

# Some notes on the work of Rafael Navarro

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In photography nothing is so subjective as objectivity. The choice of lenses, the sensitivity of the film or the grade of contrast in the paper used for printing produce sufficient variables for differences to be noticeable. It is true that there are elements of auteur photography in which the technique and the discourse attempt to reflect reality as it supposedly is, or at least, as it is perceived; photojournalism is often put forward as a classic example, as is the work of portrait photographers, who establish in their portraits elements of neutrality such as continuous backgrounds to eliminate the superfluous and focus the discourse on the identity of the face. Indeed it is a fact that Richard Avedon and Humberto Rivas were subjective to a fault. Although both Gervasio Sánchez and James Natchwey like to use those immaculately blank backgrounds, the former's records of the war in Bosnia could never be mistaken for those taken by the latter; they both move the viewer to tears and indignation because each photographic image is shot through with the unique personality of the photographer.

I hope you will forgive this somewhat roundabout introduction, which I believe is necessary to prompt a reflection on the complex work of Rafael Navarro, whom I consider to be an absolute master of subjectivity. I have had the privilege of seeing him at work for almost thirty-five years, which entitles me to say that there is no constructive space in it for improvisation. Each item, each series, is the product of a lengthy distillation process. Even when the visual impact of an element could provide a pretext for an immediate response, Rafael needs to make it his own before he can press the shutter. There will be those who will resort to the master Cartier-Bresson's argument of the "decisive moment" to claim that one does not always have sufficient time to frame the discourse, but reflection is also subject to the flash of insight that illuminates every work of an artist, although it may not be the only source which provides the light that is required for anything to become a work of art.

Rafael Navarro began his career as an auteur photographer in 1975 with the two series *Formas* (Formes) and *Evasiones* (Evasions); those who were born in that year are today 36 years old. This means that a large segment of those who consider art to be a cornerstone of their universe may not have had the experience of examining the richness and impact of those original images and are unaware of the environment in which the greatest generation of our photographers had to operate. Which brings me to another, perhaps excessive, digression.

In many of the voluminous works that undertake to tell the story of photography in this country, there is a tendency to conflate Spanish photography with the photography of Spain and the work of the photographer with the work of the photographic artist or auteur, and then to bottle the resulting blend as if it were a mixture of wines made from the same grape rather than the result of a legitimate and complex *coupage*. Photography in Spain is a succession of very different vintages in which the territory is more important than the methods used. Among Spain's greatest treasures are the images which ushered it into the history of the medium, when on 10 November 1839, in Barcelona, the first photograph in Spain was taken by Ramón Alabern. This vast body of work includes both that of innumerable Spanish photographers as they plied their trade as well as that of foreigners who, out of interest in our cultural heritage, scenery and peasant folk, took photographs in Spain which they took with them when they left the country. Photography in Spain is a fruitful amalgam which brings together the vast range of techniques, subjects, and styles that have been followed here by natives and non-natives, whether by name or anonymously. Photography in Spain embraces the daguerreotypes of Casajús, Albareda, Napoleon, Franc and Lorichon and the calotype negatives of Gustave de Beaucorps, Wheelhouse, de Clercq, de Leygonier, Vigier, and Pec; from the albumen prints using wet collodion by Martínez Sánchez, Señán and González, Maufsaïse and Thurston Thompson to Braun's

and Ortiz Echagüe's carbon prints; from Laurent's streetlamps to Clifford's photographs of the construction work on the Queen Isabel II Canal and many of the Underwood and Underwood stereoscopic pairs to the rolls of film discovered in the "Mexican suitcase" taken by Chim, Capa and Taro.

Spanish photography limits itself to a quantitatively smaller output whose importance in the history of the medium is yet to be evaluated. Its scope is defined by the nationality of the photographer rather than the national territory in which the photographic images were recorded. Thus, Juantxu Rodríguez's photographs of Panama, Luis Valtueña's work in Ruanda, and an essential part of the work of Cristina García Rodero and of Isabel Muñoz belong as much to Spanish photography as the impeccable works of Alfonso, Ramón y Cajal, Centelles and Jalón Ángel. To which we must add the contribution of a handful of exhibition commissioners, gallery owners, historians, specialized publications and firms such as Valca™ and Negra™.

To attempt to differentiate between the work of the photographer and auteur photography may appear to be an academic paradox; any work, even if we do not know the name of the person who did it, must have been done by someone. This is of course true, but auteur photography goes beyond the concept of mere identity to define that which an artist who chooses a given technique as a medium for his or her creative expression creates, which makes auteur photography the shortest and most fecund tributary of the narrow river of Spanish photography; they both describe and flow into the wide waterway that is photography in Spain.

From his beginnings in the mid-1970s, Rafael Navarro has contributed decisively to the development of auteur photography in Spain; so it is fitting to analyze the narrative framework which had to struggle to emerge in the last years of Francoism. Those were especially tough times for anyone whose creative pulses beat in the regions of art and culture, permanently suspect of wishing to dismantle what Franco believed he had left set in stone once and for all. The regime's censors were happy to let pass the flow of images from companies and photographic associations in exhibitions and trade fairs they approved of. These were mainly concerned with the effects that could be obtained with the range of special filters or the use of zoom lenses, high sensitivity films which could capture grainy effects, or the repertoire of dodges, multiple exposures and darkroom trickery. The images offered throughout all of this maintained the inoffensive choice of themes required by the autism of the social environment and an appropriate balance between technique and beauty.

A select few attempted to find a way through the breach which had been opened already in the wall by avant-garde photography. The few Spaniards who attended the first sessions of the *Rencontres internationales de la photographie d'Arles* would be those who would replant auteur photography in a Spain that was inclined to forget the impressive work of Godes, Renau, De Lekuona, Masana, Sala, Porqueras, Vilá and Catalá Pic.

The first steps of Navarro, Rivas, Fontcuberta, Olivella, Esclusa, Formiguera, Avellaned and a small number of peers must not have been easy; theirs was another kind of work altogether and found few channels for its distribution. The gallery Spectrum Canon in Balmes Street in Barcelona, curated by Albert Guspi and Sandra Solsona; the *encuentros de Cadaqués*; the journal *Nueva Lente* and the Spectrum Canon galleries in Zaragoza, Ibiza, Alcoy, Madrid and Girona made up the new but limited territory in which that handful of auteurs could be valued and could bring their work to an expectant minority who were able to understand and appreciate it.

In 1975, a year which was marked both by pain and hope, the twelve exposures each of *Formas* and *Evasiones* nailed their colors to the mast. 24 original prints which unsettled those who liked to define themes and styles: Abstraction? The Nude? No, they are Forms and Evasions, that simple and that complex. They are constructed on the basis of a different way of seeing, and hence a different way of narrating. They are marvelous fragments of a reflection which does not set out to be universal or to hem in the viewer when defining his or her identity. They are the flashes which Rafael has filtered with his camera of worlds that, in his eyes, enclose a diffe-

rent essence. Freed from the objectivity and the rules of discourse that convention dictated at the time, those first two series laid the groundwork for an immense body of work that has been constructed over four decades. To return to the definition of Spanish photography above, which may explain why there are many who are not aware that the series *Evasiones* was launched in Paris; in that obscurantist Spain of bell, book and candle, to conceive an artistic discourse grounded on the Nude was as impractical as trying to buy contraceptives in a pharmacy.

In 1976 Rafael Navarro presented *Involución* (Regression); again twelve exposures, a solar number symbolizing order in the cosmos. The series is a powerful creative reflection in which the physical limitations of the roll of film are a major part of the artistic discourse revealed at 400 ASA with Kodak™ TRI-X®; for a whole generation who followed the beat of all things photographic in the pages of *Nueva Lente*, it was a ground-breaking piece of work that laid down clear differentiating principles.

*Agur* (Farewell), a 1977 photographic essay, explored more deeply the eloquence of the fragment, in the protagonism of the part as opposed to the whole, in the accents that define forms and backgrounds; flashes that go beyond stylistic techniques and which extend across all of the auteur's work, like the wake of those flat pebbles that we have all skimmed over the surface of a river.

In 1978 Rafael Navarro began working on *Dípticos* [Diptychs], a work in progress until 1985, which became recognized as one of the most celebrated pages in the annals of Spanish photography. It comprises sixty-nine originals contact-printed from two 13x18 cm plates. Each is the sum of two shots which, when placed side-by-side, establish a new identity that exists solely in the mind of the artist and within the confines of the 20x25 cm sheet of photographic paper. As in the *Book of Changes* or *I-Ching* –the oracular treatise from the second millennium BC in ancient China– in which the combination of two trigrams produces a hexagram which transcends their content and generates a new meaning, *Dípticos* captures the multiple states of consciousness in a complex and fascination narration.

From *Formas* to *A destiempo* [Out of Step], the artist's most recent work, lie thirty-seven years of development and the solidity of true master at work.

To attempt to discern the main points of such an extensive body of work is a task for critics and historians, who are better able to weave together contents and continents, chronologies and contributions. My chart of Rafael's work was laid out for me on 22 June 2006, during the opening of *Cuerpos Iluminados*, [Illuminated Bodies], an exhibition curated by Rosa Olivares who drew on the walls of the Lonja Palace of Zaragoza an exact road map that perfectly interprets the twists and turns of his path to maturity. Even though I knew each one of those images, I had never had the opportunity to view them as a continuous sequence and with the distance that the dimensions of the hall allowed. Series after series, work after work, the constructive patterns of a life dedicated to creation intertwined precisely, without encroaching on each other's spaces of unique identity. The calculated distillation of the bodies in each one of the selected fragments, the travelling focus which permits the slow shutter speeds within the finite space of the frame, the shifts of detail in the tonal values of the grey scales, the reiteration of the part which generates a new whole, the gravity, weight and texture of mineral worlds that transcend stone, the rhythm and explosions that pulsate in each shift, the presences that cast light on the absences. In that exhibition, one could see the wisdom of tracing the thread in the form of a spiral so that in each circle there is sufficient space for growth, as in the sixteen minutes of the *Ostinato in C Major* that Ravel uses in his *Bolero* to show what a crescendo can be.

Now, Rafael has entered the world of color and digital photography. I am not in the least surprised at not needing to be surprised; the transition from a tonal to a chromatic idiom forms part of the same extraordinary *crescendo*, while it has allowed the composer to increase the density of orchestration.