

Possessions is the title the Greek artist, Manolis Baboussis, has chosen for identifying certain cycles of his photographic oeuvre which will be hosted for the first time in Italy at CAMeC in an extensive one-man show.

There are multiple reasons for this initiative which I envisioned for reflecting on the work by such a particular contemporary photographer meriting special attention. First of all, because Baboussis has reached a stage of his work in which his distinctly sensitive photography constitutes an original linguistic statement deserving of its own place in this medium. And because he has a profound, lasting and unsuspected relationship with Italy: he has stayed here – since 1968 – for long study periods in Florence, Rome and elsewhere throughout the country; and finally, because his relationship with the Italian and European art scene – through the medium of photography – is that of a witness and passionate, acute and assiduous critical interpreter of many human events and of the progress of certain artists crucial to the second half of the 20th century such as Jannis Kounellis, for example.

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Manolis Baboussis: Pensive Photography



Among the various virtues of his photographic work which, in any case, offers examples of a remarkable quality, is a *thinking* attitude which distinguishes it and gives it a particular meaning, density, weight and identity. In fact, each of the various cycles of the work on exhibition in La Spezia is based on a distinct project and concept that, on the one hand, lends order to the thematic in-depth probing and, on the other, shows that the act of beholding is providently a thought serving a project, an aesthetic, critical and poetic reflection. Photographs, in Baboussis' case, which are self-interrogating about acts, realities or things whose motives, subjects and causes must be guessed, since the experience in each photograph has already taken place to the eye of the beholder – as demonstrated by the image – who has visually and perceptively consummated his own action, thereby making us both participants and onlookers at the same time.

Even if, as one might claim, this dimension is shared by all photography, Baboussis has the virtue of making it apparent. That is what makes the great difference which, I believe, has its own specific origin. Actually – and it could not be otherwise – is it Baboussis' gaze that creates an image which would otherwise not exist, given that he observes and notes something so diffused, frequent and indistinct, and at the same time sheds light upon it, that it reaches our eyes as something almost banal; in other words, something not destined to being noteworthy. Instead, that is not the case; possessing this imperceptible reality with the focused attention of an eye used to distinguishing it allows that portion of the world on which Baboussis' gaze falls to undergo a transformation and to become, through an act of justice, an image to transfer from present times into memory.

Photography "decides" on something that it has quickly judged, and confers the attribute of a real event to that otherwise indifferent entity. In that way, not only every photograph is a conscious and meditated experience of reality for Baboussis, but it is very often his imagination that makes something become real, something that other-

wise, without the act of photographing it, would remain in a limbo of ever-latent possibilities, somewhere between uncertainty and lack of attention. We realize very quickly, when observing the diversity of Baboussis' gaze projected on his surroundings, that it responds to a thought or design for a project, after which ideas become organized and take shape in the photographic image. But what takes shape is not so much that which is before Baboussis' eyes and, instead, is the thought which he instills into reality, in his pursuit of its essence. Thus, such photography shows the meaning of what we perceive of reality, not its alleged and unlikely objectivity.

The interpretative capacity of Baboussis' photography thus becomes one of its salient aspects, to the extent that the things, the people, the places in each image preserve the imprint of the experiences they have previously undergone.

By focusing on and clarifying the information he intends to highlight, Baboussis' photography makes us participate in the process of its achievement, in the judgment and the organization of the world of which he, in the first place, is conscious. In this specific sense, his photography is not one that captures our senses or our attention by offering implicating suggestions; to the contrary, being images of a reality destined to the indifference of individual gazes, it leaves us lucid and distant, even capable of our own judgments about what it portrays.

Since the Seventies, because of his particular training during his studies in architecture, Baboussis has been reflecting on environments with his photography, at a time when architecture in Italy had become radicalized by the Superstudio and Archizoom groups in which Adolfo Natalizi or Andrea Branzi and Lucia and Dario Bartolini were prominent. The absence of the human factor in those photographs allows us to perceive the invisible residual but sensitive dimension of acts in the places where they actually took place: in Imola and Volterra (1973-1974), when he visited the last psychiatric hospitals still open before the the Basaglia revolution went into effect, he recorded the acts of the patients which he, himself, had provoked and then showed his slides of them on the sites where they had been shot. The vividness lent by absence (were it actually an entity) which became evident in those slides, escaping the category of photo-paintings, made the architecture and the space speak for themselves as realities inappropriate to the human condition. Such stigmatas contracted in that youthful experience, seem to have become, over the years and after a great deal of work, the common denominator of a large part of his photography.

Baboussis seems convinced that, despite the fact that movement instills and changes all things by modifying their shapes, it actually does not change their structure and their profound essence. In a certain sense, his Parmidean attitude exposes images to a degree of suspended ambiguity, open to our desire for compromise and leaving us free to perceive according to our capacities, and thereby stimulating our judgment. Thus, each photograph is suspended between the judgment already expressed by Baboussis and that of the beholder. This method takes us in succession from one experience to another, from one photograph to another, and invites us to enter rather discordant places: hospitals, museums, schools, courtrooms, religious institutes, political headquarters, TV studios, factories, more or less everywhere, to visualize the shells of acts rather than their protagonists. Moreover, Baboussis has the habit of arranging his images together, even those taken in different circumstances, without regard for their subjects and dates. Such a short-circuiting of associations causes an ulterior attribution of meaning. This characteristic, joined to the indisputable technical quality of his photographs, should have brought his work to light much earlier (a glance at the dates of the works would suffice) in contexts and events where such other photographers as Thomas Struth or Gabriele Basilico were featured, whose photographs are based on some similar aspects as well as some premises they all share: architecture, absence, values of not only psychological but socio-political perception and judgment on the realities they portray.

Baboussis' virtues, as well as the designating "delays" of an artistic ambiance often caused by the foremost market criteria in the critical evaluation of the works, are highlighted in the various sections of the exhibition installed in La Spezia. But artists active in Greece or elsewhere have never been part of the periphery of the world. If anything, it is the rest of the world that has often been peripheral to Baboussis' home country!

So this is an opportunity for a better knowledge of an artist who has reached a degree of remarkable quality and who cannot be said to be lacking in critical detachment deriving from reflection, all of which makes him a non-conforming protagonist of the current panorama of the art of photography.

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