

Art

Photosensitive material



COURTESY THE ESTATE OF RICHARD BARTHOLOMEW



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Still life Nasreen Mohamedi and (right) Krishnan, Jehangir Sabavala and Biren De at a party

Twenty-five years after his death, art critic Richard Bartholomew is making his Mumbai debut as a photographer, reports **Deepanjana Pal.**

Photojournalist Pablo Bartholomew doesn't know when his father, poet and art critic Richard Bartholomew began taking photographs. He thinks it must have been in the 1950s, when his father was a schoolteacher. "He was in his teens when his parents went back to Burma and he stayed on," said Pablo Bartholomew in a telephone interview from Delhi. "I was handed down a box camera but my father could have only begun photographing when he was able to buy his own camera. Everything he did, he did on his own."

By the time he became a father in 1955, Richard Bartholomew was taking pictures of everything and everyone around him. Bartholomew is best known for his insightful art criticism in newspapers and magazines like *The Times of India* and *Thought* and while his writings are a record of the beginnings of modern Indian art in the 1950s, his photographs offer a more intimate look at the artists and the times. "Seeing these photographs, it's not like I'm looking at it with a sense of marvel," said Pablo

Bartholomew. "There was a certain simplicity. Life thrived without money, material wealth and comfort. People were able to have good thoughts and be truly creative, not like the rock stars and prima donnas of now." This fortnight, Richard Bartholomew's photographs come on display at Chatterjee & Lal. They offer you a chance to see an Indian art world that is starkly different from its present avatar.

From *A Critic's Eye*, the title of this exhibition and the book of Richard Bartholomew's photographs that was released last year, it's clear that photography was something the art critic took seriously. Born in Burma in 1926, he came to India as a refugee with his family in 1942. He studied for his Bachelor's and Master's degrees at St Stephen's College. In 1958, he began his journalistic career when he joined *Thought*, a cultural affairs magazine. The photographs in *A Critic's Eye* begin from the mid-1950s and they show Bartholomew's desire to keep a record of how places looked and people behaved. Perhaps this came out of a desire to keep a tangible record of the life he had made for himself in India, after his experience of being a refugee and having nothing by which to remember his past in Burma.

Or maybe he sensed that the times he was working in were like a crucible for legends in the making.

Art was a passion and not a profession. Its young practitioners, like FN Souza, MF Husain and Ram Kumar, were full of dreams and ideas. Bartholomew's ambient photographs show artists who would become legends. FN Souza is captured mid-argument, wild-eyed and gesticulating. Nasreen Mohamedi grins at him, and us, warmly as she looks up from the book she was reading. The dapper Jehangir Sabavala is seen sandwiched a little awkwardly between SA Krishnan and Biren De. Smoke swirls around Ram Kumar, Krishen Khanna and Virender Kumar as they seem con-

They let the viewer become an invisible person in the photographed room.

sumed by a conversation at a party. MF Husain pulls at his hair while talking to someone on a telephone. "The artist portraits are echoes of history," said Pablo Bartholomew.

Richard Bartholomew died on January 11, 1985. He left behind about 17,000 negatives, which his son began archiving in 2007. "The photographs were something I knew, something I could tangibly work with," said Pablo Bartholomew, who as a boy would

help his father in the dark room and occasionally act as his assistant. As befitting one who dabbled in painting and was friends with artists, Richard Bartholomew's photographs are beautifully composed. The simplicity of the black and white shots show how carefully the photographer in Bartholomew aligned the lines and angles in a scene before him. In most of them, every detail is crisply rendered and all of them let the viewer become an invisible person in the photographed room or crowd. In many, the mood is intensely private and just the act of viewing them seems to invade the subject's privacy.

Bartholomew's photographs are wonderfully candid, but not casual.

From Richard Bartholomew's photographs, it's clear that he had decided his task was not simply to critically appreciate art but also to document the artists' lives. For Pablo, the importance of *A Critic's Eye* is the photographs' standing as historical documents. "They are a social comment of the lives people led," he said. "You forget little details, like the fact that Shridharani Art Gallery used to have windows in the late '60s and '70s. You've seen people grow old and die, and you sort of reassess them now." *A Critic's Eye opens on Tue Feb 9 at Chatterjee & Lal. See Photography. The book A Critic's Eye will be available at the gallery.*