

RED FIRE

by Rosanna Albertini

About *Par le noir*, by Jean Louis Garnell

summer 2004)

(photographs for *Lecture*,

Light has turned red, STOP on the images: they are not clear at all, almost soaked in a blackness as impenetrable as the surface of a pot filled with ink. A lack of light paints them red, or brown - yellow - grayish, giving them an asphyxiated look, as if less light were the equivalent of less oxygen. Can the paper breathe? Some images draw back from the surface, others seem to break it. What's behind the curtain? Sand, it may be.

Or illusion: so was the surface of the *Ink Box* by Charles Ray (1986), thick printers ink as still as a marble face, and James Turrell's dark rooms, where the visitor's immersion into the darkness produced, after a certain time, odd perceptions of luminous, ungraspable entities. But illusion is not the point in Garnell's images, whose disquieting beauty goes along with a sense of evoked presences that are not informed on. Because their language is the language of passion, they are self-defeating art images; the clarity or certainty usually expected from visual communication have gone to hell. We experience a space of *intranquillit * -- a new word that entered the French vocabulary to translate the Portuguese *desassossego* in Pessoa's book of *Disquiet*, a word for a sense of instability mixed with disappearance in progress. The artist has captured what remains of each image, when physicality, accidentally or intentionally, has undergone a sort of mutation on both sides of the camera.

Maybe this artist could say, with Pessoa's words, "I'm the gap between what I am and I am not, between what I dream and what life has made of me."¹ Reality enters the images of his last series, *Par le Noir*, through a sort of personal, unique "literary" formalism. Photography in Garnell's hands becomes a powerful language because it's arbitrary. Visual and verbal texture can be compared, approached, for they "are not windows we look at the world through, and it is the absence of this visual notion of clarity that stirs our most intense feelings."² We see something and we don't know what it is, nor where it happened: life is night lit; why one of the images has become a bunch of rotten puppets, or dried-up broken mushrooms, or a battlefield of eggshells; why a piece of film without images, a curtain that makes me think of feathers, and a

¹ Fernando Pessoa, *The Book of Disquiet*, 1982

² Adam Phillips, Introduction to Edmund Burke, *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful*, 1990

couple of galaxies that could be whatever we want, suggesting some different meaning every day. The mystery must stay: there is no why. The artist appears next to two lamps, he magically turns into a white spray of light in a darker view of the same room. His own image in the shadow introduces one more interrogative point, or the impression that the artist himself is undone by the process: a touch of magic, and he vanishes. One could fancy that Garnell, like most contemporary artists, struggles to avoid the "infinite pain of self-realization" -or self-expression, not really believable anymore in our time of biological determinism, devoted to the religion of efficiency and social control. The very idea of change has turned into mutation; but isn't mutation a mannerism of dying, disguised beneath fictional selves now entangled in the net of new, technological mirrors? It was William Butler Yeats who wrote that the figure of our self "who carries the netting wove from the stars" delivers and deceives us;³ confused as we are, we choose to carry on our shoulders roots and trunks and engines from which the planet has been transformed into a gigantic Medusa head, to the point that our heart hardens under the effort, and explodes in grains of sand.

Please STOP making sense.⁴ Garnell's images are not less *absurd* than Camus' intellectual drama: the artist sets up the way things look, and covers with images a reality which has no reason to be. The vigilance for discernible meaning has to resign, the pressure to understand be taken off. The essential procedure of absurd thinking, art making, and why not absurd reading, is the effort to grab, through description, the density of a reality which is becoming foreign to us, and escapes.⁵ The mind rolls past the infinite variety of faces that reality presents to our experience; and only some of the faces wake up, the ones that resonate in the artist for hidden, personal reasons. Through the artist's consciousness, "one can see appearing not only what words mean, also what things mean: the core of primary meaning around which the acts of naming and expressing organise themselves."⁶ There is choice rather than explanation. But the ground of any image coming to the art is an essence of things that are in the world, intermingled with time, waiting for somebody to pay attention. The phenomenological quality of this last series of photographs by Garnell, although deeply rooted in a century of literary French tradition, connects the French artist to some very young groups of neo-fluxus-punk artists who are moving their first steps out in Southern California. "We propose a politics of vulnerability, of failing better -say the *Dvision*

³ William Butler Yeats, *Per Amica Silentia Lunae*, 1917

⁴ *Stop Making Sense*, film of the *Talking Heads* concert, 1984. directed by Jonathan Demme

⁵ Albert Camus, *Le Mythe de Sisyphe*, *Essai sur l'absurde*, 1942

⁶ Maurice Merleau Ponty, *Phénoménologie de la Perception*, 1945.

artists in a recent statement -⁷ we seek ambiguity, possible explanation revealing the un-resolve-able.

The ghosts of Anatole France, Paul Valéry, André Gide, Albert Camus, Maurice Merleau-Ponty step into my ink, shivering for the lack of style of their contemporary American offspring, but for Garnell, they embrace his most recent and his past work realizing how strongly and precisely his visual style connects to their own. So vividly does this artist grab from life the quality of each image that one would say he removed and stole from nature the physical essence itself. For each image, only one click. Every piece flattens on paper an unrepeatable volume of life just one second long. Each photograph tells the viewer that the images it contains are there for no reason other than their formal connection to the artist searching for moments in which he is subdued. Nothing but visual configuration. Who takes what? That one click is sensual, if not consensual; it's a kiss. And for my ghostly writers, their pages say more than just THAT,⁸ they are open rooms for readers to be brought to the presence of a very last aristography, writers who use style to liberate the lines from the pressure to make sense in a literal way, or to make sense at all. The written manner regenerates the vast wild land of how humans are compelled to be, and nobody knows why.

It is not only because of his art of depicting the most fleeting lack of form, unidentifiable landscapes, inner spaces, unknown human beings as if they were the last remained on earth after a destructive catastrophe --the precious relics of irrelevant moments-- that I see Garnell as a member of the above-mentioned aristography, it's because of his style. What's life? --he seems to ask. White flowers bloom every spring despite the overflowing, red and black human disaster. Formally, *Par le Noir* is a new body of work: softened outlines, spots of color melting in the dark, chaotic appearances, figures in the shadow; the concept is unprecedented for an artist who broke a white bowl in two pieces, and took symmetrical pictures of both, white on a white field, so that nobody could doubt that they were the same bowl. No mistakes were allowed. Now that his figures have become more and more like figures of speech, they can stutter, be repeated; the noise, voices of all things without names bring up confusion, the same black density that pulls anything to pieces forces them to pile up; and the emerging thoughts are specters of our present, wrapped in a sensation of darkness.

Style is a sharp stick; no matter that it is not verbal. Garnell's personal manner doesn't give up with elegant quality. He can describe decay, mistakes or nebulous

⁷ APARNA BAKHLE/DVISION, Statement of Intent, 2004

⁸ André Gide, *Marshlands*, 1953

visions as tidy as a pointillist picture, and his camera is used as a writing *stilus*, still marking forms of a distinguished language. His art embodies a visual language moulded by the good manners in such a determined way that nature and History are not separable --a union depicted, and conceived with the same glimps of absurdity, by the anatomic *planches* in Diderot and D'Alembert's *Encyclopaedia*. A clean and naked skeleton, nameless, crosses the tibias, graciously leaning the elbow's coronoid apophysis on the flat surface of a neoclassical altar that grows in the middle of nowhere; s/he elegantly curves the metacarp to support the cheekbone's apophysis as the skull shifts toward the ground while the other arm lies on the table. The left hand's fingerbones look like slightly drumming the marble in a posture of perplexity. Is s/he looking into the future?

To tell the truth, the former sequences of *Suites* and the *Dyptiques* that Garnell made in the 1990s are no less figures of speech. Despite the clarity they celebrate -a revelation of visual power that Garnell shares with Thomas Struth- a vein of darkness underlies quietly and secretly the splendor of every picture. Besides, they have something in common with an early photographic series by Sophie Calle: on the grave stones each life was engraved in one word: brother, sister, father and so on.

Civilization consists in giving a thing a name that doesn't compete with the thing and then dreaming about the results. The object really becomes something else because we make it become something else.⁹

Garnell doesn't need to give names to the figures in the *Suites*: mother, couple, young men, boy, grandfather, mother and child come intuitively to everyone's mind. The sequence happens to exist because the images themselves seem to want a proximity; the artist, in good company with boredom and monotony as he wanders in his own thoughts, follows their inclination, waiting for their story to appear. There is no romanticism in his thoughts. He seems to cut, precisely, some frames of reflection out from countless little actions that nobody counts and which do not count for anybody. As viewers, our attention sinks into the images, finding inside and around them frozen moments of disillusioned awareness. A lifetime is only felt for what it is, incomprehensible. Objects, landscapes and humans in each series look like intangible, repelling any attempt at intruding into a moment of palpable privacy: a pole pulled in opposite directions by electric wires parallel to the road (image n.1), a woman who lets her thoughts go, between the parallel arms of a chair (image n.2), a square reflection of light on a wall, competing with less movable squares and rectangles hung on the same

⁹ Fernando Pessoa, *The Book of Disquiet*, 1982

wall (image n.3). An invisible seesaw moves from life inside the house to the outside, at window's length. Nothing happens. (M. 1996)

One doesn't go out; --and it's a mistake not to. It's true that one can't; but that is because one doesn't. --One doesn't because one thinks oneself already outside. If one was aware of being shut in, one would at least feel the desire to go out.¹⁰

Sarcastic philosophy by Andr  Gide! Savouring a sadness that doesn't make him suffer. Sadness in fact, for Gide and Garnell, was not the center of their art; they didn't know, most of the time, that such a sadness was finding space in their artifacts, involved as they were in thoughts and perceptions constantly digressing on a variety of things --usually the least interesting for the professionals of intelligence-- and they enjoyed them. Garnell, most likely, did not think of his pieces of the last fifteen years as containing darkness. Rather, he shaped single moments into memorable pictures, peculiar for not being a remarkable subject. The artist made them memorable witnesses of our History, silently leading the viewer into life's density, contingent and beautifully strange.

I am Tityrus, and solitary, and I like a landscape, as I like a book, which does not distract me from my thoughts.¹¹

In Diptyque 3, 1998, a woman is standing in a park. She looks pensive. Having turned her head away from the view of the eighteenth-century landscaped park, she has slightly shifted her gaze down, toward the pebbles and the blades of grass, neither distracted by the environment, nor attracted by any panoramic view beyond the balustrade. Maybe unwittingly, here Garnell plays a mythological score: like Pier Paolo Pasolini who traveled in Africa in search of men and women making the same gestures, living the same tragedies of their Greek ancestors,¹² Garnell has found and captured in Paris the portrait of a contemporary Cassandra. No need to predict future disasters; they are already here, too painful to watch. The technical perfection of the Italian garden conceived as an art of drawing lines between natural chaos and human fantasies of harmony and order, today has become haunting, almost disturbing, because the progress of reason has turned into its opposite and made our sense of reality inconsistent, if not inconsolable. The day grows infinitely gray. In the two views of the

¹⁰ Andr  Gide, *Marshlands*, 1953

¹¹ *Ibidem*

¹² Pier Paolo Pasolini, *Notes For An African Orestes*, film, 1970

park there are no shadows, near and far trees appear as if they were displayed on the same line, like soldiers, an army of trees that moves toward the foreground from the enlightenment of the past centuries. They are dark, totally blind. The woman instead is the real presence in this piece, a figure almost sculpting all the instants in which we are strangers to ourselves, Èrrant at the gates of our own psyche.¹³ The artist faces the obstinacy of things we cannot change, nor fully understand. What an elegant landscape can be, as opposed to the meanders of our intimacy?

Right now, in Garnell's mind, light has turned red: his most recent photographs, estranged from meanings brought in by external experiences, seem to me, as George Steiner has suggested, Èrehearsals for death.¹⁴ ÈIt is the lucid intensity of [their] meeting with death that generates in aesthetic forms that statement of vitality, of life-presence, which distinguishes serious thought and feeling from the trivial and opportunistic. At a dread cost of personal means, at a risk more unforgiving of failure than any other, the artist, the poet, the thinker as shaper, seek out the encounter with otherness where such otherness is, in its blank essence, most inhuman.¹⁴ In *Par le Noir* Garnell brings us to the threshold of the inexperienced: an unfamiliar, not quite friendly territory. If we try to find in each image a sense which fulfills our reasonable hopes of identification, we can only see our thoughts vanishing, absorbed by the eyes. Such a strong conjunction of light and darkness seems to come from a state of mind very close to Yves TrŽmorin's, an artist whose images also display the dance between life and death. Such a fantastic dance is often overpowered by the effort to deny the temporary nature and the permanent crisis of both, words and images, and yet it recurs in the arts every time that Hope turns black. Poetic words and images, then, become the space of our absence from a world that we hardly accept. The loneliness Garnell presents in these black pictures goes along with the destiny of our existence, perfectly senseless. It's not the end of the journey, only a long winter, waiting for the spring.

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¹³ George Steiner, *Real Presences*, 1989

¹⁴ *Ibidem*