

Study of an Archive Photographer Pablo Bartholomew seeks to recover a forgotten way of seeing by revisiting his work on Bombay done 25 years ago

JANICE PARIAT



IT IS NIGHT at the gallery. The lights are turned off. The guard outside taps his cane against the cold cement steps. Somewhere is the faint ticking of a clock. A dog barks. The streets of Jhandewalan, Delhi, are quiet. Tomorrow, they will swell again with people and traffic; some of the crowd will head to the gallery for *Chronicles of a Past Life...*, a photo exhibition by Pablo Bartholomew on Bombay of the 1970s and 1980s. For now, though, I imagine these grainy black-and-whites in twilight rooms, frozen on the wall, prisoners of paper and light. I think of the ravages of time—of what it may have done to the people in the photographs, the

city, the photographer himself. These multiple ghostly selves spill from the frames, and the rooms—though empty—fill with shadows.

The 'past life' that Bartholomew refers to in the title is not just of Bombay, its inhabitants and himself, but also, as

While 'chronicle' is usually used to describe a written account of an event, photographs too have their own visual language, one that is more fluid and flexible than text

he says, "a way of seeing", one that he had to largely abandon when he took up journalism and made the switch to colour. The exhibition is laced with nostalgia in many ways; as he explains, "I have come back to [my work] after about 25 years to find things that I have lost." While 'chronicle' is usually used to describe a written account of an event, photographs too have their own visual language, one that's more fluid and flexible than text. "Not too many people speak it," says Bartholomew, "and fewer spoke it when I made this work." What he would like is for viewers to find their own narratives or stories, and con-



CHRONICLE OF A BYGONE BOMBAY (Clockwise from facing page) Bathers at Mahalakshmi; a roadside photo studio; ragpickers in a scuffle

sidering the wealth of drama in the images, that should not be difficult. Bartholomew's eye is an irreverent blend of Diane Arbus' fascination for outsiders and Bresson's uncanny timing—one that is unhesitant, unflinching and unfailingly embrace.

While his show *Outside in! A Tale of 3 Cities*, held in September last year, captured the inner core of family and friends, *Chronicles...* is his outer world—"the world of exterior spaces,

the landscapes of the city and within that the street life and people that negotiate those spaces". His gaze is far-reaching, a low-sweeping pan shot close to the ground that alights on bathers at Mahalakshmi and *dabba-wallahs* at Sachivalaya, a row of eunuchs at Broad Street and a couple of child-like prostitutes at Falkland. Bartholomew captures a city in transition with its towering shiny-new Air India and Express Towers buildings,

and Worli under construction, as well as its dreams and ambitions—dance girls outside a studio, extras in a movie. The images bustle with life against backdrops that stand like sets from a period-piece film—Ambassador cars, advertisement signs, clothes and shops all from a startlingly recent yet distant era. Bartholomew speaks of how the city provides space for everyone to survive and thrive, and has an energy that keeps it going. In some ways, this gives the images a certain timelessness—the roadside gamblers, rag-pickers, Parsi beggars, coolies, hippies in cafés, and fleeting faces of passing strangers are characters you could recognise in Mumbai even today. Interspersed between the clamour are pockets of quiet tenderness. A man sleeping on Chowpatty Beach, a homeless man raising his hands at a statue, a bent old woman crossing the road, empty, desolate views of the sea, a newspaper-strewn verandah at Colaba. There is a special intimacy between subject and photographer, which he attributes to the fact that he shot this body of work at a time when he was shunted out of high school, making him a pariah. As he explains, "Many of the subcultures I traversed were a refuge, places and people to hang with and spend time with. And I have always used my photography as therapy, as a way of questioning, finding and healing myself of all that is in turmoil within."

Back at the gallery, dawn breaks and the day is slowly bathed in faded winter sunlight. The doors open, a phone rings, a coffee machine hisses, and people trickle in. The ghosts fold back into themselves, and become rooted, motionless. Perhaps, apart from savouring the photographic delights that *Chronicles...* has to offer, we too, like Bartholomew, should remember what we've lost. How far we've come, else, and why. The images stand testament to a different age, one that some would say was slower, touched by an ineffable innocence. As you stand looking at them, they look back. Sometimes, a photograph reviews you. ■

Chronicles of a Past Life: '70s and '80s in Bombay is on till 25 February 2012 at Photoink Gallery, Delhi