

SUBTLE BEAUTIES

BY DOMINIQUE BAQUÉ

Photographs, which cannot themselves explain anything, are inexhaustible invitations to deduction, speculation, and fantasy.
Susan Sontag

Guillaume de Sardes, Nicolas Comment, Ola Rindal and Henry Roy: four photographers, standing on the fringes, alongside mainstream art and that overly coded photography influenced by the Dusseldorf School, photojournalism, postmodernism and the obsession with new technology. Cultivating more or less the art of the secret, they share a similar sensibility, a penchant for travel and chance encounters, for the random and the accidental. They are united by sensitivity and refinement, which in one becomes dandyism, in another remains modesty. With the exception of Sardes, whose work here is exclusively in black-and-white, they share a similar mode of chromatic expression, particularly in Comment and Roy's more assertive sensuality and in Roy's magical and harrowing spectrality.

They are quirky, perhaps slightly mannered. Most are haunted by books, one by music; all of them travel, taking on the slightly old-fashioned role of the "travelling photographer" — old-fashioned, yes, there is something of this touching relationship with the past in the corpus of their works. Is not being "fashionable" a supreme form of resistance?

They all interconnect and echo each other: Sardes regularly invites them to contribute to the beautiful *Prussian Blue* magazine, of which he is editor-in-chief and artistic director; Rindal and Roy have worked in fashion and for *Purple*

magazine, particularly alongside Elein Fleiss; Comment, Roy and Sardes have often appeared together in *Edwarda* magazine and most recently in *Possession Immédiate*.

All four have a predilection for the banal and the insignificant, which they redeem through an exceptionally subtle chromatic range, a controlled blur, flares and an expressive use of perspective. They are influenced by surrealism — again, another outmoded art. But the surrealist writers' texts rather than their paintings, with a definite touch of kitsch — and Breton above all. A similar sense of melancholy haunts their images, although the beauty and sensuality of the women salvages them from its “black sun”.

They also spurn the spectacular and the ostentatious, often the bedfellows of postmodernism. All it takes is a vehicle obscured in the fog, a phone box, useless and abandoned amidst the undergrowth, an errant dog, a simple bouquet of overblown blooms, already fading, a dreamy young woman half seen through a bus window... Everything becomes a sign, everything makes sense, so long as the gaze stops, lingers and allows one to be drawn in, intrigued. Seduced. Intoxicated, perhaps.

Often, Comment and Rindal share the same sense of mystery, in images that remain enigmatic. Women are more present and more eroticised in Comment and Sardes' work, while they are almost absent from that of Rindal, just as colour is more assertive in the work of Comment and Roy. Ultimately, however, they all proclaim their unconditional love of Beauty.

I would, therefore, be tempted to talk about a “group”, despite the fact that in this era of savage liberalism and frenzied individualism — that pitiable prevailing law of both the jungle and of entertainment — there's no longer any such thing as a group in either literature, the visual arts or cinema. Which is a far cry from the shared studios, the intimate groups of painters and writers of the 19th century, the interwar avant-garde groups, everything from Bauhaus to surrealism, and even the conceptual artists and minimalists of the 1960s and '70s, and artistic movements like Fluxus, Arte Povera, etc.

Contemporary art tends towards extreme individualism. For all that, the notion of the group, which I seek to apply to these four artists, does not seem to bring unanimity. Is it a fear of losing the group's singularity? Perhaps also their firmly asserted individualism? Some might simply use the term “group exhibition”, but in this instance it is grossly inadequate to express the astonishing homogeneity of the works that have been brought together here. So while it would not be appropriate to talk of a “school” (which is completely anachronistic these days), nor a “movement” (which is too vague), I would rather posit the idea of a “circle”.

Sardes, Comment, Rindal and Roy form a circle. Circles. Intersecting, intertwining, concentric, sometimes far apart, sometimes, conversely, entirely overlapping. Four photographers. There could be five of them, were we to include, in another concentric ring, the very similar work of Giasco Bertoli, considering for example the shady portrait of two blonde women kissing in *Edwarda* (2012), the wild and windswept *Grégoire Colin* (2008) on a damp quayside, the unnatural calm of *Maryon Park* (2007), the almost picture-postcard sunset of *Normandy* (2010), the swimming pool photos and the fashion spreads for *Purple Fashion* (again) and both *Tennis Court* series (2007 and 2013).

In fact, there could be six of them, if the gaze of a woman, sharing the same sensibilities, were to disturb this exclusively masculine circle and invent a new eroticism. Why doesn't she exist?

For all that, each has his story, which I consider worth mentioning, for they all refer to intimate photography, a travel journal, a life journal, visual autobiography. Comment and Sardes are from “here” (although given that these days the reactionaries are now reversing the hard-fought values of '68, I don't like to use the expression). Rindal comes from Norway, blowing in with his misty, grey and blue moods, an almost atonal palette, the mysteries of its snow and its nights, while practicing what I would term “photography without qualities”, in reference, of course, to Robert Musil. And Roy is from Haiti, although he has a fairly complicated relationship with his motherland. Having fled Papa Doc Duvalier's regime with his parents at a young age, he came to France and quickly became integrated into its culture and history, now feeling like an outsider in Haiti, a stranger to the exoticism it inevitably evokes, its voodoo myths, etc. There, he is seen as a white man, if not a traitor, and remains a foreigner, one that is not welcome. He cannot, however, deny that something of the ancient Haitian culture still courses through his veins.

Above and beyond what I have chosen to call the “circle”, I must, in order not to lose sight of their own qualities, come back to each of them as individuals; to listen and re-transcribe as accurately as possible their pasts, their revelations, their perspectives and their areas of dissent, too. So, a group shot with individual portraits.

HENRY ROY

Henry Roy recounts his good fortune, almost by pure chance, to have been assisted by three mentors: Guillaume Rouart, who came from a cultivated and wealthy family of art lovers, with whom he struck up a