

RITA BARROS

Bohemia – life and death in the Chelsea Hotel

BIBLIOTECA FCT/UNL - CAMPUS DA CAPARICA
Universidade Nova de Lisboa, Campus de Caparica
2829-516 Caparica

15 SET - 15 NOV 2014

In the Gallery of the Biblioteca FCT/UNL - Campus da Caparica, “Bohemia - Life and Death in the Chelsea Hotel”, is a retrospective exhibition of Rita Barros’ career in photography, based on her thirty years in New York, and focusing on The Chelsea Hotel. Barros explores the peak and fall of an iconic site of New York's culture - the Chelsea Hotel, an inspiration for many – and reveals the life and personality of the residents, through their very own special and bohemian ambiance.

Open until November 15, the exhibition begins with the first images most representative of the artist’ s early career, predominantly in the area of music and performance in New York. Although the first images are black & white, as if someone just arrived in the big city, then they quickly gain color, and finish with a smooth, soft palette, as if to echo the decay of the Hotel itself, a sequence of ancestry, heyday and decline. It is also in this, an exhibition of thought and emotion.

There are several aspects that deserve due attention in this show, curated by Jorge Calado. First the importance of a show that encompasses the various stages of the artist’s life. After the intensity of some of these portraits there are some images of modernity, whose aesthetic proposal intersects with new perspectives on urban landscape or the use of color. Incidentally Jorge Calado, said at the panel discussion that the artist thinks and composes in color. The outstanding prints are in either black and white or in color, either Cibachromes, or digital prints.

This beautiful exhibition, curated by Jorge Calado, has been designed for this specific space: from the presence of the artist's personality, embodied in the set on a red background, to the lyrical sequence of images, through the dialogue between different points of the room, even the issues of scale and visual framing . A strong aroma of cigarettes and coffee permeates the imagery. The artist grabs her memories and reveals her passion for life and how to take advantage of it. She challenges us and intimidates us with her direct gaze. Teases us with her boldness in “The Last Cigarette “ hits the viewer: eyes get stuck in every movement, in every point of her body, in every detail.. With her direct and even defiant gaze she calls us, touches us, challenges us. The color red is her trade mark, but we venture to say that it would be hardly necessary to use this color when she manages to show her vital presence in each image.

Aesthetic evolution and maturity is achieved by the artist. From the use of psychedelic color in her first portraits (Shizo, 1989) where the set should be viewed as a whole, to the images on the building (“Roof Scaffolding, 2012, or the

magnificent “Eye on Roof”, 2012). The wide range of images, chronologically sequential of the artist's life in New York, is not restricted to the characterization of the space or environment. Rita Barros also explores the most intimate and personal paths centered in her daily life. These are also images that pull us back to some previous exhibitions of the artist, whether at the Photography Encounters of Coimbra, or the former much missed Gallery Pente 10 or more recently in Loja da Atalaia

The Chelsea Hotel is a long repository of bohemian life in New York since the nineteenth century to the present day, with its procession of artists, writers or famous figures who chose it as a residence - Andy Warhol, Marilyn Monroe, Arthur C. Clarke, Leonard Cohen and many others. Rita Barros' images are a way of welcoming us to the big city and the microcosm that is the Chelsea Hotel, making us feel at home, merging with them. These are images that can translate the atmosphere of freedom and multiculturalism, which is the genesis of the Chelsea Hotel, like a large vertical village. A space where one is free to be what one wants to be, without preconceptions, and where one learns to accept and help each other.

But these images as a whole, are also, simultaneously and paradoxically, a memory and a cry of revolt against the devaluation of the memory and history of a culturally determining past, in exchange for the brightness of economic options. The hotel was sold in 2011, and the new owners immediately began the demolition and eviction of its long time residents. These photographs, for their strength and emotion, portray this condition of lost paradise, a unique place, which still resists physically, but contradictorily we know that in fact it no longer exists. It's not only the images of empty walls that convey the destruction of the Hotel itself. Shattered homes and shattered people left the Hotel. Then, almost at the beginning and the end of the show, the author presents her self portrait to show us her personal determination. We are proud to know that someone is fighting so that New York City will not lose that revered space and that creative Freedom!

António Lopes / Sandra Osorio