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Interiors: The art of Raymonde April

The Quebec photographer aims at an inner world

by NICOLE GINGRAS



Eleven years ago, I wrote about Raymonde April in conjunction with an exhibition of her work I curated for the Musée d'art de Joliette. Since then, the photographer has made a 16-mm film and mounted several major exhibitions, and the images she creates continue to obsess me. Some of her images seem even more monumental than I once thought them. Her photographic series are like fragile frescoes of private life: they portray landscapes and heroic characters, but also innocuous moments: a peculiar light, a gaze, a gesture, an object that might have gone unnoticed. Every image carries paradoxes within it: anonymous intimacy, troubling familiarity, reassuring singularity, poetic description, fascinating prosaicism.

April's work reveals a discernable yet inexplicable tension between the familiar and the distinctively singular. She has developed a unique relationship with her viewers and does us the

kindness of sharing with us the secrets of her world: we become, in a sense, her confidants, and this alchemy underlies our attraction to her work. Despite their apparent simplicity, her photographs resist being tied to a precise meaning. This can be disarming: her art holds our gaze but also resists it. Our experience of an April photograph unfolds over time, moving through description to narration and, sometimes, fascination.

How does one describe the gaze that April casts on her surroundings? Her images are never isolated; they form part of a continuum. She has a highly unusual way of framing and reframing her images. Think of *Le Portrait de Michèle* (1993), of *L'Homme de poussière* (1973–93) and of her self-portraits, which have become icons in the history of contemporary Canadian photography: *Jour de verre* (1983), the series *De l'autre côté des baisers* (1985–86), *Une mouche au paradis* (1988) and *Femme nouée* (1990).

Certain of her images need to be seen alongside others to take their place in her network of reflections and correspondences. She creates resonance through the recurring appearance of certain figures (members of her family, her friends) and places (landscapes in the lower St. Lawrence region, a cottage by a lake) that have become familiar to long-time viewers of her work. There are also formal questions to take note of with each series because—and one can never say this enough—April's photographs are composed, constructed, thought out. She works in three associative modes: fresco (creating puzzling panoramas composed of potent, isolated moments), montage (using cinematic techniques such as parallel, diachronic editing) and mosaic (presenting a massed array of images that resists being taken in by the viewer's gaze and defies our efforts to see everything).

L'Arrivée des figurants (1997), consisting of 33 photographs in five series, was a turning point in April's work. Here, April asserts that the image can be constructed as a continuum that suggests a sequence of stills from an imaginary film. This magnificent work prefigures the artist's interest in installation and the way in which her photographs are exhibited, something that would play an even greater role in the projects *Tout embrasser* (2000–01) and *Aires de migrations* (2005).

Tout embrasser is the title of a film and a series of photographs that were presented at the Leonard and Bina Ellen Art Gallery at Concordia University in 2001. In the film, a pile of photos rests on a table. Every few seconds, a hand appears and removes the top photo, revealing another beneath, until the pile is gone. Then everything disappears. The screen goes blank, then a new

pile appears. The film records the images as in a documentary, showing photographs made from previously unprinted negatives dating from the artist's first roll of film in 1972 to 1998. Here, her contact sheets, her field of inquiry, became an inexhaustible "Mystic Writing-Pad" (a term used by Freud in a text on memory). Using principles of juxtaposition and classification, April, from 1996 to 1999, assembled 19 piles of between 15 and 35 photos each.

In the exhibition, the artist chose certain photographs from the film and enlarged them. By returning to the starting point of the project, she enabled viewers to discover specific details and narratives within the work while at the same time highlighting the paradoxical relationship between images and time. Tout embrasser expressed April's desire to recount where she comes from, a desire that is reiterated in the bodies of work that followed.

Aires de migrations is a fascinating diary of creation, an encyclopedia of the image (photographs, drawings, texts, postcards, letters, etc.) created jointly by April and Michèle Waquant, a Canadian artist living in France. The work is based on precise landmarks of time and place, and overwhelms the viewer with photographs taken by the two artists, portraits that each has taken of the other and photographs of their families. It's a risky venture, one that is based on the artists' mutual desire to pool their respective photographic archives and also to incorporate into their work the broader history of snapshots and family albums.

As we rummage about in and scrutinize their family iconographies, we are provided with an opportunity to discover the moment when each artist found her particular way of framing the world. Sometimes their visions seem to be running on parallel tracks: they might show us the same landscape, but frame it differently. The exhibition goes beyond the concept of the archive or the personal diary: assembled under the sign of excess, it functions as an unveiling, bringing to light the first traces of the creative act. The sheer number of photographs in the work makes it impossible to see everything, so for the vigilant observer there is the possibility of discovering new images each time.

This quality of ambiguity, the oscillation between familiarity and singularity, remains photography's greatest paradox and founding principle. With Aires de migrations, we can see a similarity of vision across generations. In the family albums, certain visual tropes can be detected even in photos that predate the artists' births. April and Waquant show how photography serves as a fabulous screen onto which thought, fiction, reality and memory can be projected.

The notion of the work site has played an increasingly important role in April's work over the last ten years. The hive of activity evoked by *Tout embrasser* and the archive assembly of *Aires de migrations* reverberate in *Mosaïque* (2004), a photograph taken by April at Michèle Waquant's studio in Bagnolet. Created immediately after *Tout embrasser*, it also prefigures *Aires de migrations* by showing us an array of images waiting to be looked at and discussed by the two artists.

Recently, in *Gravitas* (2007–), April's domestic space has become a work site. For this project, April patiently and steadfastly stripped paint from the walls of a room in her apartment with a palette knife and documented the process with an eight-byten- inch camera. Her visual recounting of this Herculean labour speaks to the time involved in a major project and expresses the perpetual need for new ways of looking at images—both those already existing and those yet to come. These photographs (both black-and-white and colour) show us both time and texture. They document an unspectacular transformation: we witness an activity begun by chance, then made regular, even obsessive—a metaphor, perhaps, for the artistic process.

Writing about Raymonde April in 1997, I emphasized her insatiable gaze. Today, this quality of astonishment is still present in her work, though turned perhaps towards fragile moments, less imposing and spectacular ones. Paradoxically, her works have a more powerful effect on the observer. While April seems to have tried to detach herself from her images and the places and people she photographs, strangely enough this distancing draws her viewers even closer. By exploring the world of images that inhabits her, April discovers the world around us.

Translated from the French by Timothy Barnard