

RITA'S EYE Jorge Calado

Rita Barros made her name in the late 1980s photographing singers and musicians – jazz, pop, rock, country, classical, etc. – in black and white. Whether still or in action, full-frontal or in profile, their portraits were always beautifully composed, tilted heads and all (*Pls.* 3-9, 11). Around 1989 she turned her camera onto her own world at the Chelsea Hotel and everything changed. Suddenly there was colour and abstracted faces and torsos gave way to complete bodies, from head to toe. Lying down on *chaises longues*, sitting on exotic chairs and suitcases or jumping on beds, Rita's friends and neighbours all seem at ease within their exotic environment, and they speak through the chromatic palette of their possessions as well as with their facial expressions. In Barros' gallery there are scarlet women, grey men, and Nicola L who embodies all forms and shapes (*Pl.* 32). Each individual has created his or her own fantasy world, but there are interesting correlations: the painter Blair Wear (not shown), would feel at home in Shizo's room (and vice-versa), Shirley Clarke and Gérard Schreiner share a similar taste in native carpets, and the array of shelves in the engineer's office is as much a memory palace as the exquisite nineteenth-century Korean medicine cabinet in Schreiner's room (*Pls.* 27, 28, 34, 37). Ghosts of other existences – a painting here and there, Grace Jones's lips, Marilyn's mouth and eyes, a mannequin in Victor Hugo's room, a Shirley MacLaine poster, and so on – peep out from the backgrounds of those portraits, as counterparts of the remembrance plaques that frame the entrance to the hotel (*Pl.* 12).

For the Mexican poet Octavio Paz, reality was 'more real in black and white'. Many photographers – convinced that colour is a distraction and that all you need for the depiction of the world is light, line and form – would agree: less is more. But colour energizes space and re-organizes the relative importance of what the camera shows: a blue broom in a sea of yellows, a pink butterfly among a set of green clovers (*Pl.* 68, 71). Colour photography was once considered suitable only for advertising, and except for a few images by Ernst Haas it was not officially recognized by the New York Museum of Modern Art until the exhibition *William Eggleston's Guide* in 1976, a mere decade before Rita Barros took up the camera. Barros drenches her images in colour to make a statement or impart emotion. I suspect that she thinks visually in colour, enhancing the 'despotism of the eye' mentioned by Samuel Taylor Coleridge. In her work, the more personal the picture is, the more colourful it becomes.

Walking into Room 1008, Rita Barros' apartment in the Chelsea, is to see her colour photographs come alive in 3-D. Here are the red walls, the green couch, the

apple-patterned curtains, and outside the windows the magnificent view over Lower Manhattan. Closer inspection reveals selected art books, red light bulbs, multiple effigies of Saint Anthony, Lisbon's patron saint and Rita's godfather (she was born June 13th, St. Anthony's Day), along with a James Bond plate and the lighter used to ignite her last cigarette. Elsewhere the coffee pot and cups, stars in some of her most celebrated pictures, also turn up. (By the way, I was reminded that domestic gas burns with a beautiful, translucent blue light by Rita's photograph of the Italian coffee maker, Fig. 6.) Colourful patterns and textures are crucial to Rita Barros's life and work. Her apartment is a wonderland where chrysanthemums and sunflowers grow on tablecloths and apples ripen on curtains (Pls. 39, 40, 46). Still lifes of fruits and flowers, printed or real, abound (Pl. 42). It is, perhaps, her proximity to the hotel's roof garden, where the flowers bloom in the spring and birds nest on bushes and trees, that explains such

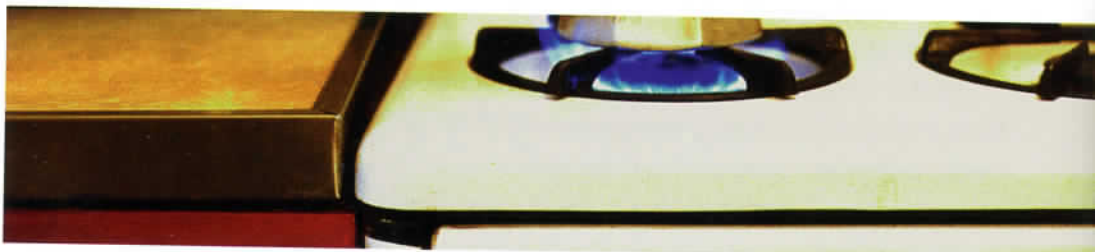


Fig. 6 Coffee machine: re-interpretation, 2007

pastoral fantasies. (The concept of roof garden originated with Philip Hubert, the architect-designer of The Chelsea.)

Like many artists who emerged in the 1980s, Rita Barros has a healthy and earthy awareness of her own body, which is the object of many of her photographic series, artist books and videos. It all started in 2001, which was both the year of Arthur C. Clarke's *Space Odyssey* – written in what is now her apartment – and of Oporto as European Capital of Culture. Barros signaled the coincidence with a very well-received show at the 111 Gallery, in Oporto, entitled *Room 1008*. In this exhibition the hotel narrowed to her own apartment and she turned the camera onto herself to enact little narratives, sometimes with the help of a prop (Pls. 40, 47). The chosen format was the artist book – a new departure for her – although there were also a few enlargements

of self-portraits from her photo-books. The Serralves Museum of Contemporary Art bought the entire collection of nine hand-made books.

'I always enjoyed the tangible side of photography. I like photographs as objects. Above all I like to tell stories through photographs', Rita told me. The hand-made book, composed of original photographs, poems, loose phrases, mementoes, etc., was a natural move. 'A book is a closed object, made of other things', she says. 'I like to choose and handle materials: different types of papers, fabrics, glues'. Some are flip books, to be flicked through; others unfold like concertinas, opening out to reveal a sequence of images like notes in a musical scale. (Time insinuated itself slowly into her work, and the videos would come later.) In several of these books the photographer is both the creator and the creature acting out her fantasies. For instance, in *Wall* (2006) the artist, dressed in black, touches, feels and confronts a red wall. The sinuous,

two-dimensional coreography tells us nothing about the purpose of the exercise. Is she trying to find an exit, climb over the endless wall, make love to it? We will never know (*Pl.* 48).

Barros is very knowledgeable about the history of photography (and of art, in general) – she teaches at New York University – so it is no surprise that several of her images contain implicit homages to her great predecessors.

The pose adopted in *Green Couch #5* (with her black cat, Manel, perched along the edge of the sofa's back) hints at André Kertész's *Satyrical Dancer* (1926), whereas *Mask #7* (2008) takes after Man Ray's portrait (1926) of *Kiki with African mask* (*Pls.* 45, 47). But *The Last Cigarette* (2009), perhaps Barros's most original and successful sequence, has no particular lineage. Elbow resting firmly on a red table, a beautiful woman dressed in black enjoys her last cigarette. Using the square format, Barros records the pendulum-like movement of the forearm, swishing to and fro like a windshield wiper; she inhales and exhales, smoke levitates from her mouth like a genie liberated from a bottle, and at one magical point a perfect curtain of smoke veils her circular mouth (*Pl.* 41). After the ritual is over, what remains is the solitary glass ashtray with a couple of cigarette butts, looking like an open mouth with carious teeth. Red becomes Rita Barros and she seems to have adopted a special type of red, as Yves Klein did with the now-called International Klein Blue; she also knows that black



goes well with red, so chromatically her pictures from this period turn into variations on the *rouge et le noir*.

While time was creeping into her photography, space was literally being shattered. The images in the series *Presence of Absence* (2008) series are re-examined and re-interpreted, cut into fragments or long strips to highlight a detail. There are hints of a larger picture, but the detail matters most. Sometimes she presents the elongated detail and the short whole, side by side (Fig. 6). Like a broken mirror, the original photograph gives way to a new generation of images, evoking Byron's stanza in *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*: 'Even as a broken mirror, which the glass / In every fragment multiplies; and makes / A thousand images of one that was / The same, and still the more, the more it breaks'. Photography is the most democratic of the arts, and for Rita Barros nothing is too modest or banal to be photographed: the saddle or the chain and lock of a bicycle, a gold lamé ballet shoe, a cupped hand (Pl. 44). Even the joyful coffee cup on a flowery tablecloth – a photographic Matisse, if ever there was one – might be a detail of a never-seen photograph (Pl. 39)! The fragmentation continued in the 3×3 (2010) series, where portraits of family and friends were created through three by three grids of snapshots of body parts, significant possessions and space boundaries.

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Long before an inquisitive eye was painted on that triangular wall of the Chelsea's roof, Barros used a similar eye in a Magritte poster as a background to her portrait of Iggy Pop (Pls. 2, 3). René Magritte's *False Mirror* (1928) is another optical parable, like the one photographed by Manuel Álvarez Bravo in 1931. (For the Mexican master, the name of the local optician's shop, La Optica Moderna, implied a modernist view point, and he often printed the image back to front.) Magritte's painting shows the blue, clouded sky reflected on the iris. Usually the iris functions as a mirror to whoever is looking into another person's eyes. Magritte's eye is thus a window, recalling the double-function of a photograph as a mirror or a window. Eyes have long been taken as windows to the soul, and in fact recent research has confirmed that it is possible to predict what people are thinking from their gaze. Barros also photographed a mosaic eye (not shown) in Chambers Street subway station for the series *Presence of Absence*: made up of small, scaly-like pieces, it has a reptilian look. The eye on the roof was comforting and reassuring: all-seeing, it supervised the bohemian artists who inhabited the building. But the tenants were wrong to trust in its protective omniscience.

The latest phase of Rita Barros's work – which continues to this day – began with the sale of the Hotel Chelsea in 2011 and its aggressive renovation while some sixty harassed tenants hold on to their apartments under hazardous living conditions. Noise, cuts to the supply of power, water and gas, all kinds of pollution caused by dust, mould and toxic compounds have become common. As life was deteriorating all around her, Rita Barros embarked on a project called *Displacement* that documents – through videos and photographs – these deranging changes (Pls. 49, 53-76). Some of these photos have been used to corroborate the tenants' complaints in housing court about the disruption and danger caused by the ongoing renovation.

By 2012, Barros felt that she had become part of the story – hence her second series, *Displacement2*. Creation is the best form of catharsis. Defiantly, she exorcises the constant disruptions to her daily life by inventing new routines and by photographing and filming them. Her weapons are irony and humour. Her first video, *Labor Day* (2012), was prompted by her anger at discovering that the roof garden she was caring for during her friends' vacation had been destroyed by the developers. Since then, she has made a couple of dozen supplementary videos.

Many are set on the symbolic roof, like *Another Happy Day* (2012) where she relives Winnie's predicament in Samuel Beckett's play by burying herself behind a growing pile of bricks (Fig. 3). The most recent one, *New Loft on the 10th Floor*, made during Christmas of 2014, uses the scaffolding and canopy installed in the corridor outside her apartment (the ceiling had been removed to reinforce the structure with a steel beam) as a new bedchamber. Other revealing titles include *Motherfuckers* (2012), *The Probability of a Hole* (2012), *On the Roof* (2013), *Three-Legged Chair* (2013), etc. (Pls. 50-52). Barros has become an expert practitioner of the theatre of the absurd.

Meanwhile her photographs have inevitably become melancholy and more abstract (Pls. 69, 72, 74). A veiled, lonely bicycle at the end of a corridor poses as a latter-day sleeping beauty (Pl. 57). The people have gone, and the flushed colours

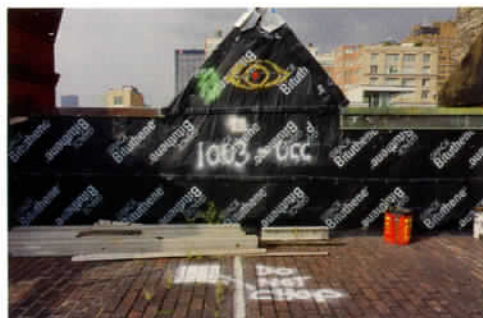


Fig. 7 Spray-painted eye on the roof, 2014

have faded. Reds have given way to brownish pinks. The curtains are tattered, the dry flower pots broken (Pls. 65, 73). The rooms that once pulsed with energy and creativity are now empty, desolate spaces (Pls. 61, 64, 66). Here and there memories remain in the shape of a golden radiator or an expensively framed reproduction of Vermeer's *The Lacemaker* (Pls. 65, 70). A scarred, cubist wall has turned into a latter-day Mondrian (Pl. 69). Barros used to see the Chelsea in vibrant, psychedelic colours and the city outside in black and white. Her early portraits of musicians, her views of Manhattan, the collapse of the World Trade Center were all photographed in black and white (Pls. 1, 3-11; Fig. 5); colour was reserved for life in the Chelsea Hotel. Nowadays, as the Chelsea is being slowly but steadily absorbed by the rest of the city, Barros's palette is evolving into a subfusc mess, a kind of faintly tinted black and white.

The roof garden is already gone and the ghosts have taken over (Pls. 74-76). The symbolic eye on the roof has been defaced and buried under a commercial tarpaulin (Fig. 7). No, it never was the eye of God, perhaps instead it was the single eye of Polyphemus, the man-eating cyclops. But no Odysseus came to the Chelsea's rescue, and Polyphemus has moved elsewhere in the city in collusion with the greedy real estate developers.