

City of angles

Pablo Bartholomew's photographs capture his relationship with Mumbai, finds **Zeenat Nagree**.

The last time Pablo Bartholomew had a solo show in Delhi was in 2008, with *Outside In – A Tale of Three Cities*. We saw his friends, lovers and their wild parties, and glimpses of life in Delhi, Mumbai and Kolkata during the 1970s and 1980s. This fortnight, we'll see the pictures Bartholomew shot while wandering through Mumbai in between some of those parties in his new exhibition, *Chronicles of a Past Life – '70s & '80s in Bombay*. The Photoink show features over 100 photographs from one of India's most prominent photo-journalists – portraits of ordinary citizens going about daily chores as well as marginal characters like ragpickers, drug addicts and eunuchs. There are also portraits of film extras who Bartholomew encountered while working as a film still photographer.

"The city has always been an economic refugee's haven," said Bartholomew, who came to Mumbai in 1976 at the age of 21, to escape his troubled teenage past



and the shadow of his parents – art critic Richard Bartholomew and theatre personality Rati. "I too came to Bombay as a refugee to find myself both economically and in my work," he said.

Where Bartholomew's celebrated 2008 exhibition provided glimpses into his bohemian circle, this exhibition shifts the focus to the streets of Mumbai. In some of the photographs, Bartholomew confronts his subjects, evoking strong reactions from them: an old Parsi beggar couple hide their faces with a newspaper; a man in disheveled clothes clutches his tattered bag as he

stares into the camera. In other images, Bartholomew observes from a distance. Tiny figures of dabbawallas sort tiffins on a footpath. A porter loads boxes onto a bullock cart.

Chronicles of a Past Life marks the end of Bartholomew's use of black-and-white film. The romance of black-and-white photography heightens the tenderness of private moments like the one of a couple walking under one umbrella in a rain-washed street. There are smoke-filled blurs shot at drug dens and there is a starkness of life in the pictures of the homeless.

A few snaps of empty interiors present a view into the homes that served as the stage for the drug-and-alcohol-infused drama that was at the centre of *Outside In*. But it would be wrong to assume that these are the only pictures that offer a glimpse into Bartholomew's private world. The drug habits of his youth and the experience of being expelled from school at age 15 led him to seek out "the life of the marginal". A group of film extras dressed in gowns confront the camera as they wait between takes, a eunuch looks into a mirror as she applies lipstick and an old man concentrates on his next fix.

From the pictures that Bartholomew shot during the period, it seems that Mumbai gave him access to a variety of worlds – film, theatre, the streets – that might not have been possible in his hometown of Delhi. "It was there that in my twenties I found love, money, success," he said. "What else do you want?"

Chronicles of a Past Life is **ongoing** at Photoink. See Exhibitions.