

Wall

From a narrative in search of the experimental

We enter the Cistern of Casa da Cerca through a short, narrow stairway. It's a brief descent but we do it cautiously, measuring our steps; soon a scene, an action, surrounds us. On the walls, several images show the obsessive movements of a female figure: a woman. All around us, photographs, placed upon an iron railing embedded into a wall of time-yellowed stone, compose a narrative and, within this narrative, a character. They force us to breathe differently, and to move in such a way as to define the architectural space of the building. We then follow the movements of her body, the rhythm of the images, which are limited by the frames and the surrounding space, in their search for continuity, sequence and meaning (of what we see).

This exhibition by Rita Barros titled "Wall" consists of a sequence of photos that is the outcome of the intervention on a specific place and context (an ancient reservoir presumably built during the 17th and 18th centuries). This description, far from being the most profound or accurate, is, so to speak, a trivial one since we immediately associate the artist's work with a certain kind of photojournalism in love with places, events, and portraits. Let us recall the characters of the legendary Chelsea Hotel ("Hotel Chelsea", Encontros de Coimbra, 1992 as well as "Quinze Anos: Chelsea Hotel" Galeria 111, 1999) or the painful shock of the people and the aftermath of 9/11, in "Um Ano Depois", (Centro Português de Fotografia, 2002). Rita Barros has always used photography as an artistic medium; she is, first and above all, a photographer. She does not work in any other medium that we know of, and her universe has never been, for instance, the universe of painting nor has it seemed to be shaped by complex conceptual concerns. This is why, to our surprise, we discover a body of photos inhabited by representations close to abstraction, conceptually informed, and with occasional references to choreography or the odd work of fiction.

So, we should put into context this less "realistic" approach to Rita Barros' photographic production. Since 2000 she has been creating a series of handmade books – let's call them "artistic objects" - which, through their sequential imagery and the absence of writing, capture actions that: transform the body into something else (*Silence*), its disappearance (*Apple*) or movement in a distinct space (*Passing Through*), or the mere placement of a canvas on a wall.

Up to now, Barros has made 30 artist's books, (nine of which belong to the collection of the Museu de Serralves in Oporto).

A more recent sign was "Presence of Absence", (Galeria Pente 10, Lisbon - Nov 11, '08 - Jan 20, '09) where one could observe Barros' new approach to the colors of the intimate interior of quotidian routine - where experiences, situations, gestures and landscapes were represented and projected. At times, one could even see formats such as diptyches and close-ups that alter the descriptive nature of the imagery. With such deviations, these images open themselves to other interpretations of solitude and the passing of time.

Back to the books. We come upon "Wall" in its most portable state – in other words as a book - in its display window at the entrance of the Cistern. Although differing from the "object-book" developed by the Brazilian neo-concretists (despite some formal similarities), Barros' book offers itself up to be handled (or opened) as a tactile and visual experience: the photos are in a sequence or series which may be opened or closed - a narrative-visual system - a story told in images that we can interact with.

The choice of this discreet and intimate format, far from the institutional ostentation of an exhibition, underscores an artisanal approach that becomes Barros' own comment on photography: notice how the edges of the paper serve as a frame to the depicted action where the relationship between the photograph and its surround gives the work a character that is almost three-dimensional. Finally, another arresting quality is the unique nature of the books¹ since the artist didn't use any industrial process.

Meanwhile, in the Cistern we become aware that some of these concerns - such as a more direct interactivity with the work and the traces of that exercise with the paper and the photo have vanished. Blown-up, "transfigured" to another scale for another space, not intrinsically for exhibitions, "Wall" becomes a stunning experience made of rhythms, movement. The images hang at eye level and describe a body confronting a wall, touching it, caressing it, measuring itself against a plain stone surface - scrutinizing it, as in search of something. A way out? Another place? What does it run away from? One could say it tries to exit the frontiers of a domestic space or the photo itself. On the other hand, due to the framing, the wall seems like a minimalist painting. Could we be standing before a metaphor about the relationship between the body and the physical limits of painting, of photography, ultimately of the work of art?

This female character is interpreted by Barros however - as in the other series of books - her identity is not the most relevant issue. "Wall" isn't about the self-portrait, but about a body with no identity. In that sense it is hard not to be reminded of Helena Almeida, and a possible reference to this artist, even if Barros' work doesn't show the traces of the creative process or the space of a drawing or painting.

The body in these photos slowly changes position many times: we find it standing, squatting, crouching, bended over itself, moving the arms backwards. As if, the interaction makes us dance, questioning, although quietly, the split between the real and the virtual space of representation. There are also the colors: red on the wall, black over the body - a sign, a pictogram - and the sand color of the Cistern; they convey a vertiginous narrative which, at times, seems to have no end or beginning. Thus "Wall" leads our senses and imagination perfectly. As if it was searching for a story. But most of all searching for adventure, and experimentation. And it's exactly in that direction that the photography of Rita Barros seems to be heading nowadays.

José Marmeleira, 2009

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¹ Editor's note: "Wall" is produced in an edition of 3 copies, see "A Note on the Book" in this volume.