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RAYMONDE APRIL : A PHILOSOPHY OF RETRENCHMENT
VINCENT LAVOIE

57 ans, une pratique plus que photographique en l'honneur d'une vie passée dans l'écriture et la lecture. Elle est une philosophe, une écrivaine, une journaliste, une femme de lettres, une femme de bien. Elle est une femme de bien.

Son œuvre photographique est une œuvre de la philosophie qui s'inscrit dans la lignée de la pensée de Raymond April. Elle est une œuvre de la philosophie qui s'inscrit dans la lignée de la pensée de Raymond April. Elle est une œuvre de la philosophie qui s'inscrit dans la lignée de la pensée de Raymond April.



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Les œuvres photographiques de Raymond April

RAYMONDE APRIL
œuvre photographique
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If ever a photographic practice brought the intimate and the public into delicate, circumspect contact, Raymonde April's certainly does. Her images fascinate through their presentation designed using elements of daily life and in which friends and family are promoted to actors. They admittedly favour fiction over the flat recording of reality, but they nevertheless do not deny the photograph's power of witnessing. This "somewhat documentary side,"¹ acts less to emphasize the veracity of the photographic image than to form a counterpoint to an overly nostalgic conception of photography which would have meaning only for its author. The documentary aspect of Raymonde April's work demonstrates a concern for the viewer, since it presupposes an ordering of the biographical material that makes up her works. For although the artist's personal history constitutes an intrinsic component of her creative process, we could not say that the autobiographical position adopted by Raymonde April leads us to apprehend a private space. In fact, her autobiography conceals more than it reveals the artist's private life, because it is not presented as containing singular stories but, rather, as a malleable, even protean, raw material. *Le souper* (1984), for example, exhibited at the Musée d'art contemporain de Montréal in *Voyage dans le monde des choses* (1986), tells us little about the position this meal holds in the artist's personal history. We guess that the figures are bound by friendship, because they are dining, talking and laughing around the same table. A detail, however: one place is empty. Who is missing? And why? It is so easy to speculate on the meaning of such an image that we suspect that this void represents a strategy for confusing the viewer's reading, or else a warning not to seek a single, sovereign meaning. Consequently, despite the familiarity of the subject, the viewers remain detached from the scene, confined to their position as observers somewhat bedazzled by the range of angles for analysis. Although her images show us friends or family, and are the subject of an exhibition, hence a public presentation, we are far from the feeling of looking at pictures from a family album. And yet April's images are plainly full of affect, and the documentary nearly nothing we just spoke of is there to remind us of this. That, perhaps, is why they seem both near and far: near because they attract an attentive, sympathetic, even knowing look, but also far, because they reveal themselves to us with great caution.

Here we find this aesthetic of distance characteristic of April's work. *La géométrie* (*Debout sur le rivage*, 1984), also from *Voyage dans le monde des choses* (1986), is exemplary in this regard. While the model is presented in a form that obviously sets it up as the subject of the picture, is it in fact a portrait? With respect to the conventions of the portrait, this work breaks a major taboo: it hides the face. It is, indeed, difficult to identify this visage veiled by a sheet of plastic of the kind used to store slides. But, besides the fact that it jeopardizes identification of the model's features, is this veil of plastic really devoid of information as to the identity of the person it

covers? Isn't this mica paper the attribute of a photographic practice? Isn't it then all the more evocative of the activity it refers to, from the fact that it fits over the photographer (?)'s face, that mirror of passions. Once again, the autobiographical component acts as a mask interposed between the subject of the representation and the viewer. In fact, we are trapped by a familiar rhetoric which, ultimately, refuses to make sense. It is therefore difficult to look at the works of Raymonde April in a fetishist way, because none of the elements that make up her images stands in isolation. Even the method of presenting shots in series makes it impossible to value one image more than another, because of the formal and semantic interactions that arise between each photograph.

This question of fetishism seems to come up with some intensity in the *Sphinx* series (1988-1989), exhibited at the Musée d'art contemporain de Montréal in *Tenir l'image à distance* (1989). Comprising six photographs of different sizes, this series shows us figures picked out of the crowd at random. These representations are enlarged and framed, so that the figures that were submerged in the crowd now seem to emerge from anonymity. Once the camera has distinguished them from the crowd, can we speak of fetishism? That might be true if the rules inherent in the elective practice of portraiture had been applied, but such is not the case. No staging, no scenic device, no accessories none of the stratagems usually employed by a portrait photographer when taking a shot. Instead, we have individuals with unknown identities who stand against an equally anonymous urban background. Whereas *La géométrie (Debout sur le rivage)*, gave us an explicit use of the rules and conventions governing portraiture — use of a neutral background, adoption of a pose, central position of the subject, control of the lighting — the *Sphinx* series rejects all reference to that rhetoric, although it presents the same elusiveness of the figures and gives rise to the same sense of exclusion just when we think we have reached the essence of the subject. What is surprising, however, is the effect of intimacy, of proximity created by the segregating eye of the camera. This intimacy is, in the end, illusory, since it depends on the “conjunction of calculation and chance.”² Raymonde April's images are certainly precious, because they make retrenchment and secrecy their principal method of exhibition. They are images that express intimacy, without ever displaying it. Images in which fiction screens overly inquisitive looks. Images, finally, that are somewhat modest, with self-expression taking the route of standing back.

¹ Text by the artist, taken from *The Impossible Self*, Winnipeg, Winnipeg Art Gallery, April 10 - July 10 1988, p. 19

² Régis Durand, “Raymonde April, sphynge du familier”, in *Art Press*, “Spécial photo”, 1990, P. 59.