

From Current Issue

[EDITOR'S LETTER](#) The Upside of Social Networking

[ESSAYS](#) Hollow Monuments

[PROFILES](#) Mao Xuhui

[FEATURES](#) Wafaa Bilal

[REVIEWS](#) Three Inaugural Exhibitions at the Arab Museum of Modern Art (Mathaf)

[REVIEWS](#) Bani Abidi

[REVIEWS](#) Takashi Murakami

[REVIEWS](#) Ai Weiwei

[REVIEWS](#) Elad Lassry

[PROJECTS](#) Tomoo Gokita

[Table of Contents](#)

[Web Exclusives](#)

[Archive](#)

[Subscribe](#)

CHRONICLES OF A PAST LIFE: '70S & '80S IN BOMBAY PABLO BARTHOLOMEW

HEMANT SAREEN
SAKSHI GALLERY

INDIA

The celebrated Indian photojournalist Pablo Bartholomew is best remembered for his deeply moving and shocking image of an ashen-faced head of a dead child peeking above ground while the rest of his body is being buried. The child was a victim of the leakage of a lethal gas from the Union Carbide factory in Bhopal in 1984, resulting in a tragedy that killed and maimed thousands. Bartholomew's more personal series, "Outside In: A Tale of Three Cities," is a melancholic, autobiographical account of the lost generations of Delhi, Bombay and Calcutta of the 1970s and the 1980s.

Richly toned, black-and-white portraits of young urban Indian women and men living out their notions of a furtive, hungry, and precarious modernity alternate with images of grim, sparse cityscapes. Even as they outside languish in spaced-out torpor or exhausted ennui, the personae in these images seem to have been caught by the camera in acts of escape—their attempted, short-lived flight from their repressive social milieus, making "Outside In" a layered document of a self-absorbed India, insulated and desperate like US-embargoed Cuba. Apart from the teenage Pablo's skilled grasp of the 35mm idiom and dark-room techniques, "Outside In" shows an equally natural talent for not just constructing a pictorial narrative but getting the inside story, which became the cornerstone of his high-flying photojournalistic career.

In the images displayed at Sakshi Gallery, "Chronicles of A Past Life: '70s & 80s in Bombay," Bartholomew adopts the same insider's approach. He succeeds in teasing intimacy out of the notoriously impersonal city. His Bombay looks like a large courtyard bustling with everyday life: a man sleeps under the blue sky on the Chowpaty Beach; workers pull down an upended truck watched by a large crowd; wizened, old men sit in the drawing-room-like lobby of the Asiatic Library; or the momentary communion between him an aged man dressed in an ancient, tatty three-piece suit who silently protests at being photographed. These images would enrich any photographic archive of the city's past.

However, the works falter when measured up with the rubric under which they are assembled. Many images deal neither with anachronisms, nor are they strong exemplars of evocation of "A Past Life." The show seems to rely too much on Bartholomew's reputation for sensational imagery and viewers' misplaced nostalgia for a time when they felt unburdened by the guilt of consumption they now bear. India's state-sponsored poverty, brought about by the adoption of a Soviet-style command-and-control economy, forced an immaterialism on citizens that tragically resonated with the popular nihilism and asceticism of Indian spirituality. In the end, Bartholomew's images have been trumped by the eternal, unchanging India—but not because he did not engage his surrounds deeply enough. It is simply that the ongoing transformation of the country is so intrinsic, it will be some time before it manifests itself as a brand-new India.



PABLO BARTHOLOMEW, *Taxi Driver With Passengers*, Bombay, 1979, archival pigment print, 16 x 24 in. Courtesy Sakshi Gallery, Mumbai.



PABLO BARTHOLOMEW, *Cold Drinks and Ice Cream Parlour*, Bombay, 1979, archival pigment print, 16 x 24 in. Courtesy Sakshi Gallery, Mumbai.