
Les demoiselles de Foucault by Maria Cristina Strati

The young French artist Aurore Valade is at her first show in Italy. The exhibition features 16 photo works, with interiors and human figures as subjects. These skillfully contrived scenes have a strong theatrical look and a markedly painterly quality.

For Aurore Valade, photography is a conscious, ironic questioning of the very notion of artistic representation. In her photos, interior architectural spaces, objects and figures hark back to the great Western artistic and cultural tradition, ranging from Velazquez's painting to Foucault's thought. The reference to Velazquez is often evident. The way Valade builds an image, almost as if it were a scenario, reveals her source of inspiration, the great master. This feeling is emphasized by the introduction of details such as mirrors or painted portraits, which cleverly lead the spectator's attention away from a purely esthetic level, towards a symbolical, conceptual one. To these qualities we must add Aurore's preference for female subjects, often people from the artist's private world, or belonging to common everyday real life. Male characters are absent, or appear as co-protagonists in a scene that centers around the female soul and its psychology. However, the issue of subjectivity and identity is always a paradigm for universal states of mind. The photographic image becomes the mirror of the deepest human feelings, although it dissolves individual subjectivity into a conceptual dimension.

All this is about a very feminine way of experiencing personal relationships, which plays on seduction, the desire to be looked at and loved. The danger of this mechanism is the risk of losing yourself into the self-image you have built for yourself, in a frantic attempt at becoming one with what the other sees of us.

Running along the thin line of this existential risk, the identities the artist represents seem to dissolve into an infinite play of mirrors. From the point of view of composition, this emotional mechanism is reflected by the *mise en scène* of the work as a whole. Everywhere, thin imaginary lines are traced between subjects, spaces and figures, converging towards the spectator, who is thus unconsciously involved into the depicted scene.

These reflections recall Baudrillard's notion of "simulacrum", but it is above all the reference to Foucault that sets the fundamental tone of these works. In particular, they hint at *The Order of Things* (1966), which, as many know, opens with a long dissertation on Velazquez's painting *Las Meninas*. For Foucault this masterpiece is paradigmatic in the way it emphasizes a radical change that has been at work in the history of humanity, starting from the modern age: it is

the questioning and crisis of the notion of subject, and the related idea of an objective representation. For Foucault, the notions of subject and of "man" are recent inventions in the history of humanity, which can be traced back to Descartes's philosophy. They are destined to be put into question as history progresses, until they eventually "disappear" into the cultural melting pot of the contemporary world.

According to Foucault, Velazquez's painting – reinterpreted, as is well-known, by Picasso in the XX century – condenses the theoretical results of virtually all research in modern art, and is therefore a decisive element of reflection for us, too, in this day and age. Caught in a play of looks, intersections and mirrors, artistic representation in Velazquez is consciously reduced to its extreme purity, and eventually comes to question both the traditional modes of consumption of the work of art and the role of the artist.

With due proportions (but also taking into account the artist's theoretical and cultural education), Aurore Valade's research seems to follow in the steps of Foucault in some key points of his teaching.

What is clear is that we are looking at photos, not paintings. But from a more general point of view, if we believe, with Baudrillard, that only a naïve mind can view photography as the repository of a "literal" vision of reality, aimed more at hiding its meaning than at unveiling, in an almost pornographic sense, its objective totality, a more modern interpretation of Foucault's considerations on Velazquez may turn out to be helpful in reading much of the younger artistic production of today.

In the case of Aurore Valade, this theoretical research sharpens our attention on the compositional aspect of artistic practice, as an effective, conscious return to tradition in the form of a re-actualization based on hermeneutics.

Transferred to our age, therefore, Velazquez's vision of the world (and) of art acquires a new interest, which has to do with the very statute of contemporary artistic research.

In the presence of a work of art we are faced with a specific event, which says something about the way of being of humankind in our age - reaching well beyond the modern notion of subject, it gets closer to a nuanced, critical perception of both one's own identity and private sphere, as well as to intersubjectivity.