

# Dptychs

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I will voluntarily let the reader travel the fairly solid and balanced itinerary of the work of Rafael Navarro, a photographer born in the vibrant melting pot of the 70's. His name, along with that of Joan Fontcuberta, will be the symbol of contemporary Spanish creation in Europe and then in the U.S. and Latin America. This text will focus on the study of his artistic personality and the deep, creative originality of the dual expression of *Dptychs*, the series to which he has devoted himself since 1978 and that is reproduced in this monograph.

Human beings are biped(s), have two eyes and some paired organs whose symmetry is only apparent as they live the division of the sexes; deal with good and evil; oscillate from this world to the other; from presence to absence; from always to never. Caught between their past and their future, they claim for roots but dream of flying; emphasize their loneliness with all types of fences or, intoxicated, throw themselves in raptures to the crowd of their peers. They impose righteousness on themselves, cling to rigor and take care of higher motives with purity. But then they alternatively abandon themselves to the curve of commitment, the windings of lying, the chances of more or less, and to affectation. They spend their lives between anonymity and glory, conquering a social or professional identity, often to the detriment of their own, and at the same time seeking, both outside and inside, their equals and their opponents, swinging between the mad desire of the other and the cult of self, lost in a cycle of deception and of mutations that lead them once and again to their starting point, exhausted by all the crimes of escape and oblivion, but tenacious in their desire to remember and their persistence in surviving beyond themselves.

When humans, in pursuit of their shadow, their double, have the power to make mental images they project them on the reality around which in the case of Rafael Navarro is quick to return them by means of a single eye, cold and artificial, which can not be accused of being irrational or lacking in objectivity, and that ultimately should serve to resolve the duality of original human vision. But Rafael Navarro, truncated, frustrated in his desire to be another, rejects that integrity, that persistence, that unique returning in exchange for giving that he lives and wants it to be multiple. And then he invents a way out to balance the order and disorder of things his own way: for each base image he provides an alternative that complements it, inverts it, prolongs it, contradicts it, denatures it, and, later on, makes it come true by directly taking it from reality in order to juxtapose them, to match them according to his own twin duplicity. In doing so, he affirms through authoritarian inter-invention his desire to tame the great unpacking of the visible to order it, make sense of it and take it over, by passing from being an ordinary stage setting to the one of a private theater for his own personal obsessions.

Thus, dptychs, pairs of photographs placed vertically one on top of the other, are born, each being an equation consisting of two extracts from the real. Both are going to be used to form a set built as a unique image that represents an inner reality (meta-reality), and which pre-visualization is much older and based on a sketch.

The relations, even being of different nature, are rarely complex and respond to clarity of reading, but showing obvious concern. They can be about:

- Equivalence of content or purely formal through the simultaneous representation of subjects whose approach is analogical.
- A blend or extension of a visual line where the eye passes without disruption from one juxtaposed image to the other, or a theme whose global image fuses the synthesis.
- An inversion that builds and then destroys an identical form, or an opposition that facilitates the confrontation of two opposing identities in the same space.
- A transfer or ambivalence which, though personally more destructive, allows Rafael

Navarro to slip insidiously from the state of appetite or deficiency to the one of satisfaction through some sort of psychological intercourse.

- A mutation or metamorphosis, which is a privilege of the artist, and whose vision is capable of changing an element of reality into one that escapes his notice and entangles the clues of ordinary perception.

- A partition or separation where each of the two images loses its own importance or, rather, only finds its meaning in the middle line that inevitably isolates them and prevents them from communicating, leaving us helpless to reduce chaos, and the artist harmonically unbalanced, in a state of renunciation, and in the expressive power to those for whom art is revolution.

The power and meaning of the juxtapositions can be easily classified by families since there are some constants that emanate from the whole of his work.

- First of all, there is perfect graphic mastery which is satisfactory from the first glimpse of the diptychs as it gives them great plastic depth: the correlation of light or dark areas at the top and bottom of each pair; the geometric construction, often triangular or repetitive, which structures approaches or highlights the tension of separations; the overall construction of the image that imprisons the subject about itself or, conversely, takes it out of the composition; the distribution of motifs in each half and their balancing, on both sides of the middle line.

- Then, the symbolic and allegorical function, cleverly manipulated by the author, reinforces the effectiveness of visual confrontation. Obviously, Rafael Navarro belongs to the great expressionist tradition of generous exuberance, mystical lyricism, of the dramatization of mystery and, at times, of the uncompromising artistic belief, formally and in the selection of subjectmatter, of a nation that prides itself on artists such as Goya, Gaudi, José Maria Sert, Salvador Dali, etc...

- But the essential purpose, the problem of desire, too encased in the tight siege of imposed figures, becomes, somewhat hastily, an almost too convincing demonstration, perhaps agreed, despite a surreal discourse the costumes of which, like shiny and turned scales, are a mere superficial game.

- Despite a varied visual vocabulary and an apparent decline in the subjects covered, it is always about a pursuit, a will to capture that, in most cases, explains temptation as an object, though enriched with interesting permutations like master-slave, male-female, movement-stop. But in the end, the principle of design in Rafael Navarro's composite images, as well as their required reading mechanism, run counter to the very nature of desire, that is, to a drive that escapes control and drags us to excess and neglect. Conversely, we must admit that his work, because of that accumulation of closure signs, obstacles and non-matches, is about desires that are impossible to satisfy or, why not, about the impossibility of desire.

- On the other hand it is the distancing from reality what he works on in *Diptychs* to step back from his experiences. That explains the rigidity easily perceived as cold which defuses situations that one would like them to be more explosive.

- If we consider this work as self-therapy or some way of exorcism, Rafael Navarro has a projection out of himself in the artificial world of the picture, in the subjective states of tension due to desire, in the frustration or dismemberment between opposite attractions and for his incarnation in one or another element of the pair of pictures, finding his resolution, by addition or cancellation, in the third term established by the diptych as a whole. Though this may be an illusion.

In any case, the final result has a strong power of communication and is really easy to read, even though the author likes to play with transpositions and practice some way of mystery. Everyone of us can participate easily and double our pleasure through immediate visual understanding, straightforward and rewarding intellectual satisfaction, for the spirit walks smoothly on the edge of the graphic construction, raising good questions when coming into play and finding answers as we permeate into images with the just and necessary excitement, without ever knowing the feeling of failure that too much secrecy could have caused.

Moreover, from the purely artistic viewpoint, this series of diptychs is an excellent demonstration of the specificity of photography to deal with the real: though this may not be for Rafael Navarro the ultimate aim but a necessary component to his attempt to transpose, first going through stages of representation such as a landscape, an architecture, a scene whose choice, of course, is not innocent, but shows his aptitude for verification.

Rafael Navarro uses photography's capacity to conjure up much more widely: some form just sketched or drowned by a "flou" effect becomes a woman or a cloud, then the sea, the feeling of a presence, then of an escape, and finally a memory trace that our gaze, like the author's, tries to retain (diptychs 9, 23, 25). Some dry, granular surface secretes mounds of earth, of gravel, which slowly build a wall that sweeps the image away, and whose oppression turns obvious, and against which two hands develop to resist reclusion (diptychs 6, 7, 16, 21, 41, 53, 61, 63). Among this thick tangle, whether it is roots or branches located above or below ground, a body, a face sprout to life thanks to the nutritious sap (diptychs 4, 38, 51, 54).

Soon, we enter the field of illusion, of diction, which favors the telescopic message to the border of the upper and lower images. Then we hesitate to identify what is shown, as in the remarkable diptych of the dark wall, vertically split, from where the menacing shell of some unknown or underground power, or the futuristic rocket of our spatial future starts, evading the horizontal crossing of the two photographs, (diptych 45). And that woman-stalk, whose fluid grace rises from her dress as she does from a vase and whose head expands as a bouquet over the mountain (diptych 52).

It is in this way that photography, though it may come from the sole reality from which it cannot escape, is governed by the vision, predominant and original, which we handle from within, demonstrating his powers to construct and destruct. There are no tricks in Rafael Navarro's photographs since all of them are direct transfers from a reality that he has patiently spied and stalked, obtaining elaborate fruits from provoked and perfectly controlled encounters. The use of the 13 x 18 format confirms the author's voluntariness to exclude any chance, and to take his time to achieve, not only in staged or posed shots, his final works.

That power to structure or separate by means of photographic vision reaches its peak when he creates abstractions both from his own sources or the world around. In the case of Rafael Navarro, they are first of all abstract images represented graphically where things lose their identity, their function, to exist only as a series of lines, planes and more or less constant values that range from white to black (diptychs 34, 46, 47). On the other hand, Rafael Navarro creates many of his photographs from abstract ideas he seeks to shape, materialize, by bringing together elements drawn from reality and refining their scenery to compose a diptych.

One of the characteristics of photographic images consists in enclosing part of the whole in a square, however, we are so aware of that whole that it does not take any effort to "see" beyond the edges of the image. Contrary to this, Rafael Navarro focuses all our attention on a central composition. He conceives each photograph not as a painting, which by definition has an autonomous existence completely separate from any peripheral extension; nor as a shot, where what happens before, after or around always keeps an active presence; but as a picture in the theatrical sense, which contains all data and retains the characters in a restricted set respecting the unit of action, place and time or, say, rather an "alter ego" painting that we would see and live on the side of the courtyard and the garden at the same time. We live each diptych in itself. A diptych is not a shot or an excerpt from a wider world, it does not require or admit visual infiltrations coming from outside, and does not react by pure chance or by cascading with others, except for obvious thematic rebounds as it is not a series. This systematic rejection of intrusion, interference or osmosis with the environment emphasizes the importance of the physical articulation of the diptych and focuses our attention on the middle line, composed of the addition of the two black, thick edges of the negatives. Sometimes that line dissolves and disappears between the dark edges of both images, to no longer separate but to blend. Often, by stressing the

horizontal lines set by the sky, water, soil, wall tops and rails, they cut themselves into planes of numerous images, shaping the photographic matter surrounding them into a supplementary layer. Thus both images bind even more for a single vertical reading. In other cases, there is a border between the two terms of Rafael Navarro's proposal. Then their limits become sharper and their differences materialize, allowing each identity to play in a relationship where both images complement or oppose each other. This dividing line is crucial because it regulates exchanges of form and content between the two parts of the diptych, and harmonizes the movement from one image to the other, which would not have been possible if Rafael Navarro, instead of merging them into a single work, would have chosen to separate them into two completely different ones, perhaps more distant even using a two-window *passepartout*. But I must insist on his greater ability, which is to always keep a rupture zone, right in the middle line, in order to establish a subtle interpenetration, an ambiguous gap across which images can flow one into the other to confuse us better.

The fact that the diptychs are read vertically accentuates some sort of rejection to integrate the passing of time in a reading parameter which is implicit in most of the diptychs constructed horizontally, and which is carried out easily through the linear scanning of the eye they require. There is also a will to block, to lock in a single view each set of photographs and freeze his purpose to avoid any accident, any leak.

The sources of inspiration of Rafael Navarro, as I mentioned earlier, gravitate around a bundle of subjective motivations that illuminate some major issues he declines from one diptych to another, favoring the use of some motives such as signs, certain types of approach or confrontation, and emphasizing his intention to use lines of force which obey very simple rules: horizontal repetition, voluntary triangulation and elusive curve. Rafael Navarro, because of his duality cult, tends to materialize in his photographs the two sides, the two possibilities of every concept, situation or being, according to the same alternative scheme based essentially on pairs (front and back, inside and outside, above and below, open and closed, visible and invisible, positive and negative, life and death) permanently working with the idea of permutation, mixture, dissolution or metamorphosis. Nevertheless, he ends by proposing, in a visionary way, a unique world, the one of his own creation.

These are his main figures and his leitmotiv:

- An obstacle (wall, fence, cage) means loneliness, separation, imprisonment, lack of communication.
- An occlusion (mask, veil, window, no look) means loss or identity rejection, obsession with secrecy.
- A hole (slit, whirlwind, abyss) means danger, denial, forgetfulness.
- A step (stairs, bridge, footbridge, breach, road) means way out, escape-impulse, hope, imposed directions.
- A loop (necklace, ornament, pivot) means seduction, control-alternation, cycle.
- Vegetation (tree, plants, roots) means reference, tendency, growth-embrace, obsession, grave.
- Matter (water, sky, earth, rock) means rejection of the imagined, desire for stability, pursuit of the absolute.
- A hand is call or rejection, union or threat, encounter or break, the other by definition.
- A woman (body / tree, body / object, body / ether) means fountain, temptation, purity, prohibited.

This inventory of the vocabulary and the visual turns used by Rafael Navarro define his obsessive research field, which turns the diptychs into something monotonous to the reader. For the eyes of a knowledgeable observer, a closed system like this is full of risks: the rigid elaboration and the search for a too academic formal perfection block the potential lyricism like an iron chain that could border on the conventional, and a too explicit formulation would remove



almost all the mystery, even being an essential support of the project. It would be a pity, since the author has an amazing capacity to immerse us in a dreamlike atmosphere of ambiguity and drag us to a truly initiation journey beyond the outward appearance of beings and things in the background of ordinary landscapes, there where the front, the dark side, the other, the unknown, all of them his sources of introspective inspiration, remain crouched.

Rafael Navarro is too often easily satisfied by declining the closed circuit of a range of pleonasm as visual as significant, in some cases paraphrasing himself from one diptych to the next when he would have been able to handle all the conceptual extension of sham, of appearance and of the ability to be a different one in the photographic function. It happens that his works range from the raw archetypal evidence to some kind of darkness and, also over there, he loses the metaphysical dimension he could be after.

If the plastic balance of most of his photographs is flawless, the nature of the correspondences, the game of forms, the choice of motifs border on mannerism, despite his sincerity, when Rafael Navarro tackles certain issues. Conversely, when his narrative technique is one of simplicity and purity, his work breaks out both in its lines and its content. Then we are reached much more deeply.

It is difficult to conclude, after those few negative points, the analysis undertaken with *Diptychs*. Rafael Navarro has worked on them from 1978 to 1985 with such obstinacy that the need becomes a law and demands respect. It is rare indeed to see an author bound to the planned, coherent and detailed exploration of a method to produce photographs according to a relevant system of dialectical thinking. A system which turns an intimate desire or shortage into a principle of optical creation and acts according to some kind of precision mechanics, of which the camera is but the visible tool. It is a powerful alchemy that transmits, translates and transmutes attitude and personal action into virtual images which, then, are revealed as positive images that have been collected one after the other through thorough search, in a double movement of anamorphosis and metaphors.

Since this book allows Rafael Navarro to finally consider the production of *Diptychs* as a closed stage in his photographic journey, it remains to wish him to move forward to a way of creation perhaps less reasonably controlled, where method would lead him to greater spontaneity and self-control to a certain neglect. The release of more violent beats could push him out of the protective surroundings of the “mental zone system” that has preset and organized the diptychs work in a logical and calculated succession. In this way his future work would take to a tragic dimension, both in inspiration and in visual invention, which would heighten his undeniable artistic potential.