

The shooter

Pablo Bartholomew is perhaps best known for his moving pictures of the Bhopal gas tragedy, one of which won the World Press Picture of the Year award in 1985. His photographs of white hippies and heroin addicts in Delhi may also be familiar. For this show, however, Bartholomew rummaged through an archive of black-and-white negatives taken during his early years as a photographer. He came up with an "insider's" glimpse into the life of three cities in the 1970s and 1980s: Delhi, Kolkata and Mumbai. Before Bartholomew's old girlfriends, family, school friends and urban youth haunt the walls of the National Museum this fortnight, **Sonal Shah** spoke with him about this photographic flashback.

To which cities does the title, *Outside In... A tale of three cities: The Seventies and Eighties* refer to?

The title refers to Delhi, Bombay and Calcutta. And I'd prefer the names of the cities to be spelled in this manner, as they were known by those names then.

And why "outside in"?

I have always been the Outsider with an In on things. It's a combination of my mixed (up) origins. It probably comes from the marginalisation I faced after being ousted from school.

Do you think your portrayal of Delhi in the 1970s will come as a surprise to anyone?

Yes, to a large degree. Very little or no documentation of the period was done in the manner that I did it. So it brings about a feeling that is familiar and yet forgotten. And looking at these pictures – they evoke these familiarities that are embedded in all of us here in India. For the westerner who looks at



Bartholomew, taking a light reading



"Adore"



"St Stephen's band"

these images, it may give them some insight about the life and times back then.

Does this show dig up any old bones in terms of prominent personalities? Any revealing portraits?

This is not a personality-driven show. It is about friends and my family. My diary! And I did speak to as many of them as I could find about being included in the show. There may be other shows that I may do in the future that could be more personality-driven.

How are these prints different from your photojournalistic work?

They are about my world: the family, friends and the self. The dialogues here are personal, yet they connect up to something larger and become universal for the viewer.

And the work was done for myself. It's basically a shared experience of a certain time and feeling. My journalistic work focuses on the external, public world of India: politics, natural or man-made disasters, etc. So the two don't have an explicit meeting point as such.

Your thoughts on the recent visibility of Indian photography as art?

It was inevitable after the price of paintings went sky high. This is good, if it happens in a healthy manner, but I don't really know how it's going as I'm not selling anything as yet.

What kind of workshops are you involved in?

I ran the World Press Photo workshops in India between 2001-03 and have been doing lecture tours in American universities recently.

Do you still shoot on film or have you gone digital?

I work with both film and digital. It's about 50-50 right now.

Have you seen Delhi change over the last 30-40 years? How?

Sure, it's my home town. Lots of things have improved, but there are so many issues that have just been swept under the carpet and that's going to cause a real problem. There is no long-term thought. Just quick fixes.

Do you think some of the raunak that's visible in your Delhi photos is gone now from the city? Or is that just nostalgia talking?

Every generation has their high point. The most visible change may be the way we all dressed then. Today's generation is too copycat Western with all the labels adorned over their clothes. There seems to be little place for the wonderful textiles that exist in our country. On another note, the kind of music we listened to... Like, the Beatles, Doors, Janis Joplin and Jimi Hendrix were making music and we were receiving it right then. Today's generation still listens to that music too... but without the context and the immediacy. I was very influenced by that music – in 1973 and '74, I did some cutting-edge multimedia shows with music, light effects, multi-screen slide shows, experimental film and dance based on *Sergeant Pepper...*, *Tommy* by the Who and *Jesus Christ Superstar*.

You have worked across genres as a photographer. Which of them is closest to your heart?

The genre that's closest to me is actually the documentary work that's in this exhibition. And all this excavation of my work is an attempt to go back and revisit some of those old dialogues.

What advice would you give to young photographers, especially those working in an urban setting?

Just shoot the shit out of everything around you.

See *National Museum in Photography* for details.