

## CONCRETE PRESENCES, ABSTRACT ABSENCES

In the bright world of Rita Barros, the colours jump out of the images. The first thing that we notice is the chromatic spectrum of her photographs; the shape and meaning of the objects and their fragments emerge only afterwards.

It is not common, for a photographer, to think directly in colour. That great pioneer, William Eggleston, discovered that middle America was rather colourful, so he set out to find odd situations (and compositions) drenched in primary dyes. Martin Parr uses colour as a critique of our acquisitive society. (Black and white were the values of the Great Depression of the 1930s.) All Rita Barros has to do is to look around her. She doesn't even have to leave home. The story of the photographer as traveller is a myth; the most adventurous trip is that of the imagination. Rita Barros thinks about colours and they turn up where they are least expected. Before we recognize the object, we rejoice with the redness of the light bulb (a homage to Eggleston's Red Room?), the greenness of the bicycle saddle, the golden sheen of the shoe, the chromatic symphony of the coffee towel. I am reminded of Matisse's joyful painting!

These pictures are mostly domestic still lives, but there is a world beyond the intimacy of home. In one image, half-drawn curtains let us see the cubistic, redbrick New York; in another, the TV is on, but has been left untuned. The apartment is inhabited – the coffee pot is on the stove, the cup has been laid on the table – but its occupants are busy elsewhere, outside the frame of the photograph. People have been replaced by icons: Che, St. Anthony of Lisbon, a mask of Zen tranquility, a Madonna emerging from a group of shells, like a Botticelli Venus. Here and there, human (but anonymous) arms and hands are involved in mechanical work: a pair of arms, like robotic tweezers, dip into the washing sink; a hand protectively cups the flame of a lighter.

The absence and silence extend to the city. What happened to the subway passengers? The carriage is empty, as it is also the case of the lonely chair – that icon of an absence-presence – in the abandoned room. (It should be noted, however, that the back of the

chair, as well as its legs rhyme geometrically with the glass-panelled windows of the room.) To paraphrase a well-known verse of the Portuguese poet Augusto Gil, this chair without a sitter reminds me of the sitter without the chair. There is also an intimation of an approaching end, and even death – in the decaying materials and mouldy green. Time flows away, and the flames of both candles and lighter, as well as the untuned TV and the droopy roses stand for memento mori. Rita Barros plays with the presence of concrete objects to define the absence of their owners and users. Any presence is factual and objective; only absence remains an abstraction.

These photographs are a convincing defence of banality. Like John Constable, Rita Barros seems to be saying that she has never seen an ugly thing in her life. After all, anything and everything deserves to be photographed... in order to see how it turns out in the portrait. In Rita Barros's camera, it turns out well. The democratic celebration of the banal is underlined by closing-up on the detail: from the saddle to the chain and lock, from the fabric to the button, etc. Rita Barros subverts the scale and plays with the opposition between large and small. It is the detail, not the whole, that is presented in a panoramic format, as if the artist wanted to erase the overall picture and scan time. Colour, however, remains triumphant.

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