



**Pablo Bartholomew**  
*Self portrait, after a trippy night, the morning after, in my room, New Delhi, 1976.* Courtesy the artist

**Pablo Bartholomew**  
*Maya Smoking, Zarine with a Friend, New Delhi, 1975.* Courtesy the artist

**Pablo Bartholomew**  
*My Parents Richard and Rati at Home, New Delhi, 1975.* Courtesy the artist

## The Way We Were

Pablo Bartholomew's youthful photographs of family and friends dismantle commonplace scenes of adolescent conviviality and create a disarray of the senses, of sensible form, until what is left is a trance-like condition of diffuse ardour. Born (in 1955) and brought up in Delhi, he was a hobo-misfit in the sense given to it by the hippie generation. Expelled from high school for drug taking, Bartholomew is an autodidact: in his teens he produced images that are strangely 'pure' in their compassionate reciprocity between photographer and subject; his subsequent career as a photojournalist is an audacious self-making in the world at large.

Nurtured in a cosmopolitan-bohemian family,<sup>9</sup> Bartholomew first presents himself as a 'trippy' boy seated frontally with legs apart and torso leaning forward. Looking with stoned eyes into his own lens as into a mirror, he fixes his image with narcissistic regard even as he fixes upon us, viewing the image, his indifference. Grouped around this 'smashed' image – at once narcissistic, mocking and direct – are images of his friends. Yusuf in a crumpled coat stands beside a drinks trolley sharply side-lit against a bare wall; a character in their youth theatre, he is a tramp, a waiter in a dope-den, ready to slip into the soul-fatigue only the young suffer. Dancers, sleepers, dreamers recur in limpid choreography: swaying, long-haired schoolmates; dandy trios high on hash,

collapsed on a hotel-bed. Bartholomew's chiaroscuro images bespeak a kind of 'truth' about the almost virgin body, even given that virginity was as likely mocked by these free-generation kids in the changing Indian metropolis. Conversely, their imagined promiscuity unfurls worlds.

<sup>9</sup> Pablo's father, Richard Bartholomew (1926–1985), a Burmese émigré domiciled in Delhi, was inscribed in the Indian art world as a key critic. He was also a remarkably sensitive photographer, a circumstance crucial to Pablo's life and work. See *Richard Bartholomew: A Critic's Eye* (New York: Chatterjee & Lal, Photoink and Sepia International, 2009). The exhibition catalogue has a poignant text by Aweek Sen, and an Afterword by Pablo Bartholomew. Pablo's mother, Rati, taught literature at Delhi University and was active in the Delhi theatre scene. Pablo's sophistication comes from a family environment that offered access to modernist art, theatre, cinema and photography.

The *sfumato* effect of Bartholomew's black and white photographs comes from shooting in natural light, inside homes, under weak bulbs, or in dusky exteriors and under dim streetlights. It comes from working with cheaper film pushed to the limit; from a tonal range devised in his father Richard Bartholomew's home-made darkroom. Adjusting technical means to aesthetic ends, he seems to privilege a sedimented image that denotes becoming, as it does mortality. In the cycle of life and death so readily acted out by the young, what remains tantalizing is the lightness with which the existential burden of death is nurtured, coddled, tossed and relayed.

These early photographs are at the core of Bartholomew's other 'outsider' images taken in the years between 1972 and 1982.<sup>10</sup> His reach expands from gentle dereliction to harsher realities: a grim portrayal of a junky friend, a Danish woman,<sup>11</sup> shooting up in one of central Delhi's opium dens where he himself hung out after school; eunuchs in the neighbourhood and, in Bombay a little later, film extras, prostitutes, ragpickers and, at the end of the road, human leftovers abandoned to the metropolitan street. He continued with self-assigned projects, including a fine series on Chinese working-class migrants in Tangra (Calcutta) that confirmed his affinities beyond the self-exiled to marginalized communities and classes. These are, of course, classical genres of photography – the socially erased figure being integral to, almost immanent in, the camera's eye. If in Bartholomew's oeuvre this body of work claims a special place, it is because it is part of his teenage self-making: seen in conjunction with his images of love and friendship, it acquires a keen vulnerability. It is special because he was among the earliest Indian photographers to realize and expose social circumstances within an existential continuum – as figures of abjection, alienation, intransigence and struggle. And they are also, in a more generic reading of human suffering, precursors to his subsequent career of international photojournalism, tracking natural disasters and political conflict across the globe: always on the road, fast on the draw and supplying dire images formatted for a story-cum-photo-essay to the avid world of news magazines.<sup>12</sup>

Almost three decades later, in 2007, Bartholomew presented these early photographs.<sup>13</sup> Ironically, they seem to contain no 'story', no singular narrative valorizing 'the portrait of the artist as a young man'. An eccentric record, they make a pact with memory in a durational mode. Its

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10 During this time he earned his living from photo-assignments with NGOs, theatre, fashion and films. He did the stills for Satyajit Ray's *Shatranj ke Khilari*; and later, in 1982, for Richard Attenborough's *Gandhi*.

11 In 1975, at age 20, Bartholomew won First Prize at the World Press Photo for his series on morphine addicts titled *Time is the Mercy of Eternity*.

12 Starting with 120-film he went on to 35mm cameras; his photojournalist work is entirely in colour, and he moved to the digital format in 2000. For 20 years, from 1983, Bartholomew was attached to Gamma Liaison, a Paris/New York-based photo agency. Early in his career, he covered the Bhopal gas-leak tragedy involving giant corporates (Union Carbide), where his picture of a baby's burial became the 1984 Picture of the Year in the World Press Photo Award. Key assignments and international recognition came fast and Bartholomew became a widely known figure in the photojournalist genre.

(retrospective) contemporariness betokens an elegiac afterlife, producing before our eyes the very paradox of the photographic image. Lodged in the precipitate moment of 'taking' the picture is the motif of time that is already always past. And though it appears for that reason to be irredeemably nostalgic, the past as image (or perhaps as certain select images) offers compulsive renewal. An image recording the way we were becomes in the present an occasion to lure the 'sweet bird of youth' into perpetuity. This looped punctuality, this deferred promise scales, in its modest leap, images of world disasters Bartholomew later tracked. It corresponds, instead, with the utopian commitment particular to the historical moment to which these pictures belong. What makes Bartholomew's early corpus the more telling is the fact that the 1960s and 1970s were indeed committed to a regeneration of the world with and through the spirit of youth.

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13 Bartholomew recently scanned, showed and published 70 photographs (selected from thousands of negatives). *Outside In, 70's and 80's, A Tale of 3 Cities* (Delhi/Mumbai/New York: Bodhi Art, 2008), is a 'visual diary of his teenage life', spanning the years 1972-80 (between ages 17 and 25). It has an excellent text by Aveek Sen.