

Presence of absence

Le bon dieu se cache dans les détails.

Le diable se cache dans les détails.

When visiting someone's home for the first time one becomes aware of the shape and dimensions of the room; we assess the light: we are encouraged to take notice of their personal possessions: photographs, paintings, utilitarian and decorative objects. Some of these things, travel souvenirs, for example, record places and moments in time; others refer to the person they have been inherited from, or to those who have given them to us. We try to unveil, *prima vista*, what bearing those symbolic possessions have on the life of their owners, how they fit into their everyday life and the memories attached to them.

Some objects seem to have the ability to make themselves indispensable in our homes without us knowing why; it is not because we are fond of them but rather because there is some sort of unbreakable bond. They either please the eye or, otherwise become invisible. Rosa Olivares ("Objetos cotidianos", *EXIT*, n° 11, 2003, p. 13) calls attention to the role of and prodigious longevity of objects: "We believe that we choose things, but maybe, why not, things choose us. When buying a glass, a jar, a table, it was them that, among so many clients, so many observers, picked us to share their lives, or a fragment of their lives. Because, in general, things always outlive us."¹

In her 1999 publication *Fifteen Years: Chelsea Hotel*, (Camara Municipal de Lisboa), Rita Barros took pictures of her neighbours' apartments, constructing a mosaic around the long life of this famous hotel, (a *vera icon* of the New York art scene), where she has been living for over twenty years. In her exhibition, *Room 1008*, (Galeria 111, Oporto, 2001) the focus was on her own apartment. Now, in *Presence of Absence* the images are set, on one hand, at the intersection of the aesthetics of daily life and still-life (again, at home), and on the other, exterior desolation. Her photographs are linked by feelings of vague nostalgia, curiously enhanced by the serial nature of the work.

What do we see here? A few objects selected by the artist. What can't be seen is the general layout of her apartment or a particular room. But one does not actually see the home. The various images in *Presence of Absence* give a hint of human presence: the un-tasted cup of coffee, the lit candles, the blue flame on a stove-top or from a lighter, the switched-on light bulb: heat and light caused by a person's hand. A candle is the basic element in one of Barros' still-lives, a genre traditionally filled with symbolism and double meaning. A burning candle is witness to the passage

of time and decay – the *vanitas* and the *memento mori*: dead flowers side by side with a waxen face – evoking a death mask - the skull always found in the iconographic tradition of the *vanitas* still-lives of the XVII century. To this text Barros' has added more floral patterns: the flourish of a Wedgewood coffee-cup, the pattern on a towel, the curtain and the fabric of a dress with the emphasis on the button.

In Dan Flavin's sculptures, light is integral; light determines their status as works of art; but when the light is turned off they become just a set of light bulbs. Rita Barros' images display the performative potential of things in counterpoint to the stillness expected from them by capturing the work they do as everyday objects: the coffee pot is heated once or twice a day; a lighter is used for a fleeting moment. In this way objects that rise above that mysterious silence we perceive to be their fate when not being used. As we look at Barros' photographs we remember that we have identical pieces in our homes, as well as different ones - pieces that compose the lexicon of a universal inheritance of necessary objects. A partial view of the outside offers only a glance of what can be seen from inside. This is how we access the photographer's everyday view, the things she looks at – and the ones she overlooks. Other Barros photographs are composed of moments filled with abandonment and solitude, taken outside the apartment: the subway, a rusty useless bed, a chair placed in what seems to be a sanatorium...

When the eye has become accustomed to Barros' single image photographs one's attention then focuses on details in her larger paired images (Barros call these images *Re-Interpretations*). These works change perspective and scale and require a new reading, making way for other related coordinates between subject and object. In Ridley Scott's *Blade Runner* the character Rick Deckard – played by Harrison Ford – uses a fictional computer, *Esper*, to analyse photographs. This voice-operated futuristic contraption enables him to zoom in with infinite magnification and changes in point of view on specific areas of interest simply by dictating the coordinates. This is how Deckard discovers the clue that leads him to the 'replicants': from an amplified detail, invisible to the naked eye, he is able to find the shadow of the woman he is looking for: a device Barros also seems to have discovered in her work.

From New York, the epicentre of speed and ambitious frenzy, we get Barros' silent and melancholic – and yet vibrantly colourful – message that runs from daytime to night-time but bearing a *caveat*: “*vanitas, vanitatum*”

Luísa Especial, October 2008

For the exhibition “Presença da Ausência” at Galeria Pente 10, Lisbon, Portugal

