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LES FLEUVES INVISIBLES

NICOLE GINGRAS



Closed eyes, inhabited spaces, photographs taken by others, image-laden titles, body-statues, deserted sites, self-portraits, the house, walks in the city under snow, the night, mother, a faraway friend, Montréal, a spoon, patterns on fabric, silence, a bird, group portraits, a sweater tied on hips, small tomatoes, in waiting, proffered faces, a nostalgic landscape, a riverbank, snow, a pylon from afar, balconies, staircases, tousled hair, silent objects, a silhouette, shadows on a face, helmeted heads, the meeting of friends, the wind, a waterfall, lowered eyes, darkness, rhubarb leaves, the city, a missing friend, a wall too high, streets, strangers, a chair, a huge shadow, a woman sitting on a rock, a field, store windows, a childhood friend, a curtain in the wind, a car in snow, a see-saw, the back of a woman at a window, a Christmas tree, a friend and her books, crumbs on a table, a cabin, a river, dense black, a blinding sunset, a small white cup, a worktable, a man curled up, a hammer, a campfire, a masked face, campanula, a bridge, clouds, a floating face, a hotel room, mountains of clothes, father on a cross, a friend asleep, stories, a bridge on the

Seine, a troubled look, roads on the waterfront, the wind in the leaves, the cobblestones of Paris, rain on the window, a tree in clouds, the gaze elsewhere...



ITINERARY

Every image has its own duration, as it has its contrast, format and independence in relation to other images. Every decision takes time to develop. In doing so, the photograph acquires a status, a tonality, a resonance of its own. It discovers its own personality.

Reinventing associations between images is inherent to Raymonde April's practice. Images occur one after another and are renewed. The narrative and theatrical mises en scène of the late 70s give way to scenes of everyday life, glimpsed from the privileged point of view of private mythology. Photographic series succeed one another and are deployed in space. There are bands of magical space where bodies disappear into shadow: *Personnages au Lac Bleu*; her first installation, *Jour de verre*; fabulous landscapes, *Cabanes dans le ciel*; a meeting of portraits and landscapes, *Debout sur le rivage*; a series of screens, *Tableaux sans fond*. One then notices the opacity of blacks that silently absorb the light. Hazy areas arise from a tension between the desire to freeze a movement and the anticipation of it, simply for the pleasure of launching the image beyond the

moment of the shot. Portraits of friends alternate with out-of-focus selfportraits showing a face too close to the camera, the melancholic gazes of *De l'autre côté des baisers*.

A kind of uprootedness shakes the photographer in her awareness of immediate landscapes populated by friendly figures. Displaced, she then produces *Sphinx*, scenes of public life in Paris and its heroic characters. The series momentarily makes way for individual, solitary images: *Les Feuilles mortes*, *Femme nouée*, *Face noire*, *Visitation*. Friends and relatives remain faithful, and the photographer varies her treatment of places and of space: *Le Portrait de Michèle*, *Charles piqué par le soir*. Objects, landscapes, give us the feeling we can recognize someone in them: *Cuillère*; *Paysage d'hiver*, a suburban house in the snow, photographed the day after Christmas. Bodies fossilize under the effects of mimesis and metamorphosis: a half-immersed head, like an island; a marble profile integrated into Parisian architecture; a torso melting into the trunk of a majestic tree.

The photographer suggests encounters, sustained by the evocative power of titles that have the effect of reframing the instants she shows us. *Jour de verre*, *Voyage dans le monde des choses*, *Une Mouche au paradis*, *Les Cœurs en bois de rêve*, *Réservoirs Soupirs* are certainly among the most suggestive. She fixes words like she fixes her photographs, lying in wait for motion, for the image's breath.

Raymonde April progressively fades from her photographs only to reappear occasionally, reminding us that she is still there. There are fewer and fewer self-portraits. The motion of a dissolving presence, begun slowly, continues to affirm itself. The ego as outcome of identity-construction is embodied in other ways: it is invested in the places and links between images. From this point on, Raymonde April is the one who looks and sees. Outside the frame, she brings back images toward herself. She comes back to "images of the past" and breaks the silence in which they were confined. So, *Les Pèlerins de la croix lumineuse*, *La Fortune* and *Car j'ignore où tu fuis* take on an undeniable present. Regrouped, these photographs remember. The photographer pursues her work: she recounts, invents, remembers. She haunts *L'Arrivée des figurants* with a self-portrait, astonished to see the charm of memory, recurring once more, meet an implacable gaze cast upon existence.

SISTER-IMAGES



The river in my village makes one think of nothing.

Whoever is close to it is simply close to it.

— *FERNANDO PESSOA*

Unforgettable images do exist. They inhabit us more than we can inhabit them, just as certain faces or landscapes do. Their silence holds us. Raymonde April's photography exerts this power over observers. A strangely familiar world is found therein. Raymonde April's way of looking is attuned to the present, directed toward things and people that have been with her for years. For several, the familiar carries with it the possibility of recognizing the photographer's friends and relatives over the entire course of her production. But beyond this recognition of the intimate and the anecdotal aspects linked to taking pictures, the familiar is also the enchantment which the stilled instant brings to the often quite-banal moments of everyday life. The photographer does not make her models — her "subjects" — pose; she photographs them as simple actions unfold. There have to be people who look, observe and document the movement around them.

Raymonde April — Les Fleuves invisibles constitutes an unusual, retrospective tour. Contrary to the tradition where course-changes and new directions in the practice of an artist are usually identified, this exhibition reflects instead upon principles of equivalence between the images, and

affinities between bodies of work. The continuous yet imperceptible flow evoked by the exhibition title calls up the notion of flux inherent in the photographer's practice. We investigate the fragile duration of images, and their passage or inscription in time. Raymonde April has comprised what we call a *family of images*, one that is pleased to be reunited. Only now, after twenty years of practice, can one divine this very specific trait.

At the heart of the exhibition, *L'Arrivée des figurants* (1997), a series of thirty-three large-scale, black-and-white photographs, shines over previous works, chosen as the anchor points of a vision that was quite assertive from the very beginning. Among such points of reference is *Miniatures*. This series of seven photographs from 1981 integrates a number of characteristics from the photographer's visual vocabulary. In it, we can trace: shadow — a larger, more opaque mass than the body that engenders it; the force of nature and its poetic resonance; views in perspective, piercing space; text laid parallel to image; manipulation of the photographic support (one silver print is hand-tinted); photographed theatre, where the pose literally becomes the site of all impending fiction; the photographer's presence in the image; landscape as an extension of her body.

Already, in *Miniatures* Raymonde April set up conditions for reading future photographs and laid the groundwork for her esthetic by putting into tension disparate realms where form and formlessness cheerfully coexist. What strikes us in these photographs is the force of the photographer's amazement in the face of what becomes the photographed subject. Her extreme awareness of things, her ability to transcend the real and her liberty in fostering a coexistence between distinct worlds — all of which are manifest in *Miniatures* are hardly surprising now. From *Miniatures* to *L'Arrivée des figurants*, the encounters between images would become increasingly shattering.



L'Arrivée des figurants

As its title indicates, *L'Arrivée des figurants* [“the entrance of extras,” or supernumeraries] reasserts the figuring role that the photographed characters are called upon to play. Composed of five distinct parts, five variations, the work develops with a relationship of tight juxtaposition from one photograph to the next in an assembly of images differentiated by their content, symbolic and emotional weight, and their relationship to space. For example, an extreme close-up of a body, an ensemble view of a deserted landscape, a medium-range group portrait and a close-up of an object can all succeed one another. Different points of view: some very intimate; others shameless or almost indifferent, trivial. The telescoping between spaces, temporalities and characters is manifold. It calls to mind that this work partakes in free association and condensation, where various relationships to things converge. Note how the photographer varies the distance (physical and emotional) at which she holds herself from the images.

Raymonde April manages to develop a polyphonic fresco conceived from a principle of incessant encounter and confrontation between images. *L'Arrivée des figurants* also considers the loss of frame, or the dissolution of border, and the effects produced by the effusion of space provoked by the photographer. In front of this photographic series of thirty-three instants, the effect upon us is striking. The presence of the images and the complexity of the links between them is dizzying.

The images do not exist in themselves, i.e., they are not definitive. They transform upon contact with other images, like juxtaposed colours do on canvas. By this principle of association, through succession and coexistence, the photographs exchange and oppose their respective intensity and drama.

The photographer invites us to experience fragmentation through what now reads as multiple vanishing points, telescoped visions. Progressively imposed is the image of a rift between the worlds assembled here, between visited spaces and sites, photographed characters, evoked sensations. The experience is far from peaceful. In its sharing of memory images (the confrontation of varying temporalities and the recollection of past eras), *L'Arrivée des figurants* offers the recognition of fleeting time and overlapping experiences of the gaze. Such a concentration of emotions is destabilizing by virtue of the intensity and the existential presence of these fragments of life. The dam of the Réservoirs Soupairs has broken. It gives way to flooding, to the brink of chaos.



Figures in space

Figures, extras, models, subjects, relatives, friends. The roles are manifold, interwoven and, by turns, blended together. The photographer knows from whence stems the difference or changeover of state between portrait, fiction, memory, anecdote. Raymonde April has this way of

seeing and looking, sometimes in extreme close-up, often in relation to an element that appears to be a support for the body (a tree, a balcony trading), a counterpoint to the volume a character occupies (fields, balconies, fences, staircases, windows). We learn to forget that the person photographed is an intimate, to see him or her rather as an element that infiltrates the various planes. Bodies and objects are then granted the status of planes in space; they sustain tension with other characters, objects or planes, also in space. These *figures* act as visual references, anchor points to scenes provoked by the photographer. They are paths to follow from one image to another, one body of work to another. They serve as *conveyors* in the work, like the ferryman who facilitates the passage from the world of the living to that of the dead.

By seemingly minimizing the self-referential contribution of these characters, or seeking to divert any anecdote inherent in the recurrence of their faces, the photographer questions the status of their presence in the image. These presences seem interchangeable — by virtue of the degree of anonymity each manages to preserve — but irreplaceable, for it is the intervention of these familiar figures that elicits the photographer to take a picture. Raymonde April chooses her “models” because she knows they always have the same way of being different. It is all a question of gaze, direction, and thus, of vision. This understanding of the *interchangeable body* necessarily fosters the integration of a principle of equivalence between the various series.

Equivalence and liaison

Over the years, complicities and affinities develop between images, between the things photographed and thus, between bodies of work. The overall work obeys a principle of continuity that calls upon our memory to recognize a character, a living space, an object, a piece of architecture, this atmospheric quality that seems increasingly familiar to us.

We notice the return, the regular reintegration, of certain characters called upon to play different roles, to introduce other “figures.” They are invited to enter the frame once again, to inhabit a photographed space, to animate the theatre of the everyday toward which the photographer turns. There are also links that are more difficult to perceive, such as the tonality of the photograph, like a quality of silence that binds images together, creating an underlying network, in the realm of the senses. This network arises from the unforeseen, unprecedented and endlessly renewed encounters which memory weaves between recollections, retained experiences and reconstructed perceptions. Landscapes and characters then become the repositories of contained histories, and

sometimes a voice is heard. If there are equivalencies between images, some images form a more unified family than others. But no image is interchangeable: every photograph is autonomous, and obeys its own principle of unity.

Raymonde April investigates not only how the masses, volumes, textures of the various realms around her are read, but how they are linked together. Her vision rests on links she sees, instigates or lets happen. The encounter between images defies prediction, diverts rules. Raymonde April shares with certain poets a relationship to the moment wherein emotions are condensed into the events recounted or described. Like them, Raymonde April works from “details” that hold her attention, fascinating fragments that maintain a metonymic relationship with the world. A dialogue then operates between what is looked at, photographed, reframed and retained, and the reality from whence the photographed instant proceeds.

Delayed memory

The photographer lives both with her images and with the memory of them, developing a strange relationship to the present, in what now appears to be an attraction to a renewed present, a search for what she calls a “photographic present.” We know the images are amnesic: we can rewrite or reformulate their temporality, and revisit the past to bring it up to date. How fascinating, this work by memory which rewrites recollections and remodels history. Since the early 90s, the photographer has asserted her position vis-à-vis updating images taken more than fifteen years ago. She salvages the filmy sheets of memory that make up her contact sheets, conserving images taken since the early 70s.

Photographs emerge from a past that is overlooked, kept secret, discovered and revisited in small doses. In Raymonde April, memory follows principles of emotional uprootedness. Such *returns toward* images of the past, toward photographs that have not yet *seen the light of day* transversally posits the importance of looking upon images. In this operation lies not only the discovery of forgotten moments that escaped the attention of the photographer, but also the necessity to associate these moments with others. The process of looking we refer to here is not just finding, rediscovering the photograph(s), but also recognizing that it, or they, can be associated with others. This works on a horizontal plane (memory, the chronology of a practice and an existence) and on a vertical plane (the construction of *ambiances*, unforeseen realms, the *oeuvre*). Through the slippage between temporalities, as these worlds graze and infiltrate each

other, one grasps the specificity of Raymonde April's gaze upon things. This gaze, attentive, disquieted, loving, enveloping, becomes a shadow cast on the things and people she sees and photographs.

What is the role of memory in the identification of images? Recognition or reunion? When or how does an image appear to the photographer? On the surface, nothing about a photograph taken twenty-five years ago seems to have changed. The image waits to be discovered, looked at, grasped anew. There is something inexorable in this noninsistence, if not disinterest, on the part of the photograph to reveal, to be revealed to the observer, at the opportune moment. So, there are images that take more time to *appear*. Sometimes, also, there is nothing.

Some images have resisted Raymonde April. The photographer goes back to them years later. And now there they are for her. The process of creation is made up of these constant, almost obligatory, hypnotic returns to what is already *there*. Vibrant *rapprochements* of *worlds* are created by these destabilizing spatiotemporal displacements, by this function of memory and gaze. Everything is implemented in order to effect an expatriation from the known. Few works state such permeability between the different *eras* when the photo was taken and between the images' diverse realms (status, genre, state).

The edge— life between images

Raymonde April's practice continues to surprise us with its critical leaps vis-à-vis modes of photographic presentation, its intuitive approach to framing and reframing negatives, its investigation of the photographic support and printing methods, its extreme license in varying the formats and tonalities of the image — for its entirely personal investigation of what I would call the *métier* or craft of the photographer.

In closely observing this production, executed over a period of more than twenty years, we can detect in it an overt resistance to adhering to a single photographic genre. Raymonde April crosses genres, and provokes encounters through the coexistence of more than one genre at a time. Yet not one is privileged over another. It is difficult to explain how the transitions operate between what is identifiably still life, portrait, fragments of a private journal, fresco, an approach to reality bearing similarities to documentary, and self-portrait. For often, a photograph seems to

belong to more than one photographic genre at once. These fragile transitions between genres imply a combination of essences for which Raymonde April knows just the right formula. Such coexistence between genres brings privileged conditions to existence for images. The photographer thus recognizes the *motion* of the image — the ultimate paradox of photography, i.e., that internal movement that gives life to still images. These various *apparitions* then appeal to the careful observer.

What initially seemed to be intuition has become not a system but a creative principle. The image is not defined by the sublime aspect of its content, but by what Gilles Deleuze calls “internal tension,” i.e., by its form, its capacity to empty itself, to distance itself from memory-images and anecdote-images, thereby freeing itself from memory and reason. Several of the photographer’s interventions proceed along these lines, seeking this tension in the photograph. In search of what she calls “photographic matter,” Raymonde April frequently talks about texture, contrast, the granulation of the image, a certain detail she grew fond of during the process of creating her photographs. Technical considerations aside, in taking distance from the anecdotal or narrative dimension of her images, the photographer reveals the importance she places on photographic *matter* as defined and examined by Régis Durand in the third chapter of his essay, *Le Temps de l’image* — i.e., the relationship of photographic matter and the notion of *oeuvre*. The responsibility with regard to photography which Raymonde April manifests translates how and to what extent she looks at things. Photography is an affair of sustained looking — toward what will become, toward what becomes the image. This can never be overstated.

The question of the edge, touched upon in our discussion about slippage between photographic genres, allows us to broach the question of what lies out-of-field. Like a number of her contemporaries, Raymonde April has developed an approach to narrative, not just with series’ that encompass great mural surfaces, but primarily by forging links between images that are along the lines of poetry. She creates a space that is difficult to label and which rivals the off-screen space, the place *par excellence* of the Imaginary in cinema. Added to the rapport developed with narrative, by way of the magical and the heroic, among others, is an entirely personal investigation of the concept of montage *between* images. The link that the photographer maintains with film goes beyond using close-ups, replaying motion or cutting a scene into successive actions (traits from the cinematographic lexicon). Rather, this link reveals itself in what now appears as a desire for movement *between* images. For *motion* in April’s imagery goes unnoticed,

rarely discernible (there are very few out-of-focus images). The photographer relies rather on the strength of one image overflowing into another. She looks to what remains outside the frame during shooting, in search of those imperceptible signs that give the image its desired *depth*, such as the condensation of photographed events associated with close-ups, the fragmenting of a scene or a body, or her ongoing fascination for sound. Raymonde April frequently relates the importance of words articulated or sounds overheard while shooting, as though emphasizing what happened before the photograph and any event that occurred parallel to the shoot, *details* that really make one image different from another.

There are also other strategies, such as reframing. For some time the photographer has been reframing certain negatives, isolating a fragment of the image. Sometimes she enlarges it to the point of disfiguration, recalling the extreme close-up in film. There then follows a whole process of experimentation with surfaces, fractures and textures, leading to the disappearance of certain information, and the appearance of an image. An abstract motif is sometimes created, for the photographer's often-radical interventions swallow, engulf, certain details. Such interventions are meant to displace the image's primary meaning (its indexical strength), to circumvent or confuse the recognitory vocation associated with photography. And thus, emotional, anecdotal and narrative mechanisms seem momentarily suspended, disturbed.

Some will interpret the decisions associated with the photographer's *craft* as sight filters that momentarily slow down reading or bifurcate it. In this gap, in this slowing down of the mind in relation to the image, we see a period of contemplation offered to the observer. A precious instant in which to *see*. The image does not unveil itself at once. Raymonde April sets up a principle of splitting the photographed moment. A principle not just tied to the present and the past, but rather in constant transition between the image's various states. If this principle of weakening the instant has been in play since her earliest photographs, it is certainly intensified in *L'Arrivée des figurants* where the juxtaposition of photographs momentarily offsets the feeling of duration to foster a convergence of events, the simultaneity of which is clearly provoked or created artificially. The density of an experience is thus offered to us in facets or constellations of images. Part of the complexity of photography, or its absurdity, also lies in manifesting a duration that appears increasingly imaginary to us, yet still just as disturbing and unquiet.

The reading or signification of Raymonde April's photographs is never definitive or frozen, nor even static, even if a number of them have with time acquired the status of icons. Perhaps this is because, unlike numerous current photographs, they distance themselves from what Philippe Dubois identifies in his discussion of mannerist photography in the exhibition catalogue, *Tenir l'image à distance*, as an "excess of representation." Thus, *L'Homme de poussière*, *Une Mouche au paradis*, *Promeneuse*, *Deux Profils sur fond de feuillage* or *L'Arrivée des figurants* offer images that refuse to yield completely to interpretation; instead, they defy it. A task of interpretation is thus set up, and with it, all the resistance and equivocation implicit at the very heart of the image. But more forceful than us and our interpretations, these images come back to haunt us. It is impossible to silence them, or fix them by naming them.

LANDSCAPE BODIES

Landscapes — vast expanses offered to view — are sites where Raymonde April likes to be. Many are deserted. Without bodies, yet awaiting them, these landscapes are empty, evacuated of friendly presences.

The photographer chooses bodies she knows well: her own, that of a friend, parent, lover. Strange points of reference in space, these bodies sometimes set the landscape adrift. Let us recall the huddled man on a hillock or the two profiles absorbed into a leafy forest. In these two photographs, the body melts into the landscape. Through this metamorphosis, all identifying connotations are seen to totally dissolve. One photograph contains the roundness associated with the hill and the position of the man turned in on himself, a microcosm in itself. The other holds to the diagonal created by crossed gazes. Both have something of a surrealist vision, and their existence depends on the extremely tense relationships between texture, light and matter.

Henceforth, *L'Homme de poussière* and *Deux Profils sur fond de feuillage* are among these solitary photographs that punctuate Raymonde April's work. Fragments, residue free-falling from a seen and dreamed-of world, these images possess a *weight* that, simply, reaches us. Their existence seems to rest on an extremely fragile limit which the photographer investigates, reducing to the extreme the gap between the photographed planes. From this encounter or *passage* between planes arises the internal tension that makes the image possible.

THE TRAGEDY OF FLUX



The photographs in *L'Arrivée des figurants* do not all have the same status, nor the same dramatic intensity, unlike earlier works such as *De l'autre côté des baisers* or *Tableaux sans fond*. And this is fine. Some are louder and more imposing than their neighbours. Like the self-portrait of the artist in profile in a brocade dress, where a gloved hand holds a shutter release — icon of the artist at work; the scar on the dog's stomach; suspended elves, floating in an indeterminate and disturbing space; a lamb, reduced to nothing but a desolate carcass, gutted by the repeated gestures of many guests. A number of images do not demand the same forced, excessive attention. Rather, they invite us to discover some detail in them that will let us *enter into* the image. In the left corner, at the top, or at the edge, a detail (not the same one for everyone) waits to be spotted. Sometimes it is a light that dazzles and burns, that attracts our eye, like the sunset over a surface of water. How can the everyday be rendered magical without being made banal? In this strange detour of vision, there is a pause that leaves memory enough time to forge, delve back into, familiar traces. Thus it is with all photography, like a sort of awakening from what was buried or forgotten. Returning reinforces memory.

The unsettling thing about *L'Arrivée des figurants* is the force of little events, the linking of which reveals the fragility of encounters. Before these photographs, one can only wonder what state the photographer was in while shooting, and while developing the series. What was she thinking about? This energy, channeled into disappearance, is unsettling; it crystallizes a

disturbing vision as though under the force of a revelation. Following a principle of encounter and collision, this series lets a multitude of rifts and fissures come into play. The photographer confronts the power of her subjects, fascinating emperors in a world that defies them. Would this be another way of struggling with one's image, her own image?