

FISHER, Jean. [sem título/untitled]. In Rosângela Rennó. Amsterdam: De Appel Foundation, 1995, p.2-10.

Untitled / Jean Fisher

Among the few photographs I have seen, beyond the realm of my own family album, that have truly touched a chord in my psyche, are a series of modest images by Rosângela Rennó, which were presented in London a few years ago. They are far removed from what is generally considered to be a “professional” photograph, exhibiting, on the contrary, many of the features of what one might call a “failure”, an inadequate rendering of the subject intended to be caught in the camera’s lens: out of focus, double-exposed, over-exposed, poorly-illuminated or crookedly-framed.

They belong, evidently, to the genre of the snapshot, the personal memento or witness of an occasion - an individual encounter with a time, place or personality. At the same time, their imprecision gives them the quality of a film frame - an accidental or casual moment, signifying nothing in itself, extracted from a movement or sequence that would perhaps have provided the single frame with a meaningful context. And yet it is in their very incompetence to fix the event depicted that they are infused with a profoundly fragile sense of humanity.

A Mulher que Perdeu a Memória (The Woman Who Lost Her Memory) presents a blurred image of an elderly woman who seems to be posing before the photographer, yet both her features and the context in which she is placed are beyond recognition, the image beyond usefulness as an aide memoire for its subject or her friends.

Erro de Concordância (A Mistake in Agreement) presents an extremely tilted view of a wedding scene from behind the backs of the main participants. In this case, it is perhaps towards the status and position of the photographer “himself”, a question about his relationship to the figures in the scene that we are drawn.

Indeed, such a question is seldom posed by the image of photography, in which the eye behind the camera lens usually remains transparent, or hidden, in terms of its ideological relationship to its subject. These, like all of Rennó's images, are found, not shot by the artist herself, so in this sense she has investment in their personal, anecdotal meaning. What then is her role? Perhaps "shot" here is a key word - one that exposes the aggressivity that inscribes the relationship between photographer and model, as well as alluding to the "death mask" that the photographic image is, a surface skin, a play of shadows of what has passed away. But here Rennó finds and chooses those photographs that reveal the very nature of the image and our investment in it.

I should like to digress here a moment to remind you of the classic anecdote of western representation - the story of the contest between Zeuxis and Parrhasius to determine who was the better painter. Zeuxis, it is said, painted grapes so life-like that the birds flew down to peck at them. Parrhasius, however, painted a veil, and on being shown it, Zeuxis exclaimed: "Well, now let us see what you have painted behind it!" Zeuxis may have fooled the birds but Parrhasius could fool a man; but what was the nature of the deceit? Clearly we must say that image and veil are one and the same thing. But I think it would be a mistake to conclude from this story that the image itself deceives: the image, representation, is no more nor less than what it claims to show. Rather, it is Zeuxis, in his desire for meaning, in his desire to penetrate the veil and know what he thinks lies behind it, who deceives himself.

Zeuxis cannot know what lies behind the veil, and yet it is precisely this unknown that structures the very motor of his thought. Rennó's images, a play of shadows, shifting focus, doubling, dissolving before our eyes, reveal their condition as the veil, denying our colonising gaze its structuring and defining demand. We are thus confronted with the movement of desire itself, as that which seeks to know - what? Perhaps, that which one always seeks in vain to remember.

Thus, Rennó's photographs restage for us the intimate relationship between desire and reminiscence. It is by way of this association that we may begin to insinuate ourselves into the tropes set up by the artist's installation *In Oblivionem* (No Landscape). Here we are presented with two pairs of closed doors, each

panelled, irregularly and incompletely, with a “grid” of turn-of-the-century, formal family portraits. Dark, partially-degraded negatives on glass, we catch fractured reflections of our own image in them as we pass by. Opposite the closed doors are seven blocks of text, set into a wall like the engraved inscriptions of shrines in Catholic cemeteries. Each of these, like the photos, is “found”- a small, seemingly insignificant story taken from the newspaper, reporting an event involving a photograph. One or two explicitly draw attention to our psychic investment in our own image, the almost diabolical power it has on our sense of selfhood. An elderly couple claim the rights to a kiss captured by chance by a passing photographer in the street some years before and circulated worldwide, seeking to return to the privacy of their own memory what had become public property. In another legal suit, a divorcée demands that part of her wedding photo containing her image be returned by her ex-husband as it is no longer part of his property.

There is nothing on the face of it that anecdotally unites the doors of negatives and the “engraved” inscriptions. Both, however, refer to documented fragments of experience discharged from the folds of history to disrupt the seamless flow of the present. The moment frozen in the negative or inscription remains inscrutable, an impenetrable surface effect. Behind the closed doors or the image-veil, there is nothing and everything: the unconscious, the inaccessible and infinite time-space of desire - the forgetting that must also be remembered - that we glimpse through the sparks of reminiscence and the hallucinatory play of the imagination. It is this time-space evoked by Rennó’s *In Oblivionem*.