

**Ralickas, Eduardo.— «Raymonde April: The Universe is a Photograph».— The Grange Prize.— Toronto: Art Gallery of Ontario, 2008.— Web archive.**

## **Raymonde April: The Universe is a Photograph**

*By Eduardo Ralickas*

As one contemplates the corpus of photographs produced by Montreal-based artist Raymonde April over the past thirty years [available online at [www.raymondeapril.com](http://www.raymondeapril.com)], one senses that there is something unusually systematic about April's vast array of images – yet one somehow gleans from this experience that the reasons for such a secret mode of coherence defy any attempt at rationalization. Paradoxically, it is as if April's artistic insight produces a *system without a centre* – that is, a geography of a world with neither borders nor limits – but a system nonetheless. As such, April's photographs accomplish two feats (which are considered to be impossible by many): namely, the transformation of intimate life into a form of language; and the conversion of the most mechanical and technological medium of all – photography – into an instrument in the service of personal expression. Both acts ought to be comprehended as complimentary and mutually dependent.

April, a prolific photographer, has produced and exhibited several hundreds of photographs since the late 1970s. One could, potentially, devise a taxonomy – an “image” of these variegated images, as it were – in which each picture would find its place and “value” with respect to all the others. This would be to emphasize the “linguistic” or “structural” aspect of her production; however, the undertaking would be in vain, for such an endeavour would rely, in principle, on viewing the system from afar. The fact remains: such a totalizing glance is never afforded us in any aspect of her corpus, which always positions its beholders in intimate, oftentimes even emotional, proximity to the world depicted. The specificity of the “system” to which we are confronted lies in the fact that individual images do not embrace the whole, but somehow allude to it by virtue of a kind of perpetual movement that *relates* images to one another, as the whole reconfigures itself from the vantage point of each individual work, or each individual series. One's glance here is akin to what philosopher Immanuel Kant terms “reflective judgement” in the

*Critique of the Power of Judgement* (1790). Whereas “determining judgements” attempt to encompass (and thereby arrest) the form of an individual thing by means of a pre-given or universal category, “reflective judgements” pose the opposite yet complimentary problem: how does one attain the totality if one’s basis is the particular? Put otherwise, how does one make intelligible categories of the world if one never sees the universe but only its very minute, unstable, and ever-changing parts?

Clearly, April photographs according to certain “categories”: landscapes, shadows, herself, mountains, windows, waterscapes, details of tools found in the kitchen or in the garage, pictures of mountains pinned to the wall, sunsets, walls, friends, unusual domestic occurrences such as curtains in the wind, etc. Much like in the famous (and perhaps apocryphal) Chinese encyclopaedia cited by Jorge Luis Borges in which the animals of the kingdom are divided into “(a) belonging to the Emperor; (b) embalmed; (c) trained; (d) pigs; (e) sirens; . . . (h) included in this classification; (i) trembling like crazy; (j) innumerable; (k) drawn with a very fine camelhair brush; . . . (n) from a distance look like flies,” April’s photographic archive is a taxonomy of the world which by definition is replete with “ambiguities, redundancies, and deficiencies”<sup>1</sup>. Of course, the world is not at fault, nor is its artistic transcription, but rather the attempt to arrest both in a fixed system of meaning. These organization principles notwithstanding then, even the most particularized of April’s images can be regarded as mobile, and, moreover, *as somehow containing the whole*. As Borges reminds us: “it bears mentioning that there exists no classification of the universe that is not both arbitrary and conjectural. The reason for this is quite simple: we do not know what the universe is” (Ibid.). For April, *the universe is a photograph* – providing one sees the former as ever-changing and dependent on *where* you picture it.

It is here, in this miniaturization of the cosmos, that April’s plastic language coexists in delicate tension with another vital component in the meaning of her work taken as a whole: her artistically (and thereby publicly) constructed sense of self. Here, one enters another universe that parallels the first, or rather, one should say: it is here that an equally complex system is generated *within* the first taxonomy, thereby producing a system within a system, a world within an already microcosmic world.

April is a pioneer in what recent art criticism has termed “auto-fiction”<sup>2</sup>. Ever since her 1979 untitled series in which dramatic black-and-white staged self-portraits were juxtaposed to de-contextualized lines of text (such as “*Je passais des jours à douter de tout*” [“I spent days

doubting everything”)), April’s work has persistently embraced performance as a means to explore subjectivity by revealing the nature of its constructedness. In the early photographs, the words figured like off-screen voices in avant-garde French cinema – their function being to underscore the medium itself and the impossibility of representing that which corresponds to the first person singular either in language or images. Thus, in these early works and those to follow, April foregrounds scenes of personal experience (which sometimes include close friends and family in the guise of *figurants* or “extras”) only then to contrast such scenes to the very conditions of their being seen as images: form, dimension, hanging, and juxtaposition are some of the privileged factors that contribute to a process of laying bare the devices of photographic realism. Whereas initially, private performances are confronted to textual pronouncements that are not so evidently related to what one actually sees, an analogous process of estrangement takes place in all the later work (which drops the textual component altogether) as April creates pictorial narratives of the self in which the boundaries between storytelling and autobiography, life writing and the writing of photography as fiction are purposely left unresolved. It can be said that all her work pertains specifically to the vision of an “I”, if only because it nevertheless critically “frames” the act of speaking, writing, and making images from the standpoint of the first person singular. If at first glance the artist herself seems to be the centre of the system she authors, this very centre is underwritten, effaced, doubled, represented and re-framed as the site of a questioning and not as the locus of a solution. In the final analysis, life writing is shown to be plagued by the impossibility of writing out the structures and material conditions without which the self cannot be pictured in any form.

Moreover, as her corpus has increasingly grown in size, to attain one day perhaps the proportions of Borges's infinite library, April has recently begun an investigation into the status of the archive. In this light, the creation of new works cannot be undertaken without a dialogue with the plethora of pre-existing images to which they are formally or thematically related. For instance, in the film work *Tout embrasser* ("To Embrace Everything," 2000), April's hand is seen manipulating five hundred photographs one at a time. For the most part, these images were never previously exhibited, but could have formed part of a given series at the time of their production. In the film, their temporal status curiously changes: her hand, which stands in for the role of the historical gaze, "translates" past images into the present, thereby weaving hitherto unforeseen narratives.

The almost abstract series *Gravitas* combines both this meditation on archive and the notion of

self-picturing in a single work.<sup>3</sup> Throughout a period of several months, the artist undertook a yet unfinished archaeological process of stripping nearly a century of paint from the beautifully embossed surfaces that adorn the walls of the dining room in her Montreal home. This long-term performative act is documented with the aid of a large-format camera (which April rarely uses given its inherent lack of spontaneity). The resulting images are both troubling and touching as they evoke an obsessive gesture whose outcome merely reveals the cold objecthood of the wall, which in this case is surprisingly intimate. In fact, stripping bare here functions as a metaphor of artistic unveiling that is both critical and expressive. Ultimately, *Gravitas* is a reflection on time; it is a distillation of the very act of "making" images, which is here equated to a painstaking process of historical preservation that is at once a journey into the self and an open-ended voyage into the material conditions of identity. It is this openness to experimentation that distinguishes April's production from the photographic art of her generation. Indeed, what is so stimulating about viewing these photographs time and again is their rich potential for generating multiple meanings that are never stable, but depend on contextual factors that pertain both to form and to affect. In this way, her practice can be regarded as a model of artistic creation itself that unfolds ceaselessly in new ways without ever altering its foundational parameters, that is, without ever disclosing the hidden centre of its gravity.

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<sup>1</sup> Jorge Luis Borges, "El idioma analítico de John Wilkins" in *Otras Inquisiciones* (Buenos Aires: Emecé Editores, 1960), p. 142-43. An English translation can be found in *Borges: Selected Non-Fictions* (New York: Penguin, 2000).

<sup>2</sup> Cf. *Parachute* no. 105 (Winter 2002), ed. by Olivier Asselin and Johanne Lamoureux.

<sup>3</sup> *Gravitas* was exhibited at the Donald Browne Gallery in Montreal in 2007.