

Pablo Bartholomew: Outside In, Thomas Erben Gallery, New York



Much like the allure of recent period television shows such as *Mad Men* that capture moments of limbo, moments of change and moments in history that will never return, Pablo Bartholomew's exhibition of black and white photographs *Outside In*, at the **Thomas Erben Gallery**, New York, do just that. Set in New Delhi, Bombay and Calcutta (long before the cities came to be known as Mumbai and Kolkata), Bartholomew's images from 1974-1977 are a paean to his generation.

A self-taught maverick whose interest in photography began after he was expelled from high school in the early 1970s, Bartholomew took photographs of his friends and family much like his own father Richard Bartholomew who was a teacher, poet, critic and photographer at the time. Contrary to Western conceptions of a country steeped in tradition, he presents a milieu of middle class Indians in their 20s who were influenced by the influx of hippies and an era that brought western music, mirth and a strong whiff of dope. Intertwined with one of the most difficult moments in Indian history when the prime minister Indira Gandhi declared emergency and suspended civil rights in the country, his pantheon of youngsters, swayed by the glory of youth, smoked marijuana, relaxed, danced and lapsed into oblivion.

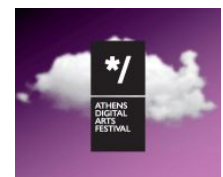
Mood is paramount to the charm of Bartholomew's imagery. At once brooding and nostalgic, his cast of characters, often encapsulated in perfect combination of shadows and dull lighting, are immersed in the moment. In *Katey and Nasser*, Bombay, 1977, a woman is lost in her narcissistic gaze in the mirror, while two men, oblivious of their surroundings, embrace intimately in the background. Similarly, in *Nommie dancing at a party at Koko's*, New Delhi, 1975, and Nizamuddin gang hanging out at *Ruhan's pad*, New Delhi, 1978, time stands still as these vignettes of merriment and ease are cherished. Bartholomew's images are a veritable triumph in the way he conveys the palpable unambiguousness of his friends' carefree spirit.

Yet his female protagonists that take center stage are less forthcoming. Although these spirited women dance and smoke with careless abandon, they appear to be enigmatic. In *Veena in my kitchen at the*



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Jangpura house, New Delhi, 1976, pensive Veena looks into the camera, but one eye is obscured by dark shadows as she stares ahead, her head tilted, unswerved by the candid camera. *Pooh in Bed*, Bombay, 1975, and *Pooh with Poster*, Bombay, 1974, are equally ambiguous. Pooh the woman in question, and ostensibly the love of Bartholomew's life, is hard to decipher. Her impenetrable gaze directed at the photographer seems devoid of emotion. Is she being evasive and nonchalant, or is she being put upon to pose? Poised at a juncture when educated Indian women would increasingly enter the work force, Bartholomew's strong female crew embodies that change.

Like all period imagery, Bartholomew's photographs of a well to do family relaxing, or the craze for motorcycle escapades in the 1970s, and the solar eclipse televised in 1969 are an ode to history, and an important cultural period in a country that has changed rapidly in the last few decades. It brings memories of the past-the outside-in. Combined with his self portraits, and the unnervingly sensuous quality of a young girl sprawled on a bed in *Aadore*, Bombay, 1976, that is reminiscent of Sally Mann's controversial images of her children, Bartholomew's photographs from the 1970s are precursors to a long and illustrious career of one of India's leading photographers.

Outside In, until 20 June, **Thomas Erben Gallery**, New York

Bansie Vasvani

Credits

1. Self Portrait, New Delhi, 1975, gelatin silver print, edition of 10.

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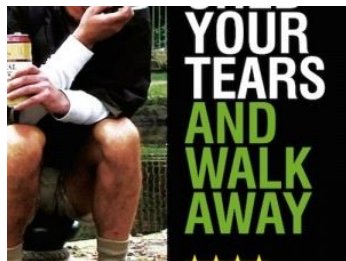
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