

Dear diary

Art



I spy Nony Singh photographs her daughter, Dayanita

Seven exhibitions from Recontres d'Arles gives Mumbai a chance to see some rare photographs, says **Deepanjana Pal**.

Arles is a picturesque city in the south of France with some serious arty connections. This is where Vincent van Gogh painted some of his most famous paintings, including "Starry Night Over the Rhone". Couturier Christian Lacroix is an Arlesian. More relevant to us this fortnight, the city has since 1969 hosted Recontres d'Arles, a festival celebrating photography from around the world. It is "the big cheese of photography festivals," as photojournalist Pablo Bartholomew described it. Last year, one of the 50 exhibitions on display at Arles was a selection of work by some of India's most famous photographers, including Dayanita Singh and Bartholomew. This fortnight, *The Photograph: Painted, Posed and of the Moment* will show some of the collections that were on display at Arles along with photographs by Henri Cartier Bresson and other photographers from Magnum, the famous photo

co-operative started by Bresson. This show is part of a month-long cultural festival French institutions are organising this year.

The Photograph: Painted, Posed and of the Moment is divided into seven parts. The photographs from the Alkazi Collection and the family albums of Umrao Sher-Gil, Amrita Sher-Gil's father, make up the vintage photograph section. Domestic photography takes on the mantle of fine art in pictures taken by Nony Singh, Dayanita Singh's mother. Dayanita Singh also shows photographs, but in the form of her book, *Sent a Letter*, which is a set of travelogues in seven Indian cities. Bartholomew goes back in time to when he was a budding photographer.

Uniting these shows is the idea of using photographs as a diary. Ceremonies of the princely states are documented in the images from the Alkazi

Collection. *His Misery and his Manuscript* is Umrao Sher-Gil's record of his relationships with his family. Nony Singh remembers the past with her photographs as does her daughter with her exhibit of accordion books. In *Outside In - A Tale of Three Cities*, Bartholomew documents his rogue teenage years when he hung out in what Alain Willaume, curator of the India show at Arles, described as "lost paradises and chemical sub-paradises". The photographs by the Magnum fraternity are a diary of India over the past six decades.

An intimacy in these images draws the viewer in along with the voyeuristic element of being allowed into private worlds. Here's a chance to see Amrita Sher-Gil and Dayanita Singh as young women. In *Outside In* are Bartholomew's ex-girlfriends and the drugged out junkies he encountered.

Vivan Sundaram, Amrita Sher-Gil's nephew, curated his grandfather's photographs with Devika Daulet Singh. Interestingly, Umrao Sher-Gil took no pictures of his first wife with whom he had an arranged marriage and there are few mentions of his photography in his letters. Yet, Sher-Gil avidly photographed his family from his second marriage and himself too. Sundaram finds the self-portraits particularly interesting. "There's an attempt to explore the self and the relationship between viewer

and object in his photographs which are very modern concerns," he said. Equally modern are Sher-Gil's experiments with techniques in photography, like blurs and double exposures.

It's the absence of all signs of modernity that makes Nony Singh's photographs delightful, especially when seen with her captions. Singh's careful compositions are rich with ambience and take in details of locations and dresses that date her photographs. *Nony and Nixi* includes photographs Singh had taken as a child, like the one of her mother, and ones that she choreographed with various members of her family, like her sister and then her eldest child, Nixi, whom we know as Dayanita Singh.

The hippie vibe comes back to life with Bartholomew's photographs of Delhi, Mumbai and Kolkata from the 1970s and '80s. Bartholomew was expelled from school in his late teens after he was found with drugs on his person. He used this time to channel his curiosity about this changing world into photography, using friends, family and other familiars as subjects. "It was a great time," remembered Bartholomew. "For whatever reason - drugs, music, whatever - we were connected with something beyond our political boundaries." See *National Gallery of Modern Art in Exhibitions*.



Inner circle Adore by Pablo Bartholomew