

BLACK AND WHITE MAGIC

Pioneering art critic Richard Bartholomew was a closet photographer. His son Pablo brings the frames to light

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RICHARD Bartholomew (1926-85) was one of the finest art critics of the country. He watched a new nation's tryst with modernism as closely as he did a thoughtful Ram Kumar in his Gole Market Studio or an animated FN Souza in his New York apartment, or MF Husain leaning on a chair in Old Delhi. While Bartholomew the critic, and even the artist, was well known, not many knew about Bartholomew the photographer. His rolls of film remained tucked away until 1986 when his photographer son Pablo decided to sift through them and exhibit some at an exhibition.

"The intention was to keep his art in the public mind," recalls Pablo, as he looks at an old poster announcing that exhibition held over 20 years ago at Shridharani Gallery in Delhi and Jehangir Art Gallery in Mumbai.

A lot has changed since. Now Pablo has a lot more negatives to lay his hands on — negatives which, when developed, look like poetry in chiaroscuro, which recall the sensuousness of ordinary moments, which display the art, the unintentional choreography, of everyday life. "I only went through 4,000 negatives for the earlier show, now I have 17,000," he says, as he readies to put up a new exhibition of Bartholomew's work and release a book that will feature 58 images. Titled *A Critic's Eye*, this isn't just a son's ode to his father. It is also a testament to a bygone era, to a moonlit night in Old Delhi, c. 1956, which Bartholomew turns into something surreal, in which light reflected in ditchwater becomes truly numinous.



(Left) Bartholomew's self-portrait with Rati and Pablo, Almora, 1959; Pablo

He takes you to mist-wrapped Mussoorie, c. 1964, in which a row of sleeping rickshawpullers would have you wonder if they had been painstakingly choreographed. There is his summer studio in Almora, c. 1957, which despite being black and white somehow recalls Van Gogh's bedroom in Arles in all its yellow-and-blue glory. He takes you to a classroom tent in Gujarat and to Narinder Place on Delhi's Parliament Street. "Now, the building has been replaced by the DLF Centre," says Pablo, his gaze shifting from the book to the frames on the walls.

Suspended on white walls are pictures of a young Pablo often sharing a frame with brother Robin. There is Bartholomew's wife Rati sleeping on the floor, sitting on the edge of a bed, wrapping a sari — an intense intimacy pervading them despite the casualness of it all. "We were not conscious of the camera. It was part of our lives," recalls Pablo.

Perhaps, it was the same unobtrusive approach that allowed Bartholomew to catch artists in their least self-conscious moments. Bhuben Khakhar seems to be in the middle of a gig with a mike in his hand in a picture taken in Delhi in 1970. In the absence of any notes by Bartholomew, Pablo banked on memory and his father's friends to provide approximate dates.

Some of the images were displayed last year at Sepia International, New York, and in Christie's South Asian and Modern Contemporary Art Catalogue for the first time. And as the exhibition moves from Photoink, Delhi, to Chatterjee & Lal, Mumbai, later this year, Pablo is already looking at giving his dad's writing a renewed place through a publication. For now, though, the focus is on the exhibition that opens today.

The exhibition at Photoink is on till February 28

