell you mellow tales of the life a man who was passionate about his relationships, about what he saw and about who he wrote. You think of the subjects who have become celebrities, who now live to be echoed in their successes and failures.

And therein lies the irony of this well-knit oeuvre which recalls Updike's snipe at celebrityhood. "Celebrity is a mask," said



M.F. Husain at work in his studio; New Delhi, 1970s.

PHOTO COURTESY: Estate of Richard Bartholomew

John Updike, "that eats into the face" — in order to provoke viewers into a thought-

ful response to celebrity culture. Taken way back in the 60s and 70s, these works go

much deeper than the eye can see. They speak of a culture and comfort we know

ARTiculate Uma Nair

not today. They are truthful in their simplicity and lack of pretentious allure.

There is a kind of playfulness in the still lifes, and even in the images of people. Bartholomew reveals that the true subject must reflect a delightful summation of a certain masculine/feminine ideal; that cocky hat in the window echoes the classical purity of a western notion of academic moments.

Still, only a particularly blithe spirit could give us works that have an uncanny power.

In New York this show seems to steal into the secret places of the heart, creating an illusion of intimacy, of

community, and success for those who have the real thing. Knowing that Souza attained celebrityhood after his death makes the exaggerations diminish.

This show brings back the famous words that echo the difference between a hero and a celebrity.

"The hero was distinguished by his achievement; the celebrity by his image or trademark," wrote Daniel Boorstin in 1961, "The hero created himself; the celebrity is created by the media. The hero was a big man; the celebrity is a big name." Bartholomew died long before we knew he loved what the mind's eye saw. And so be it.