

The Power of Suggestion: Rafael Navarro's Abstract Nudes

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When one leafs through the repertoires of the history of photography, the Spanish image is noticeably absent, except those made by Ortiz Echagüe. And, when one turns the pages of the few books dedicated to Spanish photographic history, the feminine nude is rarely present, not to mention the inexistence of the male nude¹. This is due to obvious motives: the traditional Catholicism of the country and the censorship exercised during the Franco regime, from 1939 until 1975. It is precisely during this period of time when other nations begin to elaborate their own histories of the photographic medium; thus, the predominance of the British, German, French and American viewpoints and sources, to the exclusion (and detriment) of Spanish photography. Perusing the not abundant magazines and bibliography dedicated to both Spanish and international photography that were available in Spain or the neighboring France in the late 60s and early 70s, when Rafael Navarro began to define his photographic idiom, we can deduce that the artist had no recourse to any Spanish tradition of the female nude, let alone an abstract one, that would be valid for his projected discourse.

Navarro learned the history of photography and technique through books, the premium vehicle for the dispersion of the photographic image, as was engraving for painting, and, at an early date, his library included European magazine subscriptions about the topic and books acquired during his travels. He learned by osmosis and association: frequent visits to Galería Spectrum, the first photography gallery in Spain, founded in 1973, then in Barcelona and subsequently in his native Zarragoza, where, in 1974 he was president of the local photographic society, plus the creation of the group Alabern (together with Joan Fontcuberta, Pere Formiguera and Manuel Esclusa); after 1975, assiduous attendance to the *Recontres de Arlès*, the French photography festival co-founded in 1969 by the photographer, Lucien Clergue (to whom we will refer later) –all these contacts contributed to his visual education. He maintained little contact with Spanish photographers of previous generations, more concerned with documentary photography. Self-taught and with no photographic tradition on which to rely, it is all the more surprising when Navarro emerges on the Spanish scene in the mid-70s with an already mature and sophisticated body of work elaborated around the female nude.

Navarro's first reproduction in the Madrid magazine, *Nueva Lente*, a publication considered radical for the time, dates from 1975: it is a representation of a gnarled tree whose tortured limbs form abstract curves, reminiscent of Edward Weston's peppers of 1930. His first female nude dates from 1968, his first complete series of them from 1975 (*Formas*) and his first published nudes in *Nueva Lente* in the September, 1976 issue. Nevertheless, Navarro did not identify with the irreverent, spontaneous and, at times, vulgar imagery associated with the magazine. The invented scenarios, psychedelic colors and the manipulated images were (and still are) an anathema to his aesthetic principles, which will be discussed in due course. *Nueva Lente* published few female nudes prior to Franco's death in November of 1975. The magazine did publish André Kertész's distortions, but none of the famous female nudes from 1933. A brief reference without illustrations is made in the magazine to the exhibition of photographs of female nudes by Lucien Clergue (Witkin Gallery, New York, 1978). The few published nudes in the magazine are those shown in the Gallery Multitud exhibition on Spanish photography in early 1976. As a result, we cannot really consider the magazine itself a point of reference for Navarro's own interpretation of the female nude².

Nor did Navarro actively participate in the emerging conceptual art, where in some extreme

1 — We have perused *Summa Artis* (two nudes, Willy Koch and Arnold Walter); the regional histories of Extremadura, Canary Islands, Catalunya.

2 — The photographic female nudes published in *Nueva Lente* prior to November of 1975 are: Bill Brandt, Wynn Bullock, Christian Vogt, Shinoyama Hiro, Dámore, Geroge Tourdjman and Schad.

cases the nude body is subjected to such a degree of distortion, degradation and even obliteration that it no longer can be termed a photograph of a nude³. During the 70s we also have the feminist claims of women photographers who explore their own body, averting the male gaze that valued sexual attraction and external beauty, a posture with which, obviously, Navarro had no rapport. The debasement of the body constitutes the second anathema of Navarro's aesthetics. To a much lesser extent did he embrace the sexual provocation found in the slogan "Todo vale" ["Anything Goes"], promulgated by *La Movida*, the name used to describe the explosion of creativity that took place in Madrid (not Zaragoza) shortly after the death of Franco (1975) until the early 80s, when Miguel Trillo and Alberto García Alix document the urban scene and its excesses and Ouke Lele and Pablo Pérez Mínguez invent a new approach to portraiture. Finally, Navarro did not commune with the so-called "contaminations" of photography-based art. Thus, no manipulation of the imagery nor of the medium itself, no color, no corporal debasement, no overt sexuality: here we have four of the constants in Navarro's work, to which we might add a fifth, which is precisely, consistency.

The artist adopts only part of the classical conception of the female nude so aptly described by Sir Kenneth Clark in his book, *The Nude. A Study in Ideal Form*, first published in 1955⁴ (and to which we very much doubt that Navarro had access in the 1970s). As a reference to Walter Benjamin is obligatory in so many photography essays, such is the case with Kenneth Clark when attempting to define the difference between the naked ("a huddled and defenseless body deprived of clothes") and the nude ("balanced, prosperous and confident"), the latter being the ideal body distanced from ugly reality⁵. We quote directly from Jorge Lewinski's book, *The Naked and the Nude*, considering Clark's statement on nude photography pertinent to our discussion of the female nude as perceived by Rafael Navarro:

*Naturally Sir Kenneth fully accepts the idea that admiration for the beauty of the human body (mainly women's of course) is one of the most important elements in the evolution of all the plastic arts, but, at the same time, in his opinion "... the body is not one of those subjects which can be made into art by direct transcription –like a tiger or a snowy landscape". A real, living naked body is only "a point of departure for the work of art" and in order to fulfil the exigencies of a true work of art it must be transformed, beautified and perfected by the hand of an artist. "We do not wish to imitate", he adds, "we wish to perfect". Needless to say, Sir Kenneth has some harsh words to say about photographers who try their hand at photography of the nude. With all their skill and taste, and even with a modicum of retouching and toning down, "the result is hardly ever satisfactory to those whose eyes have grown accustomed to the harmonious simplifications of antiquity"*⁶.

As a cultured person, Sir Kenneth must have been familiar with both Alfred Stieglitz's and Edward Weston's renditions of the nude and we wonder about his derogatory dismissal of the photographic nude. We can conjecture that his objection was to the fact that Edward Weston, after almost eighty years of the manipulated, "painterly" and pictorialist photography that dominated artistic practice, finally came to terms with the true essence of photography by stressing what photography can do that painting cannot. Aligned with the modernism of the 1920s and 30s, Weston strongly emphasized that, and we quote, the camera should be used for the recording of "life", for rendering the very substance and quintessence of the "thing itself", whether it be polished steel or palpitating flesh... I feel definite in my belief that the approach to photography is through realism⁷. Achieved, we might add, by the use of the straight, unadulterated, black and white photograph: no double exposure and no darkroom intervention, norms adopted by Navarro and which we extend to include no digital revision.

3 — JORGE LEWINSKI, *The Naked and the Nude. A History of Nude Photography*, Weidenfeld and Nicolson, London, p. 9.

4 — First published in 1955, *The Nude. A Study in Ideal Form* and in Spanish in 1981 with the title, *El desnudo: un estudio de la forma ideal*. Navarro has confirmed that he has not read it.

5 — LEWINSKI, *op.cit.*, p. 9 for this and further observations in this paragraph.

6 — *Ibid.*

7 — TERRY BARRETT, *Criticizing Photographs*, Mayfield Publishing Company, Mountain View, California, 2000, p. 121.

In the midst of the clamor caused by the new political freedom and artistic license subsequent to Franco's demise and the urgent desire to instantly modernize Spain, Rafael Navarro chose to remain calm and disciplined, returning to the serene and acritical concepts of classical modernist photography. To some extent he was (artistically speaking) a fish out of water compared to his peers. He is a formalist and insists upon the autonomy of art and in both his abstract and representational works where he makes few references to the physical or social world. The fragment not the entirety of the body is the conveyor of emotion. The human body in his photography is a pretext for investigation, much in the way Greek classical sculpture went beyond representation in search of the ideal form of beauty. The photographer's abstract nude is anonymous and faceless; it is not a portrait. It (she) is bereft of identity without any narrative, historical or political connotations nor cultural references—except for the fact that the skin is white. The content is the sensation evoked by means of the power of suggestion. Navarro is a purist, much in the vein of the above mentioned American photographer, Edward Weston, in addition to oblique references, where the female nude is concerned, to the British photographer, Bill Brandt (1950s), and Frenchman, Lucien Clergue (1970s), neither of whom had a life-long dedication to the subject as does Navarro.

Navarro has alternated his investigation of the abstract nude with more representational subject matter, and intermittently includes the abstract photograph in the latter. We single out four major series of abstract nudes on which to focus: the 12 photographs in *Formas* (1975); the related series *Duo* and *Despertar* (both 1989); *Tientos* (1995), and the project of *Ellas* (2000-2002).

Navarro first mentally visualizes the composition and eliminates distracting detail before taking the picture. The body is placed against a neutral background, accentuating the stark, positive/negative contrast between the black and the white in order to produce an eloquent simplicity with few tonal gradations, much in the style of Bill Brandt. To illustrate the poetic impact of this simplicity, we again refer to Edward Weston, this time to his famous photograph of the back torso of Anita Brenner, taken in 1925. It is a retouched negative. Originally there the flowered wallpaper and the baseboard of the room was visible in the background of the picture, which detracted from the aesthetic abstraction of the form. Less is definitely more: the pear-shaped form would not have achieved its renown if the background had not been altered. We know from Weston's diaries that he constantly had a "background problem". When writing about his series of green peppers done in 1930, he comments that until he stood the pepper on a tin funnel to balance it instead of leaning it against the wall, he did not achieve the abstract and tactile quality he desired. He wanted no outside intervention, just the form itself. The 1934 series of nudes (*Charis*, *Santa Mónica*) echoes the sinuous "S" shape of the peppers, just as Navarro's gnarled tree branches to which we have referred foresee the complicated body postures of later works. In *Forma N° 1* the crevice of the buttocks and the small neck bump easily fit into one another. This author has the habit of turning an abstract photograph upside down to see if the form maintains its integrity from all angles and this *Formas N° 1* does just that.

Other photographs in the *Formas* series have either identifiable or ambiguous body parts. The fragments have a smooth, satin texture. The quality of the skin (Weston's palpitating flesh) is apparent in *Formas 12* and we realize how critical and decisive a role the light plays: Navarro is a master in achieving the nuances of light and since 1975 the abstract nudes are eminently tactile and sculptural. When referring to the sculptor Brancusi as photographer, the art critic, John Coplans, observes that "in contrast to painting, sculpture is a medium crucially affected by light, the palpability, intensity and location of which irradiates sculptural form to reveal and define mass, contour, surface, color and mood. The expressive appearance of a sculpture can be radically altered by changes in the light"⁸. If we substitute the word "sculpture" for "photograph", the statement is applicable to Navarro. Coplans goes on to explain how Brancusi insisted upon photographing his own sculpture, not satisfied with the reproductions done by others.

8 — STUART MORGAN, ed., *Provocations. The Writings by John Coplans*, London Projects, London, 1996, p. 231.

The plastic results of the control of the artificial light in Brancusi's photographs of his sculptures and in Navarro's photographs of his models could be interchangeable; both are aware of the contrast of texture and the play of shadow. Brancusi photographs an inorganic model, Navarro a living, breathing one. This is true in the focus trained on the bone and flesh in Navarro's *Despertar*, on the folded cloth and skin in *Tientos* and in the different skin texture of various models in *Ellas*. Navarro met Lucien Clergue in Arlés and knows his work, in particular, *The Giants* (1977). Navarro's nudes are made in the studio: Clergue's on the beach and in the water. Both are admirers of the clarity of Weston's work, both tend to eliminate the models' faces, and both depict the nudes palpitating flesh.

Coplans co-founded the influential art magazine *Artforum* in 1962 and also researched the history of photography. The medium held a prominent position in the magazine and inspired his own career as a photographer, begun in 1984, and dedicated almost exclusively to his own naked body. The comparison between Coplans's and Navarro's treatment of the human body is a perfect illustration of the difference between "naked" and "nude." Coplans's self-portraits are made up of his own body parts and are presented as they are: sagging flesh, hairy back, "warts and all". As a post-modernist, he questioned every previous assumption about the nature and purpose of art, and rejected formalism and beauty, stressing the cult of the banal and ugly. His attitude toward his own body is very much "in your face", while Navarro treats his subject with deep respect, bordering on reverence. Coplans's self-portraits are the antithesis of Navarro's nudes, much like beauty and the beast.

There are, nevertheless, similarities between both photographers. They include the use of body fragments, the development of series, the repetition of forms, the use of shallow space and recognize the importance of scale. Coplans's photographs are monumental and don't fit in most gallery spaces. Navarro has stated in an interview with Silvia Mangialardi (2003) that he oscillates between a whisper in an intimate format (*Formas* and *Tientos*) and a shout in an over life-sized one. ... *fue ir encontrando la distancia de lectura que le diera al observador mayor intimidad o no. Si haces una obra de 3 por 2 metros nadie puede mirarla de cerca porque no ve nada, debe alejarse. Entonces el tamaño depende de si quieres gritar o susurrar. Según que cosas, te apetece decirlas bajito.*⁹

Many of Navarro's compositions are built geometrically. The triangle is repeated in many of Navarro's series (*Dípticos*, *Las formas del cuerpo*), almost always in reference to the area formed by the pubic hair. Without going into the history of censorship, Adam, Eve and the fig leaf, pornography and the like, we recognize that it is only in twentieth century that its depiction has been admissible in the world of the Fine Arts. Courbet's nineteenth century *Origin of the World* was considered a scandal in its time. Marcel Duchamp's last work, done over a long period of time, *Etant donnés: 1. la chute d'eau; 2. le gaz d'éclairage* was enveloped in secrecy and was not shown to the public until after his death in 1968; by the 1970s its depiction is accepted practice. It is not a casualty that Navarro participated in 1978 in the collective exhibition, *Homenaje à Marcel Duchamp* in the Modern Gallery, Ljubljana. He showed *Involución* (1976), in which the pubic "triangle" in his work for the first time, a most appropriate tribute to Marcel Duchamp. In addition to the triangle, the circles and the curves so associated with the female body help create rhythmic "bodyscapes", a term used to describe Arno Rafael Minkinen's nude self-portraits particularly in the *Ellas* series.

In conclusion, we would like to think that if Sir Kenneth Clark were alive in 2006, he would take into reconsideration the statement he wrote about the photography of the nude. It was written in the early 1950s and since then revolutionary art practices and attitudes have been combined to rethink the body. The discretion, suggestion and unfashionable beauty of Rafael Navarro's abstract nudes might have elicited an emotional response from him more in tune with our times.

9 — <http://www.fotomundo.com/miscela/reportajes/navarro.shtml> (17/03/2006).