

"It's a memory of a past life, but it's not nostalgia". Pablo Bartholomew and a city that still is Bombay, at least in spirit. FIRST CITY, back in the 80s, with the photographer

CHRONICLES



“A

nything that's 25 years old gets romanticised inevitably." A *Coffee and Cigarettes* vignette seems to be playing out here at Photoink, where we meet Pablo Bartholomew, to talk about his

exhibition of photographs depicting Bombay from the late 70s and 80s, on view at the gallery till February 25. Describing his view of the city through his camera as "straightforward" (most, including us, would beg to differ, of course), Pablo would rather distance himself from any accusations of charm, "I don't know if Bombay is charming", he says, only half-smiling, "There're a lot of Art Deco buildings here in Karol Bagh too, but again, I don't know if you'd call them charming?" He gives into the laughter that was lurking around on his lips, amidst sips of the coffee, and shrugs, "My way of looking is not nostalgic or romantic, I feel."

Blame the era then. In Bombay at the time, Pablo was doing film work ("it wasn't called Bollywood then"), creating photo stills for production companies, following which he got into advertising ("very stupid campaigns I was doing, lots of saris"). It was then that Pablo started taking the images that surround us today, recreating the past of a city in the present of another, "I made my money, but it was drudgery. I used to have a lot of down time, which gave me time to walk through the city, explore it, photograph it, which gave me pleasure." Pablo came back to Delhi in the late 80s ("By 87, I'd rented. By 89, I'd bought, where I still am"), and the shift became a signifier to a new phase in his career, as he gradually became the country's prime photo-journalist, accompanying Rajiv Gandhi on his tours; producing images often described as iconic (symbolic almost, of the Bhopal gas tragedy, Mother Teresa's funeral, etc). Pablo describes the era, one that's been immortalised as *Hazaaron Khwaishain Aisi* for generations to follow ("Well, there was a photographer in it called Pablo, and when I asked Mr Mishra, he said, 'yaar, tu hi toh tha'"), "Internationally, this was the first time India was connected to the rest of the world, because the backpacking travellers had started coming in, by the busloads; masses of hippies travelled over land, from Europe to India. There was the music, which was the big connect. The Vietnam war had unwound, and the backlash of that... So, loads of people were coming to India to look for whatever..." Truth, we're told. "Mainly, drugs", is Pablo's precious afterthought, laughing, as he adds, "And this hasn't happened since. Now with the internet, everything is all over the place." Which, in a full circle way, brings us back to the nostalgia question, as we figure that Pablo Bartholomew, chronicler of 80s Bombay, has, in fact, answered it. ■

(Chronicles of a Past Life - Bombay on view at Photoink, till February 25. Turn to Art Listings, pages 114 to 116, for contact details. Nearest Metro Station: Jhandewalan, Blue Line.)

(Pablo's choice of cameras: Leica M Series, and Nikon.)

WATCHMAKER: *This was at Princess Street. I went to look back for this place, but it's not there. He's probably dead.*

TEA SHOP ASSISTANT: *He's the chai guy, and there's a barber shop next door. Really next door, very dense. People would come in for a haircut or a shave and then have some chai here. And of course, that's Shashi Kapoor from his youthful days.*

SLEEPING MAN OUTSIDE A BAR: *I was always attracted to sleep, and sleepers. In Asia, the idea of public space being open to sleep, is very much there, because I found this in China too.*

CUTOUPS OF WRESTLERS OUTSIDE PATEL STADIUM: *This was opposite Haji Ali. In the 80s, Dara Singh would bring all these ageing, flabby wrestlers out. I used to go to photograph the wrestling matches, and during those times, they would import all these foreign wrestlers. Mostly, it was all cooked up. They would call it world championships and all that!*

A city, its signs and its symbols, is important to me, at the end of the day. Sometimes, even stripped away and devoid of people. The match itself would take you into the sport, and I'm not so interested in that. It's more the graphic-ness, the architecture, the lettering of the images - so these cutouts against the sky - are more interesting.

FAMILY ON A SCOOTER: *The Matador shape and look (behind the family) is still there, very familiar. And the big, fancy car next to them is some ancient version of the Benz, I suppose.*

OLYMPIA CAFÉ: *I call it the taxi driver's café. It's right opposite Leopold's, and I prefer going here. Look at the prices! I mean ₹2 is now probably 20, or 40, for half a plate, but it's still great! Yes, it still exists, and still is a taxi driver's café. They've modified it upstairs, but downstairs, it's still the same furniture, everything. The food here is great. All these tourists and everyone eat this shitty, expensive food at Leopold's. And this is right across! Leopold's is good to have a beer. You have your beer and then go across to have real khaana. I love the Mutton Masala here, it's top of the pops!*



ROADSIDE PHOTO STUDIO: *When you do street photography, you don't get into conversations. You're moving and people are moving. So I get into this studio, take a picture and move on. You react to things and spaces. You shoot. When you go into someone's space, that's when you negotiate your passage.*

This is also somewhere around the same area - Mohammed Ali Road, Grant Road, Faulkland Road.

If you're interested in the past, these pictures will interest you. Black and white has a sensory language that's difficult to read. Colour is easier, I mean black against green and yellow has an obvious sensation. Reading black and white, however, requires a different thought process.



