

Rafael Navarro. An in-depth conversation with the noted Spanish photographer, in which he talks about his work, the art market and his aspirations.

Silvia Mangialardi

Silvia Mangialardi. How did you get into photography?

Rafael Navarro. If you mean how to use it as my own language, as a medium of expression, it was when I reached the age of 30. But already when I was a teenager I had begun to take an interest as an amateur.

SM. What was it that sparked your interest in the image?

RN. More than mere interest, it was my salvation. From a very early age I had to take on the responsibility, together with my father, for the family business, and I began to feel terribly worn out by the situation and by the way my life was going. I needed a way out, a creative outlet, I needed oxygen. I always say that I became a photographer by chance. I was looking for an 'ejector seat' and so I tried out different things; first you learn the technique, then you send stuff off to competitions, then you realize that the competitions never award you prizes and it must be because you are doing something they don't want you to do, so you give up and you find your own path. I'm self-taught. I got in touch with the Zaragoza Association and they advised me, they explained some techniques to me and by 1973 I had already become President of the Photographic Society. I stayed for two years and saw that what I wanted to do was light years away from what they were into; so I quit. I am still a member of that society, in part out of romantic sentiment, but I am not involved at all in their activities.

SM. What did you want to do?

RN. At the time, I didn't know. I was trying to read myself, internally. There were things that I needed to do, to say, there were things evolving inside me that I found very hard to deal with. Photography was a tool to enter areas and say things that I did not dare put into words. I have discovered things about myself in my photographs and it was a kind of bridge to communicate with other people. I am very shy.

SM. One would never guess...

RN. No, because over the years, one learns how to make the right noises, but deep down I have difficulty communicating. I had a go at film, with a friend who insisted that I should become a cameraman. We made some short films and I discovered that I couldn't work like that, because one needed to have a crowd of people around and I needed privacy. I just had to work alone.

SM. As it such an internal thing, do you get the idea before you do the work or does it become clear to you in the creative process?

RN. Both. What really works is when a personal state of mind or feeling pushes me to create certain images. There is a point, which I call 'being in the zone' when images emerge with a significant content. It's as if were a medium, or I could connect with my unconscious. There my feelings can flourish without the mental corset of the conscious mind trying to translate them.

SM. Communication between the unconscious and the consciousness?

RN. Yes. When the communication is between the consciousness of the artist and that of the observer, it tends to be a very commercial kind of art. One makes pretty things and makes money and the buyer puts them in his house because one's name is known. The fact that a work

sells is very different from being accepted by people with sensibility, which is what matters to me. My work is not in general a big hit in the marketplace.

SM. But it still sells well.

RN. Yes, because I have been at this game for many years and I must be old and well-known enough by now. But I do admit that my work makes people uneasy. Much of it has an aesthetic charge that helps it to sell, but also an element of loneliness and bitterness. I understand that the average person would not want to have certain of my works in his sitting room, he may be keen to buy them, to buy 'The Scream', but he wouldn't want to have to listen to it all day long. For me, what is truly important is that the person is moved. One of the most important experiences of my life was an exhibition of the complete collection of *Dípticos* in a town in the centre of France. They were in the habit, a pretty intelligent one, actually, of not holding openings, only closing ceremonies. That way, the public got to know the work before they met the artist. When I arrived for the closing night they told me that there was an elderly lady who had been many times, she'd been looking at the pictures for hours on end, and she wanted to meet me. I was expecting a long interrogation but she simply told me that in looking at that series of diptychs she had watched most of her life pass by. That is something which makes up for all those hours of insomnia. She shook my hand and then she was gone.

SM. Do you limit your editions? If so, why and to what extent?

RN. I limit them for practical reasons and because the market demands it. If you want to be in the contemporary art market you have to play by the same rules as everyone else. At first I used to have quite large editions: my first series ran to 50 copies. Over the years we have cut back the editions to 10 or 15 copies for small pieces, 7 for medium sized or so and 3 for large works.

SM. Have your series sold out?

RN. The old ones no, because there are many copies, but many of the more recent ones have sold out.

SM. What do your works cost, roughly?

RN. The cheapest cost around 1,000 euro and the most expensive in the region of 7,000 or 8,000; those are big works, some of them unique pieces.

SM. Does a gallery handle your work?

RN. No, many galleries do. I don't have an exclusive 'marchant', though the pipe dream of every artist is to have someone who takes care of the commercial side so that one can leave it all to them and not have to deal with it. I find selling my photos hard. I like to show them to people who are interested in them regardless of whether they find them more or less appealing. I enjoy showing them when I see that there is an understanding of the language in them. But down the years I have been in this war I have had to show my work to people of every hue and sometimes they make you want to shut the portfolio because you can tell that the person you are talking to hasn't got a clue and has no interest whatsoever. Some gallery owners while they are looking at your work they are only thinking about whether their clients will buy it or not. It's very logical, as a guy who runs a gallery is in it to sell stuff, and I am not complaining about his position, but it is difficult for a gallery owner to stick up for a work that he doesn't understand, or that he doesn't have any feeling for. Fortunately there are others who like to take a risk and are willing to embark on the same adventures as the artists.

SM. Of all the things you can do connected with your work: selling, exhibiting, publishing it: in which of these do feel most centered, as an artist?

RN. In the process of producing it, though after that all the other routes are interesting too. Publication means that you can reach many people. The original work is a double-edged sword, on the one hand you would like to sell it and on the other it makes you feel it's a pity. When you create a work of art you don't want to let it go, deep down. There is an ego that says "you must sell, you must be in the museums, in collections, make money, be famous, etc." but at the same time there is something inside you that tells you to hang on it and share it with your friends.

SM. Where did you get your training from?

RN. As far as the technical aspect is concerned, I got that from books. As for the emotional part, I am not aware that I used any methodology. It works like a sponge: there are moments in life when one picks up on things and others when you squeeze and it comes out. In life you learn by listening to other people, seeing how a bird flies, observing the forms of a plant, the smile of a child. There are a thousand things that can make you feel and all that, whether you want to or not, gets under your skin and then later you bring it out in the work.

SM. So, for you every work is a self-portrait?

RN. Yes. Absolutely. An artist who is really sincere with himself in his creative work spends his whole life saying the same thing.

SM. Why?

RN. Because what we do changes nothing.

SM. But can't it be more of the same in a different way? Doesn't the creative process make you change your stance and this gives rise to a new work?

RN. Yes, of course, but there is a duality. On the one hand, the very dynamic of life –and the more intense one's life, the more evolution there is– it makes you change, but it's as if you had a back foot that you can't move, because it is rooted. And there you are. Don't you find that there are things you can never fix? You may come to see them in a different way, you may learn how to relativize them, how to cope with them... it feels as if you have tamed them, but the beast is still inside you.

SM. That is to say, the work elaborates on a theme that is never accessible?

RN. Or that you never finish rooting out. I have been able to end a love affair with a work. In a critical situation I took the decision to break it off, the feeling was one of intense desperation. I thought of how I would get through that night, how I would manage to live until the sun came up. We have all lived through such a situation at some point. Anyway, that night I produced a whole portfolio, only the shots of course. I went looking in the house where I was living for all of the most blood-stained nooks and crannies and as I photographed them, it was as if I was cauterizing the wounds. When morning came, I had the complete collection of images.

SM. That is a creative way out of a situation.

RN. There are those who find a way out with a few shots of whisky, which to me is neither good nor bad, everyone to his own. Because when you get to that point there are no rules. It's everyone for himself.

SM. You mean that you don't create with a concept, you create with your gut?

RN. That's right. Whenever I have tried to create using my head, to be honest, the work has spun out control.

SM. Are you more interested in transmitting the idea or the emotion?

RN. The emotion. If I wanted to put across an idea I think literature is a much more direct way. What seduces me about plastic artistic language is that you can move at much more subtle levels. A line can conjure up emotions that you cannot explain both in the observer and in the artist.

SM. What kind of relationship do you have with your models?

RN. I work a lot with the human body, when I set up a session in the studio I must do so with a model in whom I have a certain trust, but not someone with whom I have a strong relationship. Then I only have to explain to them the idea I want to work with... and then I get stuck in, to see what flows. It's like seizing the moment. Logically there is a technique behind all this, but in that moment you don't think about it, you have already overcome that and sorted it, and you can follow the emotion that the contemplation produces in you. You find a frame that moves you and that is the moment. The thing is to be open to perceiving. I cannot get across the fragrance of fields of lavender that we crossed this morning, but I can find the frame that reflects the feeling it has produced within me and so I can build a bridge to the observer.

SM. And how was it with the diptychs?

RN. I did those between 1978 and 1985, it was a more intellectual process. I set out with an idea, I sketched it out, I first of all took the picture that could cause the most difficulties (they were 13x18 plates), I developed it, made a print and, if I thought it was OK, with that print in hand I went looking for another image. Sometimes in the process, I came across something that caught my eye and it gave me the idea of doing something different. It was like a factor setting off a chain reaction: I took it and built on it from there.

SM. Why did you stop making them?

RN. Two reasons. Firstly because I had been making them for seven years and there comes a point where you feel that you are repeating yourself, and secondly because it was becoming too easy. Then I realized that I was copying myself. When that light flashes, it's time to pull the switch.

SM. Your works have been increasing in size as time goes by Why?

RN. I had always made prints in conventional sizes, 40x50 or 50x60. The diptychs were contact copies. Then I began to work with collages, in which I combined various images. And this logically led to an increase in the size of the work. With other series it was a matter of finding the viewing distance that would give the observer more intimacy or not. If you make a work that measures 3 by 2 meters, nobody can look at it close up because you can't see anything, you have to stand back. So the size then depends on whether you want to shout or whisper. Depending on what you have to say, you may want to say it under your breath.

SM. Have you been shouting lately?

RN. Yes. I don't know why, perhaps I can give you an answer in a few years from now. I ought to have less patience; I guess I must be getting old.

SM. So just how important is it for photographers to turn up at international events like Arles?

RN. From a promotional point of view, the fact is that you have to be in the right place at the right time. I believe that in life it's a question of '*que sera, sera*'.

SM. True, but not to the extent that Prince Charming is going to come in through the bathroom window. If you stay at home twiddling your thumbs, the work of art won't make itself.

RN. Picasso said that "inspiration comes at any moment, but it better catch you while you're working". And as for promotion... praise God and pass the ammunition.

SM. What message would you pass on to photographers who are just starting out?

RN. That if they want to keep their freedom, they should look for their daily bread someplace else. I had to make that decision many years ago. And I am glad I did, because it is the only way to do your work as and when you wish. If paying the rent or your kids' school fees depends on whether or not you sell a work, it will be very difficult to keep your integrity intact. If your income covers your bare necessities, you can allow yourself the luxury of turning a deaf ear to a gallery owner, a critic or a museum curator if you think that what he is saying is just not what you're about.

SM. How does an artist manage to keep at arm's length things like fashion trends, critics, whatever might separate him from his work?

RN. There was a time when whenever I was about to enter the office of someone who was going to assess my work to decide whether the gallery would buy it, or exhibit it or publish it, I brainwashed myself beforehand saying "when I walk out of this office my work will still be as good or as bad as it was when I went in". And I will still be the same artist. The only difference will be whether that gentleman likes it and understands it or not. If you manage to keep that up there is no risk. But if when you leave the office, you start to have doubts because you have been told that you should do this or that and you consider him to be an important guy, that's dangerous. Nor should one insist that you have a monopoly on the truth. One has to listen and there are many times when one must learn, but the basic apprenticeship for the act of creativity is learning how to listen to oneself.

SM. Is there anything you would like to add?

RN. The other stuff that is all around you is very important: what you read, the music you hear, where you like to go for a stroll, all of it... it's super important who you share your life with, who are you fellow companions on the road.

SM. That is a matter of chance, sometimes.

RN. Of course it's a matter of chance. All of life is. In my opinion, one of the greatest problems of this terrible internal instability that we have, this angst that we feel in many moments, which we could say is the vital source of existentialism, is due to the fact that western civilization teaches us to prioritize the concepts of certainty and security. We have to be financially secure, have a comfy house, a car, friends, a family, we have to have a load of things, the more solid, stable and controllable the better, when in fact the only thing we can actually be sure of as human beings is that one day we are going to die. How the hell are we supposed to work towards certainty if we are as flimsy as a house of straw in a whirlwind? One has to learn to live in the midst of uncertainty. I remember when I was young, anything that didn't go according to plan drove me crazy, it took my life apart. Whenever I left the house I would carry my return ticket with me, my hotel reservation, all my meetings arranged, I had to have everything figured out in advance.

SM. There was no room for the unexpected.

RN. There could be none. Now it's the complete opposite. I am still an organized person, but I don't get upset over changes of plan.

SM. You think that this position, as a man, faced with Life...

RN. It's the only valid definition of Art for me: a position one takes with regard to Life.

SM. Is this projected in your art?

RN. Sure. Someone said "a work of art loses its freedom when people began to construct it" And that is the key point of what you were saying. As long as it is just a feeling, anything is pos-

sible. As soon as you begin to make it concrete you are closing off all the other avenues. And you have to know how to close them.

SM. Right, learning how to accept the opportunity cost of renunciation is very hard, in art as in life.

RN. But the thing is, we live in a permanent state of choosing which means we are constantly having to give something up. The best way to live in the most absolute state of internal misery is if you don't realize that this is the game and try to have your cake and eat it. Something's always waving goodbye. The awful truth is that the chance never comes round again. When you give something up, it's definitive; you will never get it back.

SM. But to think like that is to invite paralysis.

RN. No, it's reality. Do you think that we can relive a day such as the one we have just lived today out here in the countryside?

SM. No, but there may be other days out in the countryside...

RN. That is, they may be better or worse, but they will never be the same, we will never relive them. If we return tomorrow, all of us, to this same place, it will be a different experience.

SM. I always think that, when one day I'm in my rocking chair, I want to look back and smile with the memory of all those moments.

RN. But you will only be able to have that smile if you feel that you have made the most of all the moments of your life.

SM. Does photography help?

RN. The creative process is a privilege; it is like a divine gift. Some people may find that laughable. But I believe that it's as if you are touched with a magic wand and you are given an access to a portal that common mortals don't have. For me, photography is wonderful.

