

The man who wasn't there



Glimpses of the past Self-portrait with Rati and Pablo (left); Ram Kumar in his Gole Market studio (right); Rati wearing a sari (inset)



The celebrated critic Richard Bartholomew was also a gifted photographer, finds **Janice Pariat**. Don't miss this fortnight's retrospective.

Credit the Japanese occupation of Burma during WWII for this at least: Richard Bartholomew fled the country of his birth as a teenager and made India his home, in 1942. His life in Delhi encompassed many activities. He was a writer and art critic (publishing articles on Indian and Tibetan art as well as poems, short stories and monographs on various subjects), painter and gallery director of Kunika Art Centre (an early Delhi-based contemporary art gallery). He was curator of the museum in Tibet House where he chronicled the Dalai Lama's collection of religious artefacts, and finally served as secretary of the Lalit Kala Academy from 1977 to 1985. Bartholomew also found the time to photographically document the people he interacted with and the cities he lived in and travelled to. *A Critic's*

Eye at Photoink is a retrospective show of about 80 black-and-white images that allow us an intimate look into his life and times.

"The idea behind a show like this," the well-known photographer Pablo Bartholomew told us at the gallery, "was to touch upon the different aspects that made up my father's work." Hence, there are images taken from the "family album", which capture Rati, Richard's wife, and his two sons Pablo and Robin around the house – sleeping, reading, drinking tea, sitting around the dining table, taking a mug-and-bucket bath, an older Pablo playing the guitar. A particularly memorable photo is one of Rati and a toddler Pablo laughing on the bed.

Bartholomew's strengths – an easy intimacy with his surroundings as well as an ability to be the quiet, unobtrusive observer – informed the pictures he took outside his own domestic realm too. A large number of images at the show are of the various artists that Bartholomew worked with and befriended. The mood ranges from

the contemplative, as can be seen in "Ram Kumar in his Gole Market studio", to the bold and belligerent (watch out for the look FN Souza throws at the camera with his finger raised at the viewer). Some capture the artists in as relaxed a fashion as possible, for example MF Husain speaking on the telephone, his hand plucking at a tuft of hair;

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or at their most composed, like Biren De standing outside his house, next to a painting. Certain photographs of groups of artists gathered at a gallery or a party also highlight Bartholomew's particular ability to be simultaneously an insider and someone who stood aside.

His work also includes photos

of various places he visited – Chennai, Mumbai, Varanasi, Almora, Mussoorie, Darjeeling – and the cities he lived in: Delhi and New York. Just like the people he photographed, the urban landscapes too reveal a range of emotions. There's the fury of lightning in a stormy Delhi sky, a quiet moonlight-soaked night in old Delhi, the glass and steel brightness of a New York skyscraper, the loneliness of a car park in the same city. These urban landscapes sometimes have the element of a story untold: a woman walks barefoot down a New York street, a man stands alone on a rooftop along a busy New Delhi road.

The pull of this exhibition is perhaps best summed up by the photograph that's placed last in the display: a self-portrait taken in a room which captures only his shadow falling against a wall. In a time when the artist throws himself in his audience's face, again and again, such effacement is a welcome blast from the past.

Janice Pariat
See *Photoink* in Exhibitions.