

Lens is more

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tags: [Mumbai](#), [Nony Singh](#), [Pablo Bartholomew](#), [Photography](#), [Umrao Singh Sher-gil](#)

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My uncle nicked my granddad's old camera a little before I was born. This is why, until the age of three, every jiggle of my adorable baby fat has been faithfully recorded in my uncle's black and white photographs. After that he got bored, which is a good thing because the last thing I need is a record of how I lost my cuteness and gained adipose. Reading about *The Painted Photograph: Painted, Poised and of the Moment* at the National Gallery of Modern Art, I could be forgiven for thinking that my uncle's photographs could have made it to this exhibition. The exhibition sounded like it was a collection of quaint amateur photographs and some by Magnum photographers. If Dayanita's kiddie shots, taken by her mum Nony Singh, can make it to the walls of NGMA, then why not those taken of me by abovementioned uncle? After all, I was cuter than Dayanita Singh as a toddler, even if I do say so myself (she has an outsized head, as though her brain is double the size of a regular baby's). However there is, understandably, zero buzz about getting to see me making faces at the camera. Wait till I get the Booker. They'll be flocking to my uncle's doorstep. Until then, there's other people's domestic photography to ogle at.

The Painted Photograph is an awesome exhibition. History geeks could spend hours going through the vintage photographs from the Alkazi collection. The Cartier-Bresson photographs are not a random selection – each photograph is the pick of a famous writer and comes with the writer's comment on the photograph. Wonderful stuff. Nervy collectors could look at Dayanita Singh's very-affordable book *Sent a Letter* and plot how they can thunk the doll-like Dayanita for selling them larger versions of the photographs in the book at exorbitant prices. But all this is for serious people. For voyeurs, you get your fill of the cozy warmth of being let into another person's life with the photographs of Pablo Bartholomew, Nony Singh and Umrao Singh Sher-gil.

Nony's are sweetly tame next to the barely-contained mania of the men. She took pictures of her world with the acceptable eagerness of an enthusiastic daughter/ sister/ mother. There are hints of conspiracy and mischief in her photographs – like the one of her daughter wearing a bikini top only for this photograph because Mr. Singh banned her from wearing such stuff in public. She photographs her mother at a family

picnic and you can see the elegance and stiffness in her posture. Her sister sits on her husband's lap (ooh! the scandal!) and you realise the photograph has been taken in a place where they're sure no one will see this scene being photographed. Nice, black and white and very charming, much like the photographer himself who is beautiful, even in her old age, despite her wig of long, black hair. These pictures may not unsettle you but they will make you take another look at the photographs you have in your own albums. There might have been a Nony Singh in your family. My uncle, by the way, comes very close. Poor man, however, didn't have any sexy backs to shoot. Tragic.

I don't think too many families can boast the likes of Umrao Singh Sher-gil, who was known as a scholar and was a very talented photographer. He may have been mildly nuts, from the look of things. His self-portraits are haunting and bizarre. Wearing a little loincloth, Sher-gil strikes the pose of Michaelangelo's David while looking more like Moses. I don't know precisely how old he was then but he was old enough for his hair and flowy beard to have gone totally white. There's such pride in his stance despite the ridiculousness of looking like a naked fakir in the richly done-up room he is standing in. In one of the self-portraits from his youth, I swear he looks like [Baba Ramdev](#), just weirder. I kid you not.



Sher-gil was clearly an avid photographer who photographed only his family, that too his second wife and their children. He didn't take pictures of the world outside; he didn't even take pictures of his first wife and he barely mentioned his photography in his letters. But he certainly knew what he was doing with the camera. He played with blurs, double exposures and other modern little gimmicks cleverly and sensitively. His pictures let you into his world, literally. Sher-gil shows us his household, his daughter Amrita's studio, the way everyone dressed and dressed up, how he himself worked. An Indo-Hungarian world at the turn of the century, built of scraps in Hungary, Paris and India. Sher-gil himself inhabits this world with an air of poetic melancholy. His self-portraits show him loosening up over the years. From almost theatrical poses he begins looking at the camera like we look at dear friends and the box is allowed to see him in carefully-choreographed naturalism (like the ones of him working or playing with his grandson). Sher-gil was also suicidal and depressive apparently. Haven't the faintest why, though I suspect Amrita Sher-gil dying at 28 and his wife committing suicide would have something to do with it.



Most people probably thought that the pictures by Henri Cartier Bresson and other Magnum photographers would be the high points of this show. I can't remember much about any of the Magnum images, including those by Bresson. What I do remember is standing in front of a photograph called "Pooh and Pablo", wondering if I've ever kissed someone with this beautiful sweetness and wishing I'd had the sense to date someone who would have wanted to remember how we kissed with a photograph like this. But then, I suppose you have to be as hauntingly beautiful as the Pooh in question (there are a number of photographs of her) even though in this particular picture, Bartholomew gives hope to all us romantics by zooming in so close that it could be any one of us with those lips, tongue and line of fine hair along her chin. It's a Mills & Boon moment at its tingliest, even if Bartholomew looks nothing like a dashing hero. Didn't stop him from hooking up with some stunning women.

The photograph is part of "[Outside In – A Tale of Three Cities](#)" by Pablo Bartholomew, one of our leading photojournalists. Taken by Bartholomew in the 70s, soon after being kicked out of school for having drugs on his person, this is the beginning of his photography. The 70s are frozen in to gorgeous, smoke-ridden life in these photographs. His world is made up of heavy-lidded women who puff on joints and scrawny men who dance wearing bell bottoms and argue about vaguely-leftist ideology. It's tough to believe these outstanding photographs are taken by a kid playing around with his camera. "Pooh and Pablo" is not the best picture in this set – he has some absolute gems here – but it's sensual, fuzzy with playful arousal and so intimate that

you can almost taste the kiss just standing in front of the photograph. This is the pinnacle of domestic photography as far as I'm concerned and those of us who haven't dated photographers will curse this omission. Those of us who have dated photographers who didn't take pictures like these of us would probably want to kill the ex-s or just imagine themselves in the pictures, instead of lovelies like Pooh. You can't get press your eye any closer to the keyhole than these photographs.



Being a voyeur is frustrating business, especially since this show will draw you back to it again and again. And, as a friend pointed out to me drily as we stood in front of a gorgeous, night-shadowed, post-coital nude by Bartholomew, you don't even get dildos in this country.