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THE LOVING GAZE : RAYMONDE APRIL IN CONVERSATION WITH NICOLE GINGRAS

NICOLE GINGRAS



For over twenty years, Raymonde April has taken photographs of herself, the city and the people around her. The artist addresses and diverts various photographic genres to better personalize them. She weaves poetic links between private and familiar worlds. She is the observer, but sometimes she inscribes herself in the picture. Often she keeps her distance, and becomes a shadow slipping between photographs.

By going back to images taken in the early seventies, April reveals once again a commitment to the everyday. This interview dwells upon her practice of recycling images from her past production to seek out how the notions of time and duration, and the ascendancy of places, faces, bodies and objects over memory have informed the photographer's work since the beginning. What seemed to be distinctive series at one time have now become sites for transition and connection between images.

The process of taking photographs and of finding titles for the images are both linked to contemplation, the artist confides. The interview concentrates on April's relationship with time and how this experience has allowed her to unfold a personal "backdrop".

Conducted for the catalogue to an exhibition entitled *La Femme sans ombre* ("The shadowless Woman") that was presented at The Box Gallery in Torino, Italy, last November, the interview discusses the entire production of this Québécois photographer.



**N. G.: From the beginning, self-portraits were part of your work. In recent photographs, such as *Journée de chutes* (1990, “Day of Falls”), you seem to have removed yourself as a subject. I would say that you have begun looking differently not only at the landscape but also at your subjects. Your models have become more structural, more sculptural. Even though you are now on the observer’s side, you still inhabit the image.**

R. A.: *Journée de chutes* is an image that came to me. I only had to be present and receive it. When an image reaches out for you like this, the whole notion of time and temporal balance becomes quite precarious. It happens very, very fast, all you have to do is grasp it. Yet, once it’s printed on paper, such an image paradoxically conveys a sense of duration quite different from the one contained in a self-portrait done with a camera on a tripod, which required a lengthy preparation. Images like *Journée de chutes* are ageless. I now try to preserve that kind of balance. The less constructed and predetermined the images are, the more they reveal themselves as visions. They happen very fast and exist only by virtue of being recognized.

**How do you design the presentation of your photographs for an exhibition?**

I like to assemble dissimilar things that come from different sources and periods. I like to show them in a continuum. My book of photographs entitled *Car j’ignore où tu fuis* (1993, “For I don’t know where you’re fleeing”) is in that vein. The greys, the blacks, the metallic quality of each image, the attention given to light – all this contributes to reuniting images taken at very different places and moments. Three of them were taken twenty years ago. Once again, my work is about continuity and rupture, ruptures in time, theme or form.

This tension between similarity and difference creates an atmosphere which ultimately enwraps the ensemble of the work. One can feel the tension between detail and whole which feeds each image and finally informs the entire series. I now wish to retrieve and develop a chronicle of small events — like a rainstorm or a snowstorm. For example the rainstorm in Québec City in the series *Car j’ignore où tu fuis* represents rainstorms in general. But if you observe the image carefully, the clothes people are wearing and the cars, you can identify the period and the city, so it remains a rainstorm in Québec City. Underneath the surface, there exists the small, lost story of a day in the seventies.

**Can you draw a parallel between the images in *Car j'ignore où tu fuis* and those in the long fresco-like series *De l'autre côté des baisers* (1985–86, “The Other Side of Embraces”)? This work also contains images of various origins which seem to have been taken almost randomly, as if only to show these precise moments. As if you had wondered how people you know or familiar objects interacted.**

You're right. *De l'autre côté des baisers* was put together almost like a family album. This series begins with clearly stated autobiographical elements and opens up to a certain kind of abstraction. I was then interested in the motions of people through time and my own motions amongst them. I was striving to create conversations, a family. *Car j'ignore où tu fuis* is more atmospheric, it fingers on small events. Yet there is a formal affiliation between both series, and there is even a face in *Car j'ignore* which could have appeared in *Baisers*.

**There is a religious aspect to *Car j'ignore où tu fuis*, something like a prayer or a farewell to lost ones.**

This title is precisely about escape. It's about people fleeing. Here they're fleeing from the storm. They were, they are, “passers-by” running away from the rain, photographed twenty years ago. There is my niece, and I don't know where she's going either. The title is borrowed from Baudelaire's “A une passante”, and as sung by Léo Ferré, with his music, it could be considered an incantation.

**Finding a title is a process that crystallizes the image, the object or the work while giving it a second breath, a new impulse. It's a poetic quest fueled by the power of words.**

Finding a title is truly a sacred endeavour close to medication or contemplation. I would never give out cues or indicate them in an exact and obvious fashion. I hope the images address the viewer's intuition. I usually try to find the title before stepping into the darkroom, because naming the images completes and fixes them.

**There is another aspect of your work which I would call unknown images of memory. With *Car j'ignore* you return to images taken when you began photographing. These now recycled images operate a fluid passage from one photographic genre to another: autobiography, documentary and family archives.**

I have always relied on time to teach me how to look at the images I make, because they are so close to my life, to the events in my life. They were taken so spontaneously, and yet are imbued with affect and memories. It generally takes a certain amount of time for the images to rest, form a deposit and reveal what they have to say. It takes me a certain amount of time before I can see them as images outside of myself. I like to play with that double nature and cap into that experience of time and memories.

Going back to what I call ancient images is a bit like giving myself the possibility of returning to an age of innocence: the innocence of the images, their speed, their fluidity. Looking at these images taken many years ago, I now realize that they were shot in an unconscious and innocent state. I think that at that time I was working very hard at creating images without knowing that I was developing a formal language of my own. Those people running under the rain in Québec City, my childhood friend at the entrance of a small tunnel in Rivière-du-Loup : I look at these images and reflect upon my attitude when I shot them. The light at that precise moment, the position of the bodies in space give them a uniqueness that is close to a moment of grace. These photographs have a particular duration because they encompass both a compression and an extension of time. If I hadn't decided to use these images, I would never see them. They would not exist. Looking at them now gives them a life different from the one they had when they were taken. For me, it's a way of looking at the passing of time.

**It's also a way of saying farewell and this is where I came from.**

It also has to do with the notion of being inhabited by an idea, a vision. At that time, I was only beginning to study the visual arts. I wasn't making those images for a precise project. Yet everything is there; one can recognize what I'm doing today. I now feel that I have to go back to them to continue my work, to renew contact with that blind state, a state where my unconscious is at work, a state where my expectations and my attitude towards life are not formulated in a particular project, but where they offer themselves as crude material. I think it also has to do with reaching a certain age.

**I like to think of your work as something done in the shadow.... Shadows reveal a presence sometimes difficult to identify. Shadows move around, the gaze moves around and they inhabit the image. Something comparable to what is said of fiction - that it settles into the image, reaches out for you to show you things inside the image. It's like an invitation. There**

**is nothing tangible and it is precisely this kind of movement which makes the image alive, something we do not want to fix. We are caught in the spectacle. This is what I mean when I say you work with shadows.**

Shadows.... It's funny, I always say that light creates images. Light carries the figures in space or in the air. But shadow is as present as light because it's the balance between them that holds things in space. The shadow is where you have to stand to create things with light. The shadow to me is the darkroom for instance. It provides distance. It also provides a place to hide, a place of containment wherein the light constructions can take shape and form. The shadow, like darkness, gives life, sustains.

The shadow is like a backdrop in my work, it is behind and underneath the objects and the people that I photograph, it links them together, like water carries islands, boats and birds that float on its surface. Shadows are like waves.

**Last year you agreed to participate in a photographic mission of Montréal. Your response to this project was quite revealing. It said : "I will not repeat what has been done, I will show unknown parts of the city, places that don't even look like Montréal." Once again, it demonstrates your mirror relationship with others, with familiar, public or anonymous places.**

With this project, I actually relied on Montréal as a backdrop. It's a backdrop that has a lot to offer. I'm always impressed by the devastation of the city as it's undergoing construction. I am also struck by its deserted aspect at night, the streets, the people. I also wanted to show how one cherishes one's own space, one's balcony for example. How we truly make acts of love. There were things I simply wanted to capture, with all the affection one can give to one's environment, lane, sidewalk or balcony. I was trying to reach for and show the lived experience of a city, but in a private manner. While taking photographs of the city, my attention was drawn to things which I had never noticed, things that were not part of the artworld, but belonged to everyday life.

**The everyday, the banal, is also subtly expressed in *Paysage d'hiver* (1991, "Winter Landscape"). It's also a comment about the act of looking. To what extent do we see things? To what extent do we see in colour or in black and white? When does the image begin to**

**disintegrate? This image is literally made out of the photographic grain and haze and it's quite extraordinary because this is where the photographic work materializes.**

This work evokes snow when it rises in a flurry, it speaks of its whiteness, yet snow is not really white, and it produces coloured light through diffraction. It's the same steam where all the colours of the spectrum are united. With this image, I wanted to work a very ordinary, neutral appearance and exploit within it the colours of the rainbow. It's as if I reenacted the relationship between the banal and the monumental. I didn't address it through sculpture or with objects but through the use of colour. The monumental often emerges out of the point of view that figures are looked at.

This image taps into our attitude towards life, be it sad or joyful, and which is often a matter of gaze. Bungalows represent a small I life in a small town, on a small day. It's the routine but it is also the happiness of the routine. It's not a simple thing. It's probably connected to childhood. A lot of people remember this banal image and see in it numerous details which are not actually there.

**Because the image is so white, it's as if there was no image at all. It's a beautiful screen just as *Le Portrait de Michèle* (1993), or *Journée de chutes* which are also large format images.**

In *Le Portrait de Michèle* each book acts as an imaginary window. The bookcase contains numerous books on painting, most of them closed; these worlds coexist together. There are other images: my own photographs and postcards collected by Michèle. *Le Portrait de Michèle* incorporates the writing, and the images in the books, those on the wall as well as the reality of the person facing us. This image speaks of order, that of Michèle, and of disorder, the possibility of opening all the books and setting the images free.

**In this photograph Michèle Waquant, artist and video producer, is screening one of her videos. She seems to me emblematic of your work where the photographed body is discussed and addressed as a figure in space. She is truly a mediator between two kinds of images: fixed and moving. She is lit by the moving images in front of her and she has the memory of fixed images behind her. Your reading is at once anecdotal and revealing of how you offer us a complex and enrapturing image, the portrait of both an artist friend and an**

**era, a contemporary reality. The circulation of images is neverending; it is impossible to see only one image at a time....**

We live in a continuum of images and sounds —insignificant things, a lot of insignificant things. Yet there is always this idea, this wish to relate everything to one's self. But photography also proposes a kind of disintegration. I feel this necessity to relate images to myself. And when I look at them I travel within each of them. I am dragged into them, called into them. When I put to a project, so many of them have to be eliminated, in order for the rest to be united. One has to find the image that will replace all the others. It's always a game of substitution.

**There is also the distance of the gaze.**

I wonder about this necessary distance. Can I really create images that speak of calm, that seem to offer idyllic visions? Or is this distance simply a practical way of living, is this space I constantly put between things and myself a better way to look at them ? Can one return from this isolation? This question comes to me now, when I look at what's going on around me. When I see disease, loss and death, I wonder what I'm talking about really. Am I talking about paradise?

**I don't think it's as idyllic as you say. Of course, some images are serene, but they are very simple things and often unsettling in their simplicity.**

I don't know. Anyway I continue with the making of my backdrop, and with placing things in front of it. It must have something to do with my own anxiety towards death and disappearance. In my work nature always looks stronger than human beings. For example in *Journée de chutes* the boulders constitute an overwhelming environment for the small human figures. Nature is quite spectacular here, like during a storm....

Last summer, I took lots of photographs of storms. I photographed the storm advancing towards us, and ourselves looking at the storm in motion. When witnessing natural events, one is always split between the spectacle and fear, between admiration and fear.

One has the feeling of seeing something unique and grandiose, of having been chosen to witness this performance. As a viewer, it's amazing to realize to what extent one can leave the body. Year



after year, witnessing the everyday, one ends up thinking that everything repeats itself, there are cycles, seasons return. Yet one progressively perceives destruction persistently at work.

**Similar to your work with shadows, the silence within your images strikes me, a bit like the change of light that foretells of the storm.**

Once again, images must express it. Sounds or words are like images that have not been captured, yet they inform the one that has been. Like a sound that brings density and a sense of framing. The image does and must contain everything. It ends up containing everything because memory does the rest; it completes the image, if you will.

There was a time when I thought that sounds remained, that everything remained in suspension around the image. Today I would say that all the sounds finally vanish. Only the image remains and we add onto it —sounds, noises, words. This notion of sounds related to images is quite remarkable, similar to the one that would have us believe that people, things and landscapes remain with us forever.

*Translated from the French by Colette Tougas*