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Aprilian Scenes

By France Gascon



Relatively early in her career, Raymonde April became the first art photographer in Quebec to establish a body of work employing what would come to be called, echoing a similar and increasingly noticeable trend in literature, “self-fiction”. When the Musée d’art de Joliette presented the first retrospective of her work, *Les Fleuves invisibles*,¹ in 1997, it was clear from the critical reception that this exhibition was the consecration of a form of photographic expression no longer turned towards the document and finding its subject in others, but towards instead the personal, the non-event and its dramatisation. This new form of expression discarded the grand subject, exoticism and denunciation of every description, yielding in their place to the everyday and its insignificant moments, here magnified but nevertheless devoid of any overly dramatic emphasis. At the same time, photographic projects of a documentary, social or conceptual nature, which had dominated for decades previous, no longer appeared to be the only high roads to the creation of great works of art. A photographic practice in an intimist vein, or one with the appearances of such, thus provided enough audacity to sustain the development of a

major body of work. “A body of work. Individual, if not unique. And accomplished”,² Stéphane Aquin concluded at the time in *Voir*, while Bernard Lamarche wrote in *Le Devoir* that “April has shifted various codes of Quebec documentary photography, along with its tradition, which in the end has founded another”, seeing “true value” in her imagery.³

Everywhere it goes, self-fiction seems to carry with it a whiff of scandal or, at the very least, cause a stir. Often it is granted a place only grudgingly. It is as if photographing oneself, choosing oneself as the subject, without submitting to the “autobiographical pact” (“I’m telling you everything”, the autobiographer says), creates a confusion of genres—part fiction, part confidence—and opens the door to narcissistic or exhibitionist foible, quickly seen as a source of boredom or repetition. As if, also, self-fiction goes hand in hand with a lack of concern for formal questions and unfailingly results in an impoverishment of narrative form—something I believe to be the exact opposite of what can be seen in the work of Raymonde April.

In examining the succession of images that April has created since the late 1970s, it becomes quite apparent that her formal universe has been accompanied since quite early on by a number of twists and turns, as well-constructed and delineated as this universe was right from the earliest positions she adopted. In April’s work, photographing her private world did not dictate a sole form or an unchanging point of view, but opened the door, rather, to veering off in multiple directions. There can be no doubt that in her work the private sphere has also been a stylistic journey, or that the spectre of repetition was also brushed aside. Subjects, formats, point of view: nothing, here, appears to be fixed; all this, we realise, monopolises her attention as she relegates “spicy” autobiographical or self-fictional content to a more indefinite and almost reticent background.

This can be observed in the first pictures she exhibited in a Montreal gallery, in 1980,⁴ including *Mais qui donc pourrait me faire mal?* from 1979; they depict a cinematic persona, the artist herself, in a vaguely melodramatic role. A text, with an air of inner thought, reinforces the image. The composition cuts off her head, leaving the rest, including the text, the task of interpretation. The staged effect is emphasised, but the interpretation nevertheless remains ambiguous. Following this series there followed other self-portraits, although now devoid of any text. Here the connection with the world of images was more direct: the persona on display, if persona it still was, had become more artistic; the photographer appeared to be playing herself. The studio in *Portrait de l’artiste #1*, from 1980, and the artist’s tools in *Debout sur le rivage*, from 1984 (the

third of nine images), provide both the setting and the elements of the “set design”. Here the boundary between what could pass for “real” or “authentic” and what could pass for staged has become more tenuous. In 1981, in *Miniatures*, April would introduce images—landscapes—taken from books, thereby discreetly staking a claim to appropriation and presenting it as one of the modes of her production of images, to which she would return countless times thereafter.

Throughout all these changes the self-portrait continued to be present, but often as a mere counterpoint to several other kinds of images which, very carefully, we could describe as landscapes, portraits or still lifes. In the meantime the outdoors had also intruded into the camera’s field of view, surreptitiously at first by way of its reproduction, such as the landscapes in the series of *Miniatures*.

Innovations are never in short supply; they follow one upon the other. The pace picks up considerably, however, with the veritable Copernican revolution in Raymonde April’s work that was the *Sphinx* series in 1989. Produced in Paris, *Sphinx* depicts unknown individuals outdoors, something never before seen in her work. Here, for the first time, she engages with a world she does not fully control and which unfolds before her, at a distance, without her having staged it. At most she selects the angles, the excerpts, and of course reorganises everything afterwards, as she always does when placing pictures in sequence, a process to which she ultimately subjects most of her work. This series also brought a new variation in the format of her photographs, which until then had been rather small and sometimes even minuscule. They now assumed almost monumental proportions, conveying authority and multiplying their references to great genres, such as the portrait of an intellectual in a reflective mood in her boudoir alluded to a little later by *Le Portrait de Michèle*, in 1993.

Afterwards, the film, the fresco and the mosaic also burst without warning into April’s vocabulary (or rather her syntax). And later colour photography. There is thus no doubt that the creation of a form and the means of construction are as important as the content, if not more so, and that April throws herself entirely into this aspect of her work. It is clear that it does not scrimp on new techniques. That it is inventive in its form. And that it takes sharp turns just as often as it likes.

Raymonde April’s oeuvre is incontestably autobiographical—there are too many traces of this to go unnoticed—but in a way, we must hasten to add, that constantly leads us to keep our distance

from this term. I have remarked elsewhere, in a discussion of her self-portraits,⁵ that her comments on her work most often focus on the ways in which the image is constructed and not on the topics chosen, which we nevertheless surmise without great difficulty come from her immediate environment. Her private world may very well stare us in the face, but it is rarely the topic of her work and she carefully avoids emphasising its presence. While we may recognise that a private world is being revealed in these images and that the characters who reappear throughout them seem to play no other role than their own, this fact is rarely mentioned, in the title or elsewhere. Modesty appears to be the guiding principle, but this is a result more of the sense of secrecy April seems to prefer, or perhaps even cultivate, by avoiding anything which might have the effect of penetrating it. Thus personal stories—in fact stories we have no doubt are personal—are stippled much more than they are made clear.

This preference for silence is not the product of chance, and Raymonde April's muteness is the very basis of the "palimpsest of 'narrative persons'", in Régis Durand's description,⁶ to which her work gives rise. By shunting aside personal stories, room is made for other kinds of narratives, more generic and more universal. And this is one of the tours de force of her work: as authentic as the original "casting" that is the source of these works may be, fiction finds a way of creeping in, everywhere, to the scenes she has chosen. The situations and poses she selects, because they are sufficiently free of overly precise references, are able to transcend the banal and, more often than not, attain an authentic iconic state.

This reversal is as unexpected as it is spectacular. This is not a place we expect to find a photographer. It is one thing for her to turn her back on the document and technical feats,⁷ or on the omniscient attitudes that photographic art has always preferred; we would not have been surprised to see her take advantage of the photographer's dominant position—and viewfinder—to bring out, in her own way, what might well be lost to sight. But this is not what she has chosen to do, and we never expected a photographer to carry out a style exercise this radical, who moves ahead as if masked, under cover of the personal, but who rejects any form of misplaced or blaring confidence, any overly emphasised feat, and prefers instead to explore great "photographic phrases", phrases made out of various scattered elements and whose signature is sometimes (often, in fact) absent, but on which she imprints an audacity which, in the end, is her true signature.

It is fascinating to watch Raymonde April move through the world of photography and, this whole time, to see her play with images in such a lyrical manner, as if the nature of her oeuvre was more musical than iconographic and as if, whether presented in isolation or as a group, they were always in flux and never entirely fixed in their references, boundaries or even their meaning, part-way between the personal and the universal, the private and the public, the awe-inspiring and the innocuous.

The way she inverts roles, passing from photographer to archivist and back again, is somewhat disconcerting, even in contemporary art, which has seen many other practices like it. Very early in the development of her work April made space for images which were not her own. At the time she began doing this, in the *Miniatures* in 1981, the art of quoting had long been a tool at the disposal of painters, photographers and many other kinds of artists. There was nothing startling about this in itself. Except that, when we compare their techniques, we see that April, unlike most artists who use quotations, employs them in situations where the quotation merges with her own idiom. Whereas a quotation in the visual arts is usually accompanied by some sort of sign indicating that it is a borrowing (something that is pointless when the object being borrowed is quite familiar), April seeks out instead anonymous quotations with no artistic signature. In her work we see a desire, reiterated many times over, not to impose the figure of the artist as someone erudite, omniscient, who gives lessons or is simply grandiloquent. A refusal to be seen as a sort of authority, dictating meaning or a moral or inspiring awe, is part of her personal stamp. She dreads technical or compositional feats. Images, she seems to be saying, should be part of a flow that resembles the theatre of life, out of which, moreover, they arise. If they appear to have been manufactured, she also seems to be saying, we should attribute this effect to the theatre of everyday life and not to an omniscient or omnipotent photographer or stage director.

What at the beginning was only a more or less perceptible quoting effect became more extreme with time. In several series made over the past few years we have witnessed a veritable blurring of the boundary between what is generally understood as a work of art signed by the photographer, meaning the picture as it was taken and printed by this same photographer, and the work of researching and selecting material in the archives, work Raymonde April has taken on with a rare intensity. Original photographs and photographs taken from the archives, both personal and otherwise, find themselves treated as if they were from one and the same continuum. Indeed one non-negligible aspect of April's work has been devoted the past few years to projects which feature her own old photographs, such as *Tout embrasser* in 2001, or which feature

photographs taken by others. And not just any “other”: snapshots taken for example by her father, an amateur photographer she admired, or, in the project she shared with Michèle Waquant in 2005, *Migration Areas*,⁸ photographs of members of her family, covering several generations and taken, as we might expect, by unidentified and anonymous photographers.

It is clear that the “flow” of these put aside, forgotten and rediscovered photographs and what they say about the affective bonds they create around them corresponds on every level with what April’s other photographs, featuring what Jean-Claude Rochefort describes as “friendly human presences”⁹—friends and family on vacation, resting, engaged in leisure activities or on an escapade—were also trying to pin down. The personal, in her photographs, is much more than images depicting friends and family; it is, above all, a portrait of the nearby places and situations where these affective bonds can flourish free of constraint or convention (other than those which we agree to amongst ourselves) and far from the disembodied environment of work, to mention only that environment. Although we never read their names, and the nature of the affective bond is never or rarely made clear, we sense from the gestures (or absence of gestures) and situations the fundamental relationships being forged among these people. The same is true of groups of people, such as that in *Autobus* from 2010, in which we can sense the nearness, the near-family quality.

Contagiously, the personal relationship inferred in many photographs ends up inflecting them all, including those which simply depict a place, at times quite distant and thus by definition exotic, such as *Chanteur (Pékin)*, from 2010. Despite the lack of the indications, we understand that a bare wall (*Gravitas*, from 2007) or a view of a cafeteria (*Cantine*, from 2004), may have been, momentarily or for a longer period, part of the artist’s familiar surroundings, and that she found in them something of interest formally. In fact from one end of her work to the other we sense that April has maintained the same “respiration” between the objects which attract her attention, whether they are self-portraits, the settings she passes through, her regular (or off the beaten track) travels and sometimes the studies of texture and light for which her immediate environment served as the pretext. The same respiration is also maintained between older and contemporary photographs and between self-portraits, portraits, landscapes and other images which depict only elements of the setting. References to artists’ working lives also recur: images of studios and work spaces, often her own but also those others (*Chambre noire de Desmond Adams*, from 2010)—impromptu and unaffected compositions (*Intérieur [Pékin]*, from 2010) taken furtively which recall in a vague way, without seeming to, genre scenes similar to those of Ingres

(*Odalisque*, from 2006) or Chardin (*Adrienne*, from 2006). All these elements, by virtue of their recurrence, remind us that there is a cosmogony at work in all Raymonde April's work that maintains its equilibrium despite the addition of foreign elements, which constantly bring it up to date, meaning into the present and the everyday, the very stuff of her photography.

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The persistence of this cosmology and constant updating in new settings and sometimes on new supports, as well as April's loyalty to certain beliefs that have been apparent since as far back as the 1970s and 80s, places us in the presence of a body of work that displays, and on this there can be no doubt, a true aesthetic. The wager of constructing this body of work around a medium which, because of its highly technical nature and well marked out codes, could appear to April to be refractory, and treating it as if it were a choral work, developing over time in several registers and leading viewers into stories which make room for them, was a mad one. A great deal of audacity was needed to think that photography could lend itself to what seems to be the outer limit of a counter-use.

I do not believe that it is by chance that this body of work was developed in Quebec, where concern for the form and construction of stories strongly marked the emergence of modern and contemporary artistic practices the more these practices distanced themselves from narrative. In the history of Quebec art, the reference to a "subject" has been disparaged more than it deserved. Raymonde April's distrust of overly literal and directive content seems to me to be directly connected to an attitude underlying many fruitful artistic practices in Quebec but not elsewhere (and particularly not in the Anglophone world). Raymonde April's commitment to circularity, both in the way in which she invites the viewer to traverse her work and in the way she lends herself to this sport of looking back, going so far as to offer up, in images, her own historiography, constantly returning to her condition as photographer and neutralising all escape into a one-dimensional meaning, incontestably situates her in the great formalist tradition of Quebec art wherein the image, in itself, is a subject of unceasing investigation. It deserves our complete attention and we dread, above all else, it being made an instrument. The nature of many of the challenges she has tackled and her loyalty to a particular vision make Raymonde April seem today like one of the last, and one of the most original and unexpected, figures in this tradition. The fact that this tradition has been reincarnated in an artistic practice—photography—where we did not expect to see it, and in a resolutely post-formalist discourse, close to self-fiction

and contrary to a certain conception of the medium, only adds to the many-faceted and quite deserved interest her work has already generated.

¹ *Raymonde April – Les Fleuves invisibles*, Musée d’art de Joliette, 1997 (toured 1998-2001). Exhibition catalogue. Text by the curator, Nicole Gingras.

² Stéphane Aquin, “Raymonde April: Art poétique”, *Voir* (Montreal). vol. 11, no. 42 (16-22 Oct. 1997): 55.

³ Bernard Lamarche, “Les beaux jours de l’intime: Raymonde April: Les Fleuves Invisibles”, *Le Devoir*, Saturday 6 December 1997, p. B9.

⁴ Galerie Gilles Gheerbrant, Montreal, 1980.

⁵ France Gascon, “Hors-série Les autoportraits de Raymonde April”, *Trois* 14, no. 1 (1998): 77-87.

⁶ Régis Durand, “[Sans titre]”, *Réservoirs soupirs: photographies 1986-1992* (Quebec City: VU, 1993), n.p.

⁷ “I am not a very good technician, so if I need to learn something I only learn what I need”, Raymonde April, in Robert Enright, “Secret Sharer: An Interview with Raymonde April”, *Bordercrossings* 108 (December 2008): 70.

⁸ Exhibition *Migration Areas – Raymonde April, Michèle Waquant*. Le Quartier, Centre d’art contemporain de Quimper, 2005 (toured 2005). Exhibition catalogue. Texts by Raymonde April, Michèle Waquant and Chantal Boulanger.

⁹ Jean-Claude Rochefort, “Bifurcations: Notes et matériaux”, *CV Ciel variable*, special section “Raymonde April, Bifurcations, Prix Borduas 2003”, p. 18.