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Là d'où je viens

Rébecca Hamilton



The town we grew up in always occupies a privileged place in our imagination. It's where we made our first discoveries, where we built forts for hide-outs in the summer, and where we hung around on the street in our adolescence. Raymonde April grew up in Rivière-du-Loup and it was in this city that she took her first photographs when she was studying visual arts at Université Laval. In 2012, while spending the summer here as she does almost every year, she applied herself to creating new images, but somewhat differently this time. Her response to a proposal to collaborate with the Musée du Bas-Saint-Laurent was to take a probing look at the archival photographs preserved at the museum and appropriate them to produce a new corpus of work. Through Raymonde April's re-invented gaze at Rivière-du-Loup, we are exposed to the images of our local reality in an unprecedented, alternative manner. Photographs by René Marmen, Antonio Pelletier, and Joseph-Adélar Boucher have enabled the artist to retrieve forgotten views of

certain sites in Rivière-du-Loup while continuing to observe her familiar environment. Like mirrors, these photos extend beyond their frames to a place to which all memory gravitates.

### ***The house I grew up in***

The exhibition *La maison où j'ai grandi* (the house I grew up in), presented by the Musée du Bas-Saint-Laurent from June 21 to October 14, 2013, is an occasion to discover the works of this significant Quebec artist from a previously unexplored angle. By pointing to the coming-and-going between Raymonde April's recent work and her previous production, the exhibition opens the way to an unusual photographic journey, part of an ongoing reflection in which different times and places intertwine.

Since the beginning of her career, Raymonde April has formulated a singular language that distances itself from documentary photography, and which has renewed a particular kind of attentiveness to the everyday world. Especially since the end of the 1990s, she has regularly re-examined the large quantity of photographs she has taken since the 1970s and drawn parallels between her past and current works. *Les Pèlerins de la croix lumineuse* (1994), the *Albums* (2005), and her latest series, *La maison où j'ai grandi* (2013), are part of this trajectory. In the *Albums*, she rearranged her family's photo archives, adding her own pictures at the end. In the same vein, this exhibition has been an opportunity for her to establish cross-references between her own production and the legacy of various photographers of the region. As Bernard Lamarche points out: "The artist is aware that remaining in her own zones purifies and defines her language, but at the same time, exhausts it little by little. Instead of extricating herself from this dilemma by completely shattering her style, April has sought ways to renew it." <sup>1</sup> Thus, the series *La maison où j'ai grandi* has enabled the artist to gain a new perspective on her production and even to deepen her research into the archival aspect by taking yet another uncharted path.

### ***The extras***

*My photos represent very small moments, but when added together they weave an endless tale. They look at me and ask me questions. Over time, one story fades away and another takes shape before my eyes: without thinking too*

*much about it, I've captured the passage of Time on places and on faces, and have recorded a kind of History.*<sup>2</sup>

Raymonde April often returns to the images she has created in the past, re-activating them and giving them a new existence. *L'Arrivée des figurants* was presented for the first time in 1997 in the exhibition, *Les Fleuves invisibles*. In that context, when this impressive corpus of 33 silver prints arranged in five distinct sections was first shown, it was considered a culmination or synthesis of the artist's work, whereas at the Musée du Bas-Saint-Laurent in 2013, it leads into the exhibition. Acting as a kind of short cut, or preamble to other series, it fully immerses us in the world of Raymonde April's photography, in which assembled instants have the makings of events.

These monumental-scale photographs of the everyday elevate life's small moments to a grandiose level. Landscapes, human figures, and details of the environment combine in a richly meaningful narrative that may be apprehended in multiple ways. Raymonde April has produced other series, in which, following the same principle as in *L'Arrivée des figurants*, she has assembled photographs of disparate subjects to create associations. Different time periods coexist and spaces are juxtaposed in poetic alternation. The indeterminate meaning of the grouping of images invites a continual reinterpretation. The off-screen space connecting the images remains open, undefined. The still life, the portrait, the staged intimate scene, the self-portrait, and the landscape are all genres that have allowed Raymonde April to articulate her characteristic approach to photography, an approach which, in the end, has its source in life itself and in all life has to offer.

### ***A history***

*And the evocative force of these found pictures continues to trouble me.*<sup>3</sup>

Since the day Raymonde April showed her first photographs, we've become accustomed to meeting the people close to her. Inspired by her familiar environment, she orchestrated scenes of an intimate character which, still today, provide her with a limitless reserve of fictional narratives. Gradually, her underlying desire to chronicle her evolution as an artist also emerged in her work. In the series *Les Pèlerins de la croix lumineuse*, created in 1994 from pictures shot in 1973 and 1974, the majority of the photographs were taken by the artist in her home town when she was

still a student. Twenty years later, she rediscovered these forgotten images and looked at them from a different perspective. Rather than turning her lens on her surroundings or on herself, Raymonde April chose to direct her attention to these existing pictures, probing them and reflecting on her state of mind when she took them. By re-animating these witnesses of her youth, she may have hoped to recapture that “blind state”, the subconscious artistic impulse that guided her at the time.<sup>4</sup>

In the *Albums* (2005)<sup>5</sup>, the photographs given prominence by Raymonde April are presented as documents, which in no way prevents us from projecting ourselves into them. Using her own and her family’s photo archives, she created a diary of past events, restoring images that might have disappeared and been forgotten. This retrospective effort, very demanding on the personal level, brought her to reflect on her itinerary, and reveals certain fundamental elements of her approach to photography. The importance of transmission, intrinsic to any enterprise involving memory, rivets our attention and holds it as the narrative unfolds.

In 2005, the series *Les Pèlerins de la croix lumineuse* was again used to advantage when it reappeared in the *Albums*, co-inhabiting with other personal archives and accompanied by narrative texts to take on a new aspect. Here, the desire to look back seemed to be fully realized. These two series put into perspective the ambivalence between what is and what has been, a recurrent theme in Raymonde April’s work. Presenting them in Rivière-du-Loup, along with recent photographs, makes for a striking whole, with *La maison où j’ai grandi* coming as a long-awaited meeting. The images have finally found each other.

### ***Confluences***

*This presence of the double and its subdivisions fascinates me. The question of time, if it predominates, is never one of unidirectional time. It concerns simultaneities in which the landscape is continually changing, moving, and recomposing itself in possible, fluctuating directions.<sup>6</sup>*

The recent photographs in the series *La maison où j’ai grandi* are also closely linked to the past by all they evoke. Each image in itself becomes a space for remembrance. The juxtaposition of the recent photos with the archival material transports us from one era to another, plunging us

into the photographic present so important to Raymonde April.<sup>7</sup> It appears that, as in the *Albums*, we are witnessing an eloquent twinning “of the recent and the distant past through the personal and found images.”<sup>8</sup> With this re-created “family of images”,<sup>9</sup> it is possible to conceive entirely new stories.

The archival photographs in *La maison où j'ai grandi* include several by René Marmen. Born in 1919, this son of Rivière-du-Loup owned and operated a photo studio from 1955 to 1983. He was also the photographer for the newspaper *Le Saint-Laurent* for some twenty years, a fact that reminds us that the photography archives of the Musée du Bas-Saint-Laurent constitute an illustrated record of the many social and cultural events that took place in the area. The Rivière-du-Loup chronicled by René Marmen is the one Raymonde April grew up in. Moreover, her selection of his photographs was not based on any stylistic or thematic unity, but rather on what they bring to mind, the link to the imaginary that they contain: Geneviève Bujold's stay in Rivière-du-Loup in 1969 to shoot a film, which caused a sensation when Raymonde April was a teenager; the Saint-François-Xavier convent where the photographer went to school; and simply, the corner of Rue Desjardins in 1966, an image that inspires a strange feeling of déjà vu, of a trajectory repeated over time. Thus, Marmen's photos are revelatory for all the reminiscences implicit in them, all the remembering they activate. The artist has also included photographs by Antonio Pelletier, who was active mainly from the 1930s to the 1950s. Two images of Rue Lafontaine that she has used are significant for the viewpoint enshrined in memory time and time again: the descent to the river.

In addition, Raymonde April drew upon the Joseph-Adélarde Boucher photographic archive, a choice that appears obvious at first glance, as several thematic correspondences between the two photographers are noticeable. An amateur photographer, J.-A. Boucher was interested in family scenes, and would bring his camera along on Sunday outings. This type of subject is also a predilection of the artist's, who has always favoured a summertime ambience. Although Boucher's work does not feature much in this series, the affinities among their respective images being so clear, an enigmatic river scene has slipped in. This picture, with its slight blurring around the edges and its unidentifiable figures watching the flooding river, is placed in correlation with Raymonde April's photos. Inevitably, a dialogue arises, implying a reciprocal relationship between the images of these two photographers who are separated by more than a half-century. Which image begins the dialogue, and which photograph influences the reading of the other?

Time after time, Raymonde April has ventured back and forth between the present and the past. As underlined by Nicole Gingras: “(Her) creation process is comprised of incessant, almost obligatory, hypnotic returns towards what is *there*. Vivid links between the *worlds* are created by these destabilizing spatiotemporal shifts, by this treatment of memory and the gaze. Everything is brought into play to cast known reality in a disorienting light.”<sup>10</sup> Although they were taken recently, the photographs of the new corpus are no less fraught with references to the past, situated as they are at the heart of different worlds that co-inhabit and collide. Raymonde April’s constantly mutating universe is a reflection of the infinitely sensitive way she looks at life. In *Les Pèlerins de la croix lumineuse* and the *Albums*, a desire to seize and hold time is evident. Looking back at her beginnings, the artist rehabilitates the past. With *La maison où j’ai grandi*, however, we have the impression of witnessing a kind of conclusion — that the artist has come full circle, or at least, has ended a chapter. Even though the *Albums* were created almost ten years ago, their presentation in Rivière-du-Loup, where it all began, in conjunction with *Les Pèlerins de la croix lumineuse* and recent photographs also shot here, brings out all their meaning. We are, in a manner of speaking, thrust into this continuum, often referred to in writings about the artist<sup>11</sup>, in which the *hic et nunc*, the here and now, seems to impart a very particular aura to the whole adventure.

*When I return there, sometimes, on a beautiful summer night, I dream that I am once again that obedient little girl whose grandmother took her by the hand and walked with her to school.*<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Bernard Lamarche, “Les Beaux jours de l’intime: Raymonde April: Les Fleuves invisibles”, *Le Devoir*, December 6, 1997, p. B9.

<sup>2</sup> Raymonde April, “J’aurais dû naître à Rivière-du-Loup”, April 6, 2003.

<sup>3</sup> Raymonde April, Chantal Boulanger and Michèle Waquant, “Retours sur une conversation”, *Aires de migrations / Migration Areas: Raymonde April — Michèle Waquant*. (Quimper : Le Quartier; Montréal : Vox, centre de l’âge contemporaine, 2005), p. 107.

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<sup>4</sup> Nicole Gingras, “Le regard amoureux: Raymonde April en entretien avec Nicole Gingras”, *Parachute*, No. 77 (Jan./Feb./March 1995), pp. 19-25.

<sup>5</sup> The *Albums* (2005) were first presented in the exhibition, *Aires de migrations / Migration Areas*, a collaboration between Raymonde April and Michèle Waquant. These two artists, whose paths are similar in certain ways, have joined occasionally forces during their respective careers. The exhibition was an opportunity for them to reflect on their beginnings and their origins. They each produced their own set of albums; these were identical in format but told different stories.

<sup>6</sup> Raymonde April, Chantal Boulanger and Michèle Waquant, “Retours sur une conversation”, *Aires de migrations / Migration Areas: Raymonde April — Michèle Waquant*. (Quimper : Le Quartier; Montréal : Vox, centre de l’image contemporaine), p. 110.

<sup>7</sup> Raymonde April, “A Fly in Paradise”, in *Thirteen Essays on Photography*. (Ottawa: Canadian Museum of Contemporary Photography, 1990), pp. 195-207

<sup>8</sup> Raymonde April, Chantal Boulanger and Michèle Waquant, “Retours sur une conversation”, *op. cit.*

<sup>9</sup> Term used by Nicole Gingras in “Les Images sœurs et autres textes”, *Raymonde April – Les Fleuves invisibles*, (Joliette: Musée d’art de Joliette, 1997), p. 134.

<sup>10</sup> Nicole Gingras, “Les Images sœurs et autres textes”, *op. cit.*, p. 141

<sup>11</sup> In 1993, Régis Durand suggested that there is an open-ended flow between Raymonde April’s images: “A reading is made between the images, creating in this way a time-space continuum,” in “[Untitled]”, *Réservoirs soupirs: photographies 1986-1992*. (Quebec City: VU, 1993), pp. 64-67. Durand’s idea was reiterated by Anne Bénichou in “Le présent photographique”, *Parcours*, No. 13 (Spring, 1994), p. 34.

<sup>12</sup> Raymonde April, “J’aurais dû naître à Rivière-du-Loup”, *op. cit.*