

## Two Tones of Past by Deepanjana Pal

### CHRONICLES OF A PAST LIFE - '70s & '80s in Bombay

Sakshi Gallery (Mumbai)

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Mumbai's art district is full of black and white nostalgia at the moment. At the National Gallery of Modern Art (NGMA), a retrospective of photographer Homai Vyarawalla's work is on display. A short walk away is Pablo Bartholomew's "Chronicles of a Past Life" an exhibition of photographs Bartholomew took when he first came to Mumbai back in the 1970s. Vyarawalla's photographs span eventful decades and are records of landmark moments, like Lord Mountbatten's last public appearance before leaving India, the first flag hoisting at Red Fort on August 16th, 1947, and a laughing Dalai Lama from a trip to Sikkim in 1956.

Vyarawalla is the first woman press photographer in the Indian media. She wanted to be a painter as a young woman but turned to photography because it was a more stable and lucrative career. Along with historic events, her photographs also record an old-world India, one in which New Delhi residents went fox hunting and a time when Mumbai wasn't crowded. The exhibition is beautifully displayed, taking the viewer to press boxes as well consular parties. Seeing the lives of Delhi's expat society alongside images of Mahatma Gandhi and Jawaharlal Nehru is fascinating, and every frame underscores how unrecognizable the newly postcolonial India was from its contemporary avatar. Vyarawalla's photographs are a priceless record of the times she's witnessed, particularly because they show everyday moments as well as those that made headline news.



In contrast, Bartholomew's photographs are intriguing for how recognizable many of Mumbai's neighborhoods are, despite the gap of almost four decades. "Chronicles" is a very personal record. It shows how Bartholomew discovered and became familiar with south Mumbai. The first set of photographs you see upon entering are the most abstract of the selection. They reflect how the city must have appeared to Bartholomew: a tight pattern of multi-storied buildings, angles and geometric shapes. In the first room are photographs that show the most easily accessible city imagery. There are cars, people in cafés and bustling streets. As you go deeper into the gallery, more closeted and shuttered parts of the city are revealed. Bartholomew's photographs take the viewer into people's homes, libraries, museums and darker, edgier parts of Mumbai. With him, you enter film shoots, opium dens and the red light district; you stand close enough to a fight between two boys in jaunty hats to be hit by a wayward punch.

The only problem with Bartholomew's show is one of excess. There are too many photographs crowded into the gallery. This means some of the photographs aren't quite as strong as their neighbors and consequently seem superfluous (the shot of Amitabh Bachchan lounging around during a shoot, for example). Also, in a number of cases, strong photographs get crowded out and don't have enough white space around them. The Vyarawalla selection is better edited in comparison and the expansive space of NGMA ensures the photographs don't seem to be squeezed together.

It's interesting to see Vyarawalla and Bartholomew's shows one after the other because they show two distinct approaches. Vyarawalla's work is elegant and marked with deliberation and a sense of graceful quietude. Bartholomew's, on the other hand, have the energy and sharp spontaneity of classic street photography. As a press photographer, Vyarawalla's focus is upon creating a record through her images. It is the content of the image rather than its aesthetics that is the object of her attention. She looks to capture details, of décor, relationships and spectacles in every frame. Even when the photograph shows a candid moment, like Jawaharlal Nehru lighting Lady Mountbatten's cigarette, there's never any doubt about Vyarawalla as observer.



Bartholomew's work, on the other hand, is intimate. People don't pose for his photographs but they are captured unexpectedly at moments so that it feels as though the person is looking straight at you or avoiding your gaze, rather than Bartholomew's camera. Rather than people or markers of time, what seems to catch Bartholomew's eye is the way the lines and curves of the city align themselves to create gorgeous frames. Light and shadow carve out spaces, reveal people. Perhaps this is what makes Bartholomew's Mumbai curiously familiar (in many parts of downtown Mumbai, the geometry hasn't changed that drastically).

In an age when digital and cell phone technology have conspired to turn every other person into an amateur photographer, it's well worth seeing shows like Vyarawalla's and Bartholomew's. They are a reminder of how much there is to document in everyday life, and how much rigor the medium demands of the serious practitioner.

-- Deepanjana Pal

(All images courtesy of Sakshi Gallery, NGMA, and the artists.)

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