

Rafael Navarro. A Particular Story

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We are currently writing the history of contemporary Spanish photography. But some are mistaking the history of photography in itself for the history that some photographers have photographed, that is, for the succession of images that can shape a certain social history told through opportune, arresting, sometimes beautiful images. No doubt this photography is, also, a part of the history of photography yet evidently it is not the history of photography itself, for this, like the history of art, is shaped by many other images, aesthetics, artistic names and intentions, and an undeniable spirit of renovation, and not obligatorily by depicting specific events external to the artists themselves.

There are other photographs, other stories that are being told. In fact, there may be truth in the idea that behind every picture there is a story that this picture somehow tells. But the story that is told or discerned is a private story, a particular story that only the artist knows and of which he gives us that only, a picture. A picture that most of the time results from a total abstraction, indecipherable in its own reality. If we all have the same obsessive subject in our heads (ourselves), with an artist this obsession becomes artwork. The artist makes all his imaginary renderings revolve around himself, his experience, his dreams, his desires and his small and insignificant life that becomes universal through beauty, opportunity and transgression. And Spanish photography has reached a sufficient level of sophistication, quality and creativity to become the subject of historic review. There already exists a framework of big and small private stories told with images that situates the social history as no more than a small chapter, and certainly not the most interesting one, of the history of contemporary Spanish photography.

In this history of Spanish photography that is yet to be told, a history that arises from that strange feeling of inferiority historians seem to apply methodologically to the Spanish twentieth century, Rafael Navarro has a chapter of his own. Since his first pictures shown, dating from 1975, coherence and consistency have been two of the elements partly defining his work. A body of work that has always revolved around two parallel mainstays: the representation of female nudes and the development of an abstraction based exclusively on repetition and the concealment of the figure for real, purely physical reasons. For it must be said at the outset, in Navarro's work there is no deceit, no strategy of concealment, and no technical tricks other than the classic photographic recreations of image duplicity, mirroring and slowing down the motion. Rafael Navarro is what has come to be called a "pure photographer", working without the aid of darkroom tricks, without the need to deploy digital imaging, without retouching. He is the last of the modern photographers, faithful to a medium that evolves toward places that are beginning to lose any relation to its origins, to the point that one no longer speaks of photographs but of images. Navarro is still a photographer who knows the craft and who does not need another to express what he sees, what he looks at. Likewise, he has used photography while completely distancing himself from all those definitions of photographic finality: there is nothing documentary about his work; there is nothing seeking to tie us to reality, or even to relate us to it. Navarro's photography transforms what is photographed into something else, converting it into a container of absolutely different meanings. Everything photographed disappears from the real world as it becomes image, thus giving rise to something else. In this process of transformation lies the importance of choosing photography as creative medium, for photography shows the relation between things, the relation of the eye with those things. It does not show the things.

We are talking about a history that began officially in the year 1975, at the time that Navarro produced his first catalogued series, *Formas*, consisting of 12 images of different fragments of the body, of a female body. We are talking about a series made 32 years ago and that, briefly, silently –as all Rafael Navarro's work– laid down the groundwork for a career that, aside from

content, concept and form, has one unquestionable element: coherence. In this first series, clearly influenced by Weston and the pure, luminous and corporeal Japanese photography, especially some of the series by Eiko Hosoe, was to indicate a path, a grammar, which is still in use and in which purity of image is above and beyond any other consideration. Form, a word that does not afford the series its title coincidentally and that was to appear in another title from the series from 1996, (*Las formas del cuerpo*), is the crux of the matter. The female body (always female) is a material that is moulded with movement and light, and that becomes form, defined, drawn by light and darkness. Black-and-white, a characteristic aspect of Navarro's work throughout his entire career, is the purest form of photography and it is also the falsest, the most artificial. In nature, there is nothing in black-and-white, just man's cultural creation. Light, the blackness of an unfathomable darkness that surrounds those illuminated bodies, which are developed, hidden, exposed, before the artist's camera to create some small, almost intimate works, to the measure of man's possibilities.

That pure language was to be mixed with a certain impalpable, undefined anguish that passes through Navarro's work, on tip-toes, and that lends it a dramatic touch in some of the series (especially in *Agur* and *Dípticos*), a narrative vein that suggests to us that the artist is inevitably opening windows onto his own feelings, onto his vital experiences. Through those openings appears the man who, by way of a medium, is expressing himself beyond beauty, beyond mystery. The forms are what the photographer employs to express himself, but what is being expressed cannot be hidden behind purist formalism or repetitive coldness. Here, a particular story is being told, a story that for so many years has not ceased to build itself into long chapters, short chapters, specific episodes, and has continually left fragments of its author, of its protagonist, between the pages of a book, in museum and gallery showrooms. In our own homes. Windows which it is not always easy to look through. Indeed, much is said about artists' work, about their careers, but about the relationships that their creations establish with others, that is a private secret. Another particular story.

Each work, each series issues from a will for continuity and at the same time marks a turning point, a breakthrough, an innovation. Thus, based on repetition, on continuity, on reconsidering certain subjects in the exact point where they were left years before, Navarro steadily builds a body of work that intermittently folds over on itself, allowing different fragments to be detected, pieces that become keys departing from that abovementioned continuity and marking beginnings of different journeys, series, innovative creative lines that follow that same methodology of repeating, developing, abandoning, to be taken up again later on. This is why elements such as forms, movement, shadows, the tree, the stone, have appeared and disappeared over and over again throughout this entire time. Knowing Navarro's work retrospectively, it is surprising how reliable it is, how every series brings forth a slight change. From time to time there is an attempt to do something radically different, and yet, inevitably, he always returns to the predetermined path as if a superior responsibility compelled him to unwind the skein more and more in order to finish weaving the whole web.

The subject of the nude body is the most recurrent in all his works. Since 1975, his work has developed in the apparently narrow landscape, the small world of the body. However, Navarro has produced more than three hundred works on this theme, all of them different. Another text in this catalogue addresses his nudes, so we will leave that line of discourse to Catherine Coleman. And though, nonetheless, it seems to me, a priori, that there is not much sense in an artist continuing to insist almost mono-thematically for 32 years on something that is already sufficiently developed and that might even seem a bit historicist, it is in one of the latest series, *Ellas*, where we rediscover, in another format and in a much more direct and much more modern way, the answer to those doubts. What Navarro does is construct a map of a non-existent universe. Little by little, he constructs fragments and all that cartography is not autonomous; it is continued, complemented and takes on meaning as a set rather than piece by piece. As it turns

out, the fact that they are women was not so important. As in stories of serial killers, what was important here were not the subjects, the bodies, but the skin, that illuminated surface that emerges from the dark. And this is where we begin to see the nexus between the bodies and the abstraction, and we also begin to understand the purity of the majority of these images, which traverse the naked body without touching it, without resorting to non-essential –practically always eluded– sex. A lot of people may speak of the sensuality of many of Navarro's images, but perhaps that primary sensuality is exclusively in *Tientos*, the sensuality of touch, of close contact, a sensuality that is independent of desire, that exists in the simple touch of fabric against a body, of the depth of nudity that only exists in solitude. These are luminous fragments where a small piece of flesh, fragments of body that at times may not be clearly recognizable, are covered, glimpsed through a white cloth that covers and precisely due to this aim to hide they are much more suggestive than what is seen. There lies the difference between sex and sensuality, between eroticism and pornography, simply in how we offer an image, the result in the beholder may not differ excessively.

But also in that hiding and showing lies the essence of the abstraction that Navarro practices, an abstraction that is built from shadows, some of which are inextinguishable, from repetitions, from fragments that are repeated, some hiding from others in that eagerness to show themselves. His work is based on a gaze deceived by reality itself. Because what we see is not always recognizable despite being clear, just as the truth can be seen in the lies and in the same way that the representations of things do not always have the same meanings as the things they represent. Darkness, shadow, some blurry contours behind a wet wall cause a loss of sharpness. What we see is a translucent but not transparent wet surface upon which a liquid that may be tears, that may be rain, is dripping and thereby preventing us from seeing clearly what is on the other side (*Desde el otro lado*). The question is whether the photo is speaking to us about what we do not see or simply that liquid and ungraspable wall. That personal abstraction, brimming with apparent realisms, luminous bodies and other illuminated bodies, has been developed silently over the years in order to become one of the main pillars of all his work. An abstraction that involves a lot of transformation, change, and that goes through kinetic stages, and others in which anthropomorphic morphology is mixed with botany, and rock is blended with flesh (another recurrent feature in Navarro's work) and one that undergoes a period of strange splendour in the series titled *Dípticos*, a 69 piece set that in strict, organized collages mixes the divine and the human, landscape and architecture, signs and portraits, in an ambitious and personal attempt to create a complete story, again that aforementioned map. *Dípticos* may be Navarro's most ambitious project and perhaps also the most cryptic as it unites so many things. It is no doubt a narrative work created during a crucial stage in the artist's life, but above all it is an expressionist gesture within the work of a peaceful artist who, apparently, whispers rather than shouting. These diptychs are scenes to decipher from a film edited by a madman, or a surrealist, whose script we do not understand and whose images few have been able to see completely.

Above, we spoke of the series *Tientos*, the most straightforwardly sensual, and this same series is that which provides us with an excuse to touch on a new aspect in Navarro's work, an aspect I will mention but briefly. The latent religiosity in a clearly pagan body of work. It is not a religiosity based on the belief in rites, churches or dogmas, but a religiosity in the way of approaching the images, of offering them –*El Ciclo Oferente* (The Offerer Cycle) is the title of one of Navarro's works. The presentation of the bodies as isolated, autonomous objects floating in the void, illuminated bodies, and not just photographically, is very much a recovery of a singular purity. These bodies play, they leap, or they are still; they dance or rest, but always in a special way, and no I do not mean that there is any similarity with the pagan gods. What I mean is that it is these fragmented, anonymous bodies –it is not even essential that they are bodies; they could be something else, green peppers according to Weston– that seem to be the centre of a Baroque liturgy. When I say they are illuminated bodies, I am not only referring to the studio ligh-

ting, but to the fact that the photographer has given them inner light, an immaculate whiteness, whose union converts them into something other than bodies, and this is why the sensuality is relegated to a place that is secondary to the beauty, to the harmony, to the pure forms and to the moving time.

All these fragments of bodies, of shadows, all these indications, points of reference, desires, stories, scripts, adventures and projects shape a geographic realm, constructing a map of the artist's life. A map in which we are all included, a map that, by striving to encompass everything, has been broadened and has grown until it has reached the size of reality. Becoming a personal, incomprehensible, sometimes beautiful, sometimes alien, sometimes familiar story. A story that only images can tell.