

## BETWEEN ESCAPE AND ENTRAPMENT

Pablo Bartholomew captures the decay, despair and rebelliousness that defined Calcutta in the 1970s, discovers **Sayandeb Chowdhury**.

In August 2010, while presenting photographs from his own and his father Richard's archive, Pablo Bartholomew told me how the *margin* had moved in to become the *centre* of his art. *Calcutta Diaries*, a selection of Bartholomew's photographs, which was on view at New Delhi's Art Heritage Gallery between the 21<sup>st</sup> of December 2012 and the 23<sup>rd</sup> of January 2013, focused on this theme of marginality, though never quite uncomplicatedly. Born of a Burmese father and a Punjabi-Bengali mother, and witness to the bohemian chic of '70s Mumbai,

Bartholomew has always tried to forge a relationship with *outsiders*. The figure of the *non-belonger* is significant, he explains, because of his father's status as a Burmese refugee in India, which found him and his family in a perpetual state of statelessness.

In the works on view, the gaze of Bartholomew's camera assumes a special meaning as you see him roaming a city that was once famous for housing refugees, settlers, the poor, the homeless and people of multiple ethnicities, all of whom contributed in different ways to creating a

**Pablo Bartholomew.** *Boy jumping off the roof of the Chinese Temple, Tangra, Calcutta. Circa 1978.*  
Image courtesy Pablo Bartholomew/Netphotograph.



complex urban space. Their legacy of hope and despair makes Calcutta a major source of seduction for any visual artist – it has a generous capacity to swiftly assemble a vast canvas populated with a shifting, restless cast of characters.

An assignment to shoot Satyajit Ray on the sets of *Shreeya Ke Kishor* took Bartholomew to Calcutta in the late 1970s. This was also a time when his grandmother had settled in Calcutta. Bartholomew wanted no time skating out of the sets and wandering the streets. Most photos in this exhibition belong to this time. In a catalogue essay accompanying the show, Bartholomew calls this 'slow' photography an act of artistic enquiry as against the 'fast' photography of

commissioned, commercial work. *Calcutta Duvio* is the result of this 'slow' and yet restless exploration.

The exhibition comprised four distinct sections. The smallest section featured Bartholomew's grandmother in her twilight years, alone and widowed, living in a cramped, one-room apartment off Park Street. This series presented a desolate picture of old age that seemed to resonate with the ageing city that was slowly coiling into the shadows. Those who know the turbulent history of post-colonial Calcutta will perhaps note with a tinge of sadness how

the old lady embodies the image of the 'lonely' city. This sombre mood continued through the next section: an impressionistic biography of Calcutta's streets.

Bartholomew's work was notable, especially in depicting the actual lives of acrobats, portable shooting range carriers, horse-carriage drivers, band players and paper toy-sellers, among other itinerant street trowlers and urban dwellers. From this series, one picture of a winery old man sleeping in front of a wall painted with political graffiti made one wonder if this protagonist represented the city in insouciant slumber. While looking at Bartholomew's pictures of Calcutta one is reminded of how Calcutta has

lent itself to outstanding portraiture in the hands of many of its chroniclers, both from India and abroad. Bartholomew adds to the repertoire but not substantially.

The third section, on Ray, though not without a moment or two of effervescent candour, failed to make an impression because Ray, as the preceding review hopes to show, has walked taller in frames by other photographers. It was in the fourth section, on Calcutta's Chinese settlers, that Bartholomew managed to create a lasting impression. In the catalogue essay, Bartholomew wrote that the Chinese community drew his attention because they were, like him, settlers in India and in chronicling their daily lives, he sought to know himself better. Perhaps, this was why, in less than two dozen photographs, Bartholomew succeeded in offering an omnibus impression of life in Tangra, Calcutta's own Chinatown. From Chinese children frolicking in merriment against the backdrop of dingy

bylanes to adolescents exulting in party scenes; and from the humdrum of tanneries to the kitchens of small-time eateries, Bartholomew captured an unobtrusive, un-improvised glimpse of the life of the community.

The picture that stood out was that of a young boy jumping off the roof of a tannery as its chimney belched out black smoke against a greying urban landscape. The photographic subject was caught in what one might call *sever* motion, triggering the fantasy of both escape and entrapment, endemic to any 'settling' community. Bartholomew's camera ceaselessly records how the

community – political refugees since WW II – were yet to come out of the cocoon of despondency that they had retreated into after being hounded during India's 1962 war with China. In recent years, Calcutta's Chinese community has been chronicled across popular and serious media but Bartholomew's work, as much for its cultural as for its anthropological value, remains nonpareil.



Pablo Bartholomew, *Man asleep in front of political graffiti*, Calcutta, circa 1970. Image courtesy Pablo Bartholomew/Netphotograph