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A R E V I E W O F B O O K S

VOL XIV NOS. 1 & 2

JANUARY - FEBRUARY 2009

PRICE : Rs 60

UK £ 2.50

US \$ 5



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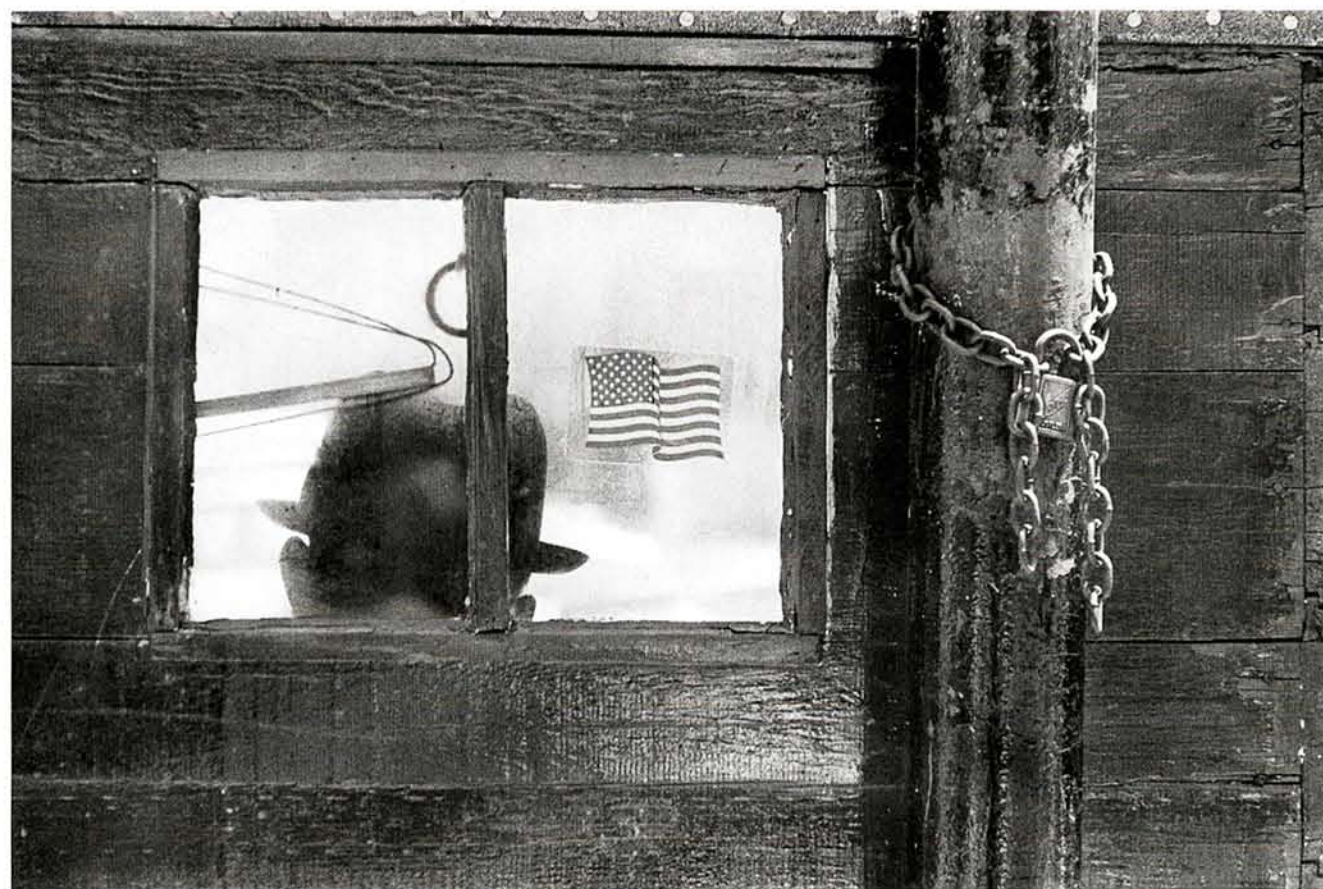
Nandini Lal remembers John Updike (1932-2009)

Contemporary Poetry from the Middle East, Asia and Beyond

Jhandewalan Road in Delhi is known for its glass and timber merchants, dense pick-up traffic, the longest red-light halt in town, and a temple with a flag. It is not a destination that comes to mind on a day of rest. But cities change. Recently, this downmarket traders' street has received a facelift at its western end where Devika Daulet-Singh has unfurled her own banner to showcase photography as Art. Photoink (that's her elegant gallery and publishing house) has taken its first few steps with deliberation, choosing its wares carefully, and its fledgling backlist has gathered some celebrated photographers as well as some that have gained a reputation with the gallery's patronage. The 17th of January was a red-letter day in its yearbook when Photoink resurrected the work of a deceased "forgotten" photographer in the form of a book and an exhibition. In a simple opening ritual, a son handed over a copy of his late father's work to his mother, and this young elite gallery came of age.

The name Richard Bartholomew was a respected byline in *The Statesman*, the *Indian Express*, and *The Times of India* in the '50s and '60s. Regarded as a seminal critic of Indian art who combined an intuitive sympathy with an alert and watchful distance, he was also a curator, a published poet, an acknowledged painter, and went on to become the Secretary of the Lalit Kala Akademi, a position that he held for eight years till he died in office in 1985. What this public figure kept to himself all his years was a private passion: his photography. A historian and archivist of Indian modernism for nearly four decades, Richard left behind an unshown collection of over 17,000 negatives, a chronicle of the art and artists of his time. A quarter-century after his death, his pictures are being exhibited at Photoink in a major show titled *'A Critic's Eye'*.

It's not often that one first views a dead man's art a generation after it was made. The experience tests you with its timelessness—it's new and old all at once. Looking at the re-made soft black-and-white bromides of the then-young now-old icons of Indian Art, I had an odd sensation akin to viewing the exhumed freshness of a restored painting. *A Critic's Eye* carries the youth of the aged legends of our time—Ram Kumar, Jehangir Sabavala, M.F. Husain, S.A. Krishnan, Biren De, Bhupen Khakhar, Krishen Khanna, F.N. Souza—dandy, comic, jaunty, pensive, distracted, preening, angular in their portraits, caught in a wary half-embrace (artists are politicians, if you didn't know), in natty attire with carefully parted hair (corporates too, if you didn't know), alone with their canvases ("intimate sittings, sacred, candid, retrospective" wrote Richard), and at parties and Akademi meetings ("as much a blend of personality, indigenous whiskey, tobacco as of the art we could remember and formulate... this is a period that deserves very careful watching"). Richard's eye is fraternal, it is evident that he belongs to the artists, not to the establishment. Along with the painters, he, too, is a participant in the 'scene', in the formation of these personalities. The partnership between him and his friends is organic, unlike some of the recent plastic attempts made by contemporary photo-artists



'Man with a hat', USA, 1970-71

Rustless

A Critic's Eye — Richard Bartholomew

Edited by Pablo Bartholomew and Devika Daulet-Singh

Designed by Rukminee Guha Thakurta/Photoink

Chatterjee & Lal, Photoink and Sepia International, 2009,

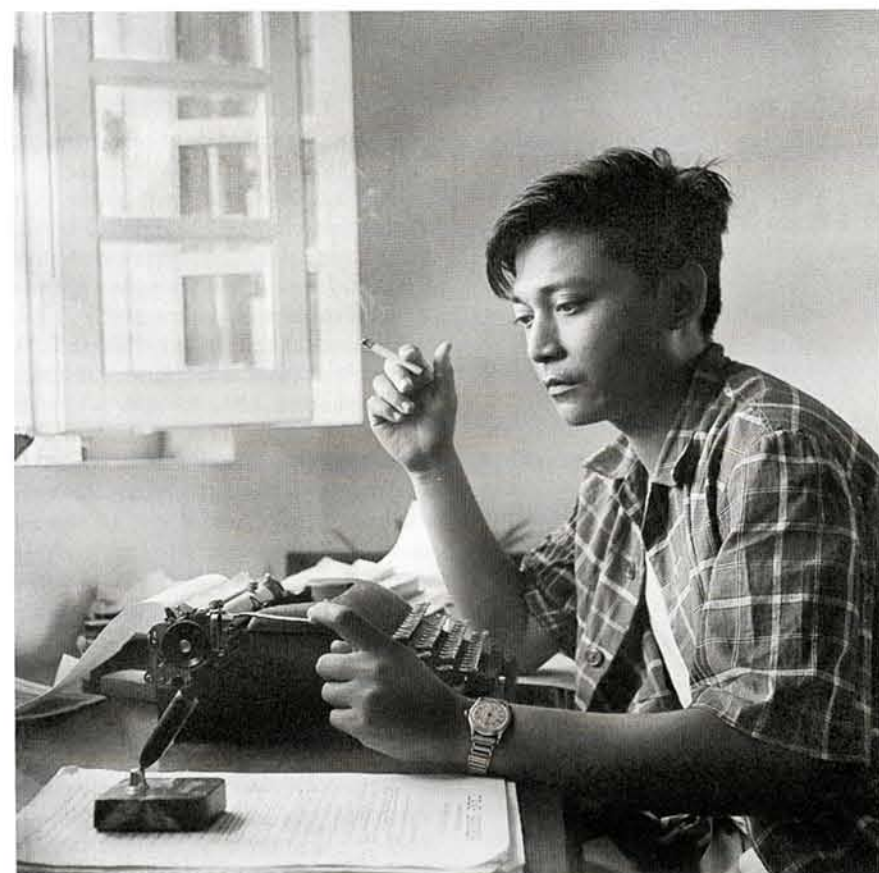
104 pp., with 58 black-and-white photographs, Rs 1,000

ISBN 978-81-903911-6-0

Exhibition venue: Photoink Gallery, 1 Jhandewalan, Delhi

17th January - 28th February 2009

SANJEEV SAITH



'Self-portrait', New Delhi, 1956

to 'involve' their subject in the 'construction' of their images (with one eye fixed on a market further West, beyond Jhandewalan).

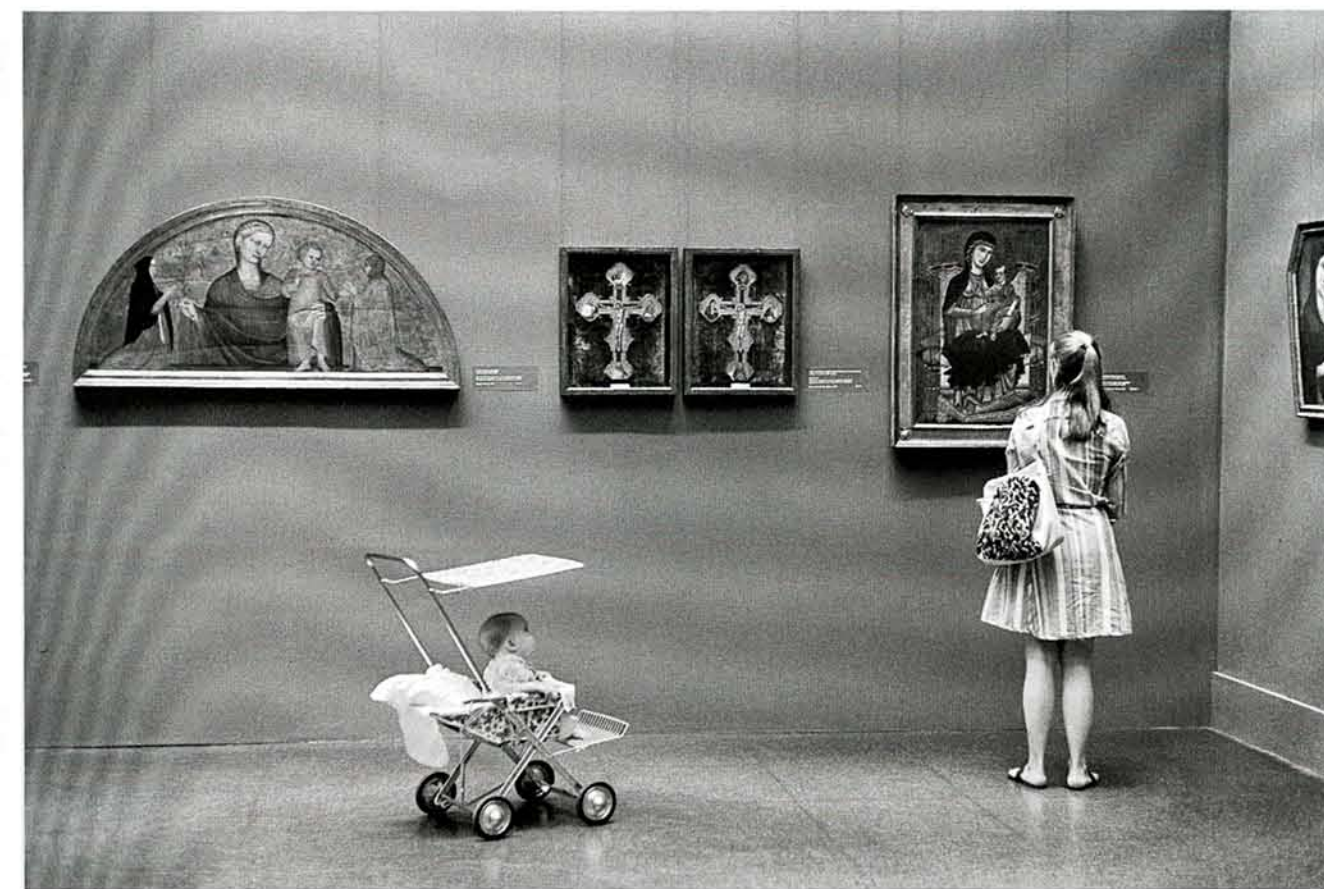
The artists' portraits form the natural centrepiece of the exhibit, their historical aura an obvious attraction for both aesthetes and collectors. (Who wouldn't want to hang an early Husain next to their early Husain?) But then, there's always something to the left and to the right of a centre, often more interesting. *A Critic's Eye* opens (on a wall to the left) with Richard's observation of his own family over two decades: photographs of his wife Rati, of his sons Pablo and Robin, and of he himself in the '50s and '60s. It closes (on the facing wall, to the right) with a series of single images of New York shot in one year in '70-'71. The heart of *A Critic's Eye* may lie in its iconic centrepiece, but it's these wings on the sides that make the show fly.

It's a quiet opening. A square picture of an unfinished painting propped up against the wall on an artist's table. The chair in the photograph stands vacant, only to be occupied by the artist in the next frame—it's Richard, introduced as painter, a self-portrait in his Almora studio. Another self-portrait follows, he is now seated at his desk in New Delhi, his left hand touching a typewriter, a cigarette in his right hand—Richard the writer. In successive images we are taken home, we are shown his kitchen, we pass the dining table, we enter his bedroom. The sun angles in through ventilators, burns through window screens, makes patterns on walls. We meet Rati, Pablo, Robin. We loiter with them in their domesticity, living their un-decisive moments, reading, sleeping, brooding, bathing, dressing, listening, smoking, alone together, their bodies part of a clean clutter. An enamel bucket, a bottle of Quink, a Sad Sack comic, an issue of *Thought*, a single-cassette player, a Tekka matchbox. Clues to a calendar, the objects mark rites of passage. A gecko watches. The boys grow old. We realise that Richard is a master of available light and has time on his side.

He reveals an ethereal stillness in his perfectly balanced compositions, a stillness, one suspects, that came from within, from the well of his creativity.

A traverse from the left of centre to the right is a leap of faith. People change. Their worlds change. Richard is an altogether different photographer in New York. At home he had the gentleness of a homeopath, in the USA he wields a scalpel. Gone is the classical square format, he now uses the more handy 35mm viewfinder. Obviously the balance shifts—his gaze is no longer fixed at a calm centre, there are counterpoints in the frame now which make the viewer's eye travel. A quickness of thought and a quicker shutter-finger capture an American way. A star-spangled sticker on a translucent windowpane separates a man-with-a-hat inside from a lock-and-chain outside, the lock says "Rustless". A woman walks on a street carrying bags in both hands, one arm raised to her shoulder, a bold sign above says "Merchandise Mart", she is barefoot. In a sunken alley a lady glances at her wristwatch in mid-step—above her, out of sight, someone stands on a rooftop-parking-lot, an unlit neon fish breaks the skyline. Inside the Metropolitan Museum a ponytailed woman in a short dress gazes at a classical Madonna-and-Child—from a pram standing two paintings away a baby gazes at her. This is decisive photography at its finest: intriguing, witty, ironic. One leaves the show a bit bewildered that such work could have stayed hidden from public view for so long.

Pablo Bartholomew is owed a debt of gratitude for preserving his father's archive and passing the baton to the team at Photoink who impress yet again with their commitment to the highest standards of production and design. If there's any bone to pick, it would have to be with the editorial compulsion to represent locational 'oldness'—Connaught Place in the '50s etc—where the photographs remain just that, mere representative documents. One could perhaps extend the essence of this complaint to the inclusion of a portrait or two of the celebrated artists in their youth. Take the name Husain



'At the Metropolitan Museum of Art', New York, 1970-71

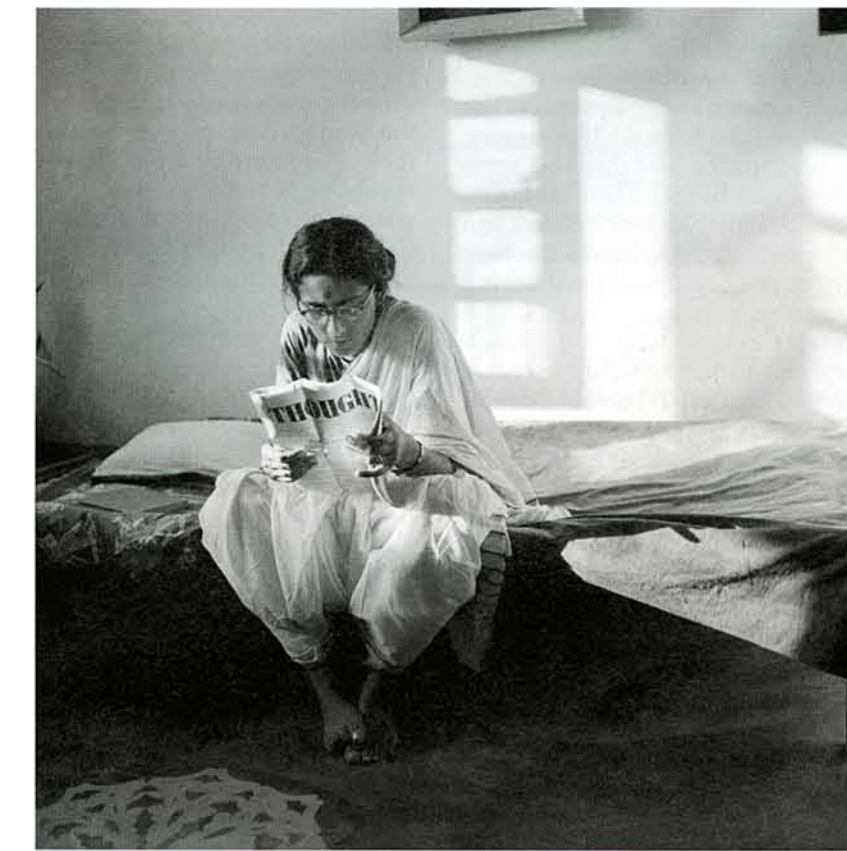
The sun angles in through ventilators, burns through window screens, makes patterns on walls. We meet Rati, Pablo, Robin. We loiter with them in their domesticity, living their un-decisive moments, reading, sleeping, brooding, bathing, dressing, listening, smoking, alone together, their bodies part of a clean clutter. An enamel bucket, a bottle of Quink, a Sad Sack comic, an issue of *Thought*, a single-cassette player, a Tekka matchbox. Clues to a calendar, the objects mark rites of passage. We realise that Richard is a master of available light and has time on his side. He reveals an ethereal stillness in his perfectly balanced compositions, a stillness, one suspects, that came from within, from the well of his creativity

away from the sharply-lit profile of the man and we are left with just another salon image. But then, it is an early Husain, and I guess one can't quarrel with that. What one can quibble about is the title given to the show and the book. Yes, Richard Bartholomew was a seminal critic, his muse may have been the (now celebrated) modern Indian artist, but his photographs do rise above informed documentation. Yes, he chronicled a promise of artistic greatness, but, equally, he gave form to the informality of his private life. To applaud his painterly and poetic sensibilities when viewing his austere photography would diminish this vision of his mind's eye. His name belongs to the roster of important Indian photographers without the benefit of a 'handicap'.

(Photographs courtesy the Estate of Richard Bartholomew)



'Pablo, Jeram Patel and Robin', Old Delhi, 1963



'Rati reading Thought', Old Delhi, 1958