

Virgílio Ferreira

“Daily pilgrims”

Mystic, poetic and introspective, the photography of Virgílio Ferreira (Porto, 1970) transgresses the borders between reality and dream, affinity and remoteness, earthy corporeality and sublimity. Though inextricably linked with the “battlefield” of everyday life through travels to geographically identifiable places and encounters with local “anthropologies”, Ferreira’s work goes as a whole beyond any plain documentary approach. It transmits the “aura” of a “palpable” human truth blurred by globalization and multiculturalism.

Ferreira has recently completed “Daily Pilgrims”. The project was born in early 2007 thanks to a one-month trip to Macao granted to the photographer by the Fundação do Oriente. This initial trip evolved in a three-month “observation” of daily life in some of the main Asian metropolises like Tokyo, Beijing, Shanghai and Bangkok, the objective being -according to Ferreira’s own words- “to stimulate the questioning of a human reality in its habitat and to reflect on the Zeitgeist”.

The immense socio-economical and cultural transformations taking place in Eastern Asia are a familiar topic in contemporary photography, but Ferreira prefers to remain an “outsider”. His out-of-focus images of anonymous human figures and bubbling city lights are miles away from the predominant tendency to examine whatever happening on the coasts of the Pacific these days as a symptomatic phenomenon of growing globalization and explosive capitalistic communism. Unarguably, “Daily Pilgrims” offers an approach unwilling to reiterate neither the cold serial formalism of the manufactured industrial landscapes of Edward Burtynsky nor the humanistic documentary gaze of authors obsessively looking for the ghost of Mao in every corner of Shanghai. “I am not engaged in collecting influences and in allowing them to operate on my work”, stresses the photographer. “My images suggest rather than show. I prefer the detail and the unobvious.”

“Today we experience the modern anguishes of the search for identity. This is the contemporary myth”, wrote once Jean Claude Kaufmann. Ferreira’s abstract symbolic universe, as constructed in “Daily Pilgrims”, seems to be fully in tune with this viewpoint. Replete with visual distortions, the series exposes critically the way in which our need as viewers for a “prefabricated” reading of pictures is stimulated by, what Ferreira describes

as “a social demand for representation and invention of the several possible -ness”. By means of an unconventional perspective and of a striking insistence on fragmentation, colour formalism and blurring, Ferreira’s images operate literally as an obstacle fence for the eye. We are never able to figure out what is out there: between us and the subject there is no room for any identifiable “Other” or for any spatial contextualization in socio-political terms. Cities and humans become a generic fluid body of forms and colours, creating a sense of timeless sociology.

Ferreira feels as if drifting in history without knowing much about why and how things happen. “There are moments of lucidity and certainty, but the flow of life shows that we are a sum of trial-and-error attempts and of collages”, he affirms with conviction and so does his whole working method, which consists of a mix of technical rigor together with spontaneity and the capacity to find room for the unpredictable in the utmost staged images.

Let us take as an example of this the unusual angles and blurring – all typical street photography tricks, which operate in favour of a peculiar snapshot quality in the “Daily Pilgrims” series. Although there is no candid camera, when we look through these pictures, an accentuated sensation of inaccessibility and deliberate invisibility conquers us. Even the photographer himself seems trapped in this feeling. In a half-oblivious voyeuristic attitude, he disregards the possibility of actually “being there”, conscious of the fact that the cultural memory we inherit and take on as our “mother and stepmother” operates as the absolute deforming force upon our gaze, obstructing us from viewing the world in its pro-verbal and non-cultural essence.

Ferreira literally captures with his camera lens captures emotions, memories and desires. This is precisely what renders his images so attractive and imbues them with a Benjaminian-like aura. But Ferreira prefers to resort to a more down-to earth interpretation, when it comes to the “Daily Pilgrims” formal qualities, an interpretation related with the main external factor that conditions his effort to catch the decisive moment: “Behind my images there is rush”, he remarks. “In these cities everybody is extremely busy and their first response is always negative. When you manage to get people’s permission for a picture, you have to shoot within a few seconds, while nobody bothers striking a pose for you”.

Yet, despite urban high-tech velocity, Ferreira achieves the picture that captures the magic with the help of his Rolleiflex medium-format camera. He still prefers to use a 6x6 slide film, avoiding any sort of digital

manipulation, post-production or laboratory intervention. What is of paramount importance in the emotive dreamlike style of his traditionally processed prints is his “colour metaphysics”. “I identify with colour. I see the world in this way”, he says. On the other hand, illumination techniques vary. “Daily Pilgrims” implied working on the street with heavy equipment and no assistant, so Ferreira had to dispense with artificial light sources. Nonetheless, as he remarks, “the city lights worked perfectly for the final result”.

“Daily Pilgrims” is the most challenging work in the trajectory of Virgilio Ferreira. Articulated by many visual layers of presences and absences, it resists all given representations of identity. Assuming the role of a “pseudo-ethnographer”, Ferreira has built his approach not upon the exotic and the unfamiliar but upon what bridges our differences. “The answer to everything I do is people”, he emphasizes. By describing life as a harmonious conjunction of alchemy, sociology and spirituality, he takes us in the realm of a universal abstract sublimity, reminding us that even if places change, people will always keep fluctuating on the globalization roads. As Ferreira concludes, “All of us are pilgrims; maybe not in typical religious terms as the pilgrims of Santiago de Compostella, but we are, in an existential and pragmatic way. All of us have a unique mission to accomplish, looking for our path in the ritual of life”.

TEXT by Natasha Christia

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