

History's Eyes

Pablo Bartholomew, 52, is one of India's leading photographers. In 1975, when he was just 19, he was the first from South Asia to win the World Press Photo (WPP) Award. However, his name remains obscure to the wider community including curators. Nowadays, when it comes to the subject of Indian photography, people will marvel at the mammoth projects that Raghu Rai has done on the Taj Mahal and Mother Teresa, the intriguing compositions of Raghubir Singh's color photography, or Dayanita Singh's environmental portraits of India's elite—complete with traditional and post-colonial symbols of prosperity. The fact that Bartholomew's name is not more readily brought to mind is surprising, as he is one of Asia's most decorated photographers. He has won the WPP on two occasions and has served as a member of the jury, in 1999 and 2000. Prior to 2006, his work was already shown at Musée de l'Homme in Paris, the Asian Art Museum, San Francisco, Queens Museum of Art, New York, and at *Visa pour l'image*—the *International Photojournalism Festival* at Perpignan, France. Moreover, his client list—which includes *Time*, *Newsweek*, *National Geographic*, *LIFE*, *GEO*, *Stern*, *Le Figaro*, and *The New York Times Magazine*—is the envy for any photojournalist.

Despite all of this, Bartholomew's place in Indian photography is by no means assured. Not surprisingly, when he speaks about his work with his prominent clients, it is hard not to detect a sense of jadedness. "Now I'm in the mainstream, editors want and I the clichés that Bartholomew." "At it's nothing

After winning Award in 1985, himself increasingly that time, he was Liaison, one of the agencies in the world, its star photographer. sort of sneeze from widely reported," says was then the number Union and the leader Movement. Cuba was based in Delhi, there work to be done as



Pablo Bartholomew, from the *Early Work* series. Man with bag, Bombay 1976. All Images: Courtesy of Pablo Bartholomew / Netphotograph.com.

I understand what go out to produce they need," says the end of the day, spectacular." his second WPP Bartholomew found drawn into a rut. At working for Gamma-top photographic and he was very much "Since the 1980s, any India would be quite Bartholomew. "India one ally of Soviet of the Non-Aligned also a friend. Being was always a lot of a photographer."

By the time Bartholomew left agency work—around 1999—he had already "lost his eye." His sense of composition and colors had become so well oiled that the edginess and the "joy of seeing" in his earlier work was gone. In the summer of 2006, Bartholomew asked his assistant to scan the first 35,000 black-and-white negatives that he had shot as a young photographer. He had put them aside for 25 years, but now took the deliberate step of rediscovering and promoting what he terms as his personal work. A selection of these, entitled *Early Work* (1972–1981), was first shown at Holland's *Noorderlicht Photofestival* in 2006, when photographers from South and Southeast Asia were featured.

According to Bartholomew, he asked the curator Wim Melis why he had selected his work. Melis said that Bartholomew had shot those images from a definite and historical point-of-view. "To engage the fringe—a lot of young photographers are doing that right now to the extent that the themes have become clichés," says Bartholomew, relating the perspective of the curator. "But that was my life. I was in it."

An alternate selection then went to Dhaka-based *Cbobi Mela IV* and a different selection has just been shown at *Rencontres d'Arles 2007*. The program note of the latter explains: "Expelled from school for insubordination when he [Bartholomew] was fifteen, he discovered a far more fascinating world of weirdoes, druggies, and white hippies." The series on morphine addicts in India, which won him his first WPP Award, belongs to *Early Work*. At the same time, another of his self-initiated series *The Nagas – Marked with Beauty* (1989–2001) traveled to the *Angkor Photography Festival* in 2006 and has been featured in Tokyo's *Month of Photography* in 2007. A third set, *The Indian Emigré* (1987–1988), which Bartholomew sees as part of his personal canon, is now being exhibited as part of a show on Indian contemporary photography and video at the Newark Museum from September 2007 to January 2008. Recently *Asian Art News's Zhuang Wubin* spoke with Pablo Bartholomew about the vulnerabilities that he has felt over the past few years and his intense desire to renew himself as an artist.

Zhuang Wubin: While The Nagas – Marked with Beauty is essentially a documentary project about the people of Nagaland in northeast India, it was also an attempt to understand your roots. Your father was born in Dawoy (Tavoy), the southernmost part of Myanmar. If you wanted to explore the issue of identity, why didn't you pursue Myanmar as your personal work?

Pablo Bartholomew: Together with other Indians, my father and his family left Myanmar for India during the Second World War. They walked through Yangon (Bangkok) and Mandalay, and ended up at Ledo in northeastern Assam. Upon meeting the Naga people, my father's family was treated with kindness. They were given shelter and food. If there were no food in the village, animals or birds would be slaughtered for them. These were the bedtime stories that my father told me when I was younger. However, unreal my ideas of the Naga people might have been, there were certain images that I had conjured up since I was a kid. At the same time, I've always been fascinated by borders. India maintains such a long political boundary with other countries that it's hard not to be interested. In these areas, cultures are never fixed or stagnant.

In 1983, I was asked by *National Geographic* to attempt a story on Myanmar. We didn't succeed but I was still able to take a peep of the country. She was not a particularly rich or poor country but her peoples led a very traditional way of life. The temples and monasteries

were very vibrant but people would not talk or engage with me. When I returned in 1989, things seemed more desperate. Pimps started turning up at my hotel to offer young college girls for sex.



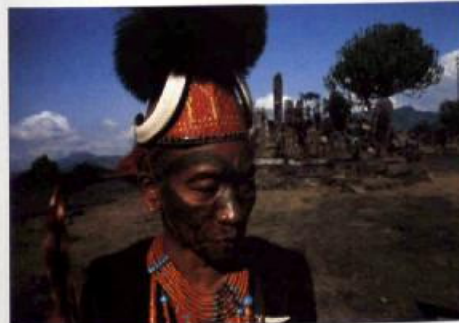
Pablo Bartholomew, from *The Nagas – Marked with Beauty* series. A temporary morung (though the institution still exists in some form, the actual buildings that served as the dormitories have long ceased to exist) had been built for an important ritual of the festival. The party of Yaong (Phom Naga) warriors would engage in mock battle with Chuchu (Ao Naga) warriors to capture their morung. In the past, both sides would perform the ritual with serious intention of emerging as the winner. In this case, the fighting was largely friendly and a stirring spectacle, evoking great excitement amongst the audiences. The palm fringes can only be worn after a successful headhunt.



Pablo Bartholomew, from *The Nagas – Marked with Beauty* series. Log drums were used for celebrating victory, taking of heads, mourning the passing of great men, and during the solar or lunar eclipses. Each occasion featured a different way of playing the drums. This ceremony is being performed after a gap of 30 years. When the log drum arrived at this destination, it was smeared with the blood of animals to appease it.

I haven't engaged Myanmar as a personal project because I have yet to find an angle to "enter" the country. I have 20 to 30 strong images of the country but I can't call this my personal work. Whenever I was in Myanmar, I felt like a highly trained professional looking in from an outsider's point-of-view. Anyone can do what I have done in Myanmar. But I doubt anyone understands the culture

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Pablo Bartholomew, from *The Nagas – Marked with Beauty* series. The powerful village of Shangnyu once existed for the Thendu Nagas (Lower Konyaks). In this village, a configuration of megaliths symbolizing fertility still exists. Every time a human head was taken, the village erected a stone to commemorate the trophy. The British banned headhunting in the 1930s. Before that, when the American missionaries converted many of the Naga tribes, they had already made headhunting and all other aspects of their animist belief taboo. Some villagers still retain the animist belief by hiding the human skulls that their ancestors had taken.



Pablo Bartholomew, from *The Nagas – Marked with Beauty* series. Worn by the Tangkhuls of India and Myanmar, this is one of the most spectacular headdresses amongst all the Naga tribes. Inter-marriage still exists between the northern Tangkhuls of Manipur in India and the Somra Nagas of Myanmar. The headdress is adorned with hornbill feathers, a brass dish, and human hair. The jaw-piece is made of wood embedded with red and white seeds.