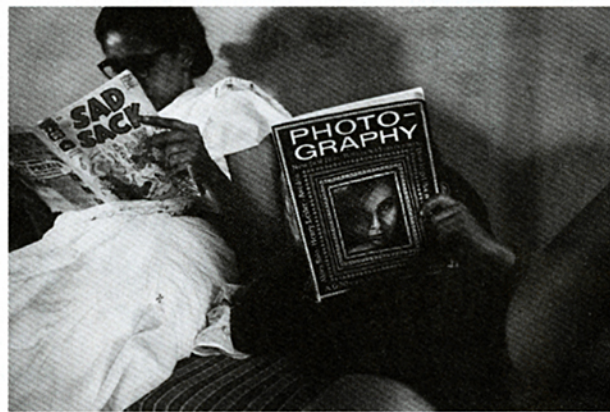


A LITTLE BIT OF MAGIC

Richard Bartholomew's poetic sensibilities animate his stunning photographic collection, says **TRISHA GUPTA**

ONE COMES away from the exhibition of Richard Bartholomew's photographs at Photoink Gallery, New Delhi, wondering whether it should really have been entitled 'The Critic's Eye'. It's true that Bartholomew was best known as an art critic. But he was also a curator (running the first museum of Tibetan art in Delhi and serving as Secretary of the Lalit Kala Akademi), a poet and a painter. And it's his poetic and painterly sensibilities, and his documentary skills, that really animate this stunning photographic collection.

The most accessible images are his portraits of some of India's famous artists, or of his family. One recurring composition is the artist with his painting: a pose in which we get an intense Ram Kumar, a gesticulating FN Souza, a quiet Biren De, and then Bartholomew himself. More unusual are the photographs of painters socialising: groups of serious-faced men in dark suits, thick-rimmed spectacles and precisely-held cigarettes, which would not have seemed out of place in a Calcutta boxwallah's office. Then there are a remarkable set of images of his wife Rati and his sons Pablo and Robin: bathing, drying clothes, sitting around, but most often sleeping or reading. This is a domesticity in which books and cameras are ubiquitous, even if people sleep on the floor. It's also, of course, an extremely unusual



Bartholomew captures a domesticity in which books and cameras are ubiquitous, even if people sleep on the floor

portrait of motherhood: Rati always has a book and a cigarette, even as she lies comfortingly close to her sleeping child. There is an intimacy to these images that is both startling and warming.

The same affectionate yet perspicacious eye captures Delhi, the city in which he spent 42 of his 59 years, after fleeing Burma during the 1942 Japanese occupation. But even as he records the

Picture perfect Krishen Khanna, Ram Kumar, Virender Kumar at a party (left); Rati and Pablo reading (below)

city's life as everyday experience, his gaze remains oblique, picking out the detail at the edge of the frame that both counters and sets off the central image. In one photograph, a man stands poised on the edge of a flat-roofed governmental building while construction workers below lift *malba*, and a man cycles slowly to work. In another, an umbrella-holding man picks up his pyjamas as he wades carefully through a crowded street.

Some of the most striking images are from Bartholomew's travels in the US in the 1970s. The human body, here, is framed against the landscape of consumer capitalism — not held by the environment, but divorced from it. But here, too, some of the most haunting images are ones that seem least dramatic at first glance. The girl at the Metropolitan Museum is a study in serenity — until you find that the culture-gazer is herself being looked at, by a baby in a pram. The woman with a suitcase, striding purposefully away, turns out to be barefoot.

The best thing about the exhibitionary form is that choices and placement conduct a magic dance of their own. When a plane flying over Delhi's fields reappears over an American cemetery, one image becomes bound to the other. It is such unexpected secret connections that make Bartholomew's oeuvre a little bit magic.

A Critic's Eye is on at Photoink Gallery, New Delhi, until February 28