

Reality and its labyrinths

"For me photography is a medium that allows me to speak where I cannot find the words. It's a medium that I look for in my subconscious, and content and hidden feelings come to the surface. It's a medium that allows me to create objects that contain subtle values, which are intelligible to others. It is a means that allows me to breathe my freedom", wrote Rafael Navarro (Zaragoza, 1940) some years ago to define his immersion in photography - that calligraphy of light, transformed into suggestion, beauty and composition - is the continuous self-portrait of someone who has rarely done them. Nor does he feel the need to make them. Sometime later he would say: "The uncomfortable thing is to have to learn new techniques once you have combed many gray hairs; the best thing is to discover new possibilities to channel your desires of expression". Also, he says that the portrait of Igor Stravinsky made by Arnold Newman in 1946 is one of the photos he most admires. "I consider it one of the best portraits that have been taken in the history of photography. The composition, the expression of the composer, the posture, and the created environment are perfect. All this makes you feel the hand of a great teacher," he says, referring to a work that embodies visual power from simplicity, and to the scarcity and precision of its elements. It's a work that perhaps can crumble or decompose as a puzzle of creation while following the parameters of architecture. Rafael expresses thus his intimate experience of photography, which he also usually defines as an art of suggesting, and his way of looking at and feeling the creation of others. Especially when Newman, who tended to the baroque and to environmental noise, achieved the maximum debugging or stylization, and materialized that happy adage that's so widespread: get the most with the minimum. It is almost like a haiku. Rafael Navarro, after many years working with black and white photography and with an analog camera (he is one of the great innovators of Spanish photography of the 80s), took a double leap: he embraced the digital camera, first he tried a Leica, but it did not satisfy him at all and now he works with a Canon and a Sony. Then he assimilated color, which is not a simple task. The gallerist Julio Álvarez, from Spectrum Sotos, maintains that "making good color photos is not easy for anyone, not even for the great masters". Before presenting such a round and poetic exhibition as *At The Wrong Time* (2010), he made numerous tests, like someone who develops an invisible background work, until finding himself at that stage where the artist puts the instrument and technique to his service, and overcomes them. You can work in absolute freedom with ease, doing what you want without any insecurity and without awareness of servility. The tyranny of color can be inexorable. In this project, an old Eastern saying which is something of a curse was corroborated, as Rosa Olivares wrote: "We will always be ourselves". The artist was reborn to manage and evolve as he likes: as a quiet stroller, as an observer of the reality that moves away from documentation and narrative; as someone who goes out to prowl with a desire: to find himself, to cite himself with the beats of his intimacy and his identity. Rafael Navarro likes to use the term creative or artistic against the concept of reportage or document: his job, deep down, is the persistent manifestation of a desire, and perhaps of desire itself. He walks to live, to photograph, and to hunt. He walks for the sake of it, as he pleases. The Russian painter and writer Marie Mashkirtseff, as Anna Maria Church recalls in *The revolution of the flâneuses* (WundermaKammer, Barcelona, 2019), wrote: "What I long for is the freedom to go out alone, come and go, sit in the Tuileries, and especially the pleasure of stopping and looking at the art shops, entering the churches and museums, walking the streets at night; that's what I'm looking for and that's the freedom without which you cannot become a true artist." Alec Soth said he had opted for photography because "it's an excuse to wander around alone." It is not necessary to insist on it, but photographing is also an adventure: of knowledge, of pleasure, of contemplation and of the senses. It is an itinerary of sensuality. And it seems easy, and even appropriate, to think that the artist would not feel uncomfortable with the quote. Rafael Navarro had been interested in architecture or architectures. They come and go through his series, perhaps not as a free-standing theme but as part of an underlying idea in the general argument of emotions. There are several examples in his production; perhaps the most impressive is *Diptychs*. He says: "I look at a building as I look at a naked body and I face it in the same way: as a sculptor of details. If when before a body or nature the curved line dominates, then in architecture the straight line is in command". And chance dominates, as does the conception of space, the idea of light (which sometimes behaves like a dagger that delimits fragmentation and modulates volumes), and the simultaneity of planes. Of course, decontextualization (or disorientation) is the rule. Navarro is more concerned with a portion of the whole than the whole itself: it must be the sensibility and imagination of the spectator who completes what is seen. He has no obsession to make it known neither that he has traveled a lot nor that he spent hours and hours in the studio of Joan Miró in Mallorca, enclosed with its objects, like someone who participates in a secret ritual with a ghost, or in the house, perhaps enchanted, of Manuel Álvarez Bravo. In fact, it could be inferred that he is interested in those buildings that seem to underpin the modernity of architecture through binomials of symbolic expression such as order and fantasy, beauty and usefulness,

lightness and flight, reason and theory, or geometry and silence. "I never play riddles. I do not propose a hieroglyph to whoever sees my photos. Nor do I propose a challenge. I prefer that one faces the work at their whim: that they organize their own speech from the vision, without further ado. My intention is clear: I would never want to limit the flight of the spectator," he adds. "My photographs are readings of what is on the surface," said Richard Avedon, probably in an attempt to deny the inner life of objects and men. Rafael Navarro says he does not propose a philosophy. Or if there is one, he wants it to be implicit. He cares about time, structure, geometry, how chance comes to meet the 'flaneur' that he is so many times, and matter; he is interested in looking, living and seeing differently. Or at least in seeing in his own way, with the purity of lines and moons, with miniatures of glass. "It cannot be emphasized with more vehemence that the reflected light is the subject of the photographer," said Edward Weston, and this is also one of the principles of Rafael Navarro, who recognizes himself in the American master of nudes, of deserts, of toilets and of architecture. "Light is the soul of photography. I like all lights. We only see light," says Rafael. The poet Walt Whitman wrote: "Now I take off the blindfold, you have to get used to the glow of light and every moment of your life." The photographer works on several issues at once. He accumulates experience and sensations, he places himself before objects. And when he opts for something, for example for architecture (construction, buildings, giant sculptures for living and dreaming, design and urban furniture) he takes advantage of everything. He studies the photographer's position, looks for angles, elements, settings, wounded lights; he looks for reflections, backlighting, shadow spots, textures and symmetries; as if he were a musician who nourishes his score with impressions and ink. He does the same without laziness and with an ineffable patience. Perhaps he knows what he is looking for; perhaps he intuits that in the movements of camera and body, in a foreshortening, an unappealable calm image will be revealed to him. He is dispossessed. It is that appetite for perfection, for a diligent order, the harmony that imposes itself and expands. The work *Architectures* has poetry and a principle of coherence. Rafael Navarro remains faithful to his taste for natural cycles and has selected 28 photos. He took many more, chose many, edited more than 50 and then in that dialogue with himself opted for pieces that summarize his own career and a good part of the history of photography. As is well known, Rafael Navarro is an artist of beauty, accuracy and tranquility. He is an artist of extreme rigor, of neatness, of unused light. The care of the composition is something intrinsic in him: sometimes he struggles against his natural instinct towards rabidly perfect forms, "yes, sometimes they reduce novelty. I tend to be dangerously ordered, but that's the way it is. It's like being tall or short, having light or dark eyes. One tries to change, let go and release ballast, but it is not always easy", adds someone who seems to have everything planned, even the hidden promises. In this project, Rafael Navarro shows himself as he is. Hypersensitive, refined, an obsessive and meticulous explorer of darkness and shelters. He is interested in heights and life at ground level, cornices, the weeping of years or centuries of stone; he is interested in what is seen and what cannot be glimpsed; accidents in construction and textures, sharp, almost aggressive forms, and skies, whether dramatic or not, and of course the mystery of corners. As in all of Rafael Navarro's work, there is a dry melancholy residue that is exempt from acrimony, but perhaps anguished or desolate like a landscape without hope. And at the same time everything else is there: the subtlety, the contrast, the glide, the dance of clarity and night, the love of a form of expression that does not hide the influence of Eastern photography, especially the Japanese. And there are there, first of all, the mastery of a profession and inspiration. It is not easy to know if Rafael Navarro is starting a new route from this peak, but it is safest to follow the dust of the road and the trail of dreams, as he likes to do with involvement and distance. He always carries the resonance of the Bauhaus and rationalism in his heart. Also, he carries the aesthetic of abstraction that, paradoxically, is based on reality and its labyrinths. Volumes are what they are, what they show and also what they hide, an eloquence of framing, of lines in flight, the solitary space of angels crossed by a sudden gesture of clouds. The photographer tries to be honest with his feelings and integrates them in the great spiral of life.