

## EXCITINGLY STRANGE

BY FRANÇOIS BAZZOLI - FEBRUARY/MARCH 2008

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Rather than discuss the state of contemporary photography and its relationship to plasticity, we should instead explore oppositions, marginality and points of divergence to reveal a different form of photography, which is not “immediate” but rather “mediate”— a complex form of photography at the borders of several zones, or faculties, of behaviour and creation; or more precisely, a form of photography close to contemporary art, based wholly in photography, that could be defined (through its playful, manipulatory, and above all didactic themes) as the antechamber of all possibility; a form of photography that does not shy away from pasting, completing, cutting up, outlining, adding, and amplifying plastic interventions, all processes of reworking a creation, which are integral to photography today. This form of photography would possess the aura of immediacy and the absence of any sign of reworking. This is a received idea, therefore false, but this affirmation of an immediate form of photography where the image appears miraculously still has a tough existence.

Aurore Valade’s photography has the privilege of being situated where we least expect. It is apparently kitsch, its organisation and composition overladen; each image is however (possibly) a pure concept – the invisible antechamber between photography and contemporary art (crossed with provocative sociology), possibly prefiguring the title of her collected work. What is an “interior with figure”, if not a modest genre (above all English or German, says Mario Praz (1), a passionate collector of such scenes) dating from a short historical period (the end of the eighteenth century to the middle of the next)? What is it, if not a forgotten genre, about which it is difficult to be sure whether it was about painting the interior or the figure, so rare are the testimonies concerning it? Aurore Valade has elected to depict the interaction between the two. And the model is not dissociable from its environment. There is something of safari photograph in its proposition, and something of a vivarium in its production. The more scientifically minded would catalogue files in their computer, or stick plant specimens between the pages of a suitable notebook. With her lenses, Aurore pursues the huge wealth of human variety that today’s sociology seems eager to dismiss with statistics and their levelling effect. And what do we see—horror or marvel? The voluptuousness of delirium, the emotion of saturation, the celebration of crowding, the glorification of the most unsettling forms of decoration and behaviour. The sociological reading is finally swept away by these attractive anomalies that graft themselves onto the real to show the expanse of infinity.

Paradoxically, from this highly organised shambles staggering realism is born, but to get there Aurore Valade has had to transform light, upset the order and disorder of her model’s apartments or other hiding places, introduce symbols of truth and falsity, work her model’s poses, play with respect and derision, and upset the plans of these enigmatic characters—because of this surfeit of information we find out little else about them. The computer intervenes slightly here and there; the foreground and background undergoes a small degree of staging; she will also add several references here and there, but the game still isn’t over because it is precisely at this moment that photography actually starts to emerge from beneath the excess of complicity.

The result can engender questions in us: Is it a makeshift reconstruction of a freshly painted pictoriality? Is it another way of becoming aware of the world’s in-betweens and around-about? Is it another way of adding poetry and surprise to reality? Another way of bringing others dignity and imagination? To this, and many other questions the answer is that Aurore Valade’s curiosity shop is not made up of monsters and chimera, sirens and hydrocephalics. It is made of the blood of others and their humour, captured with tenacity and rigour. For, while everything is false, or almost, in these images (except the reality from which they are born), the characters often have disturbing veracity, and they seem to assume their own imaginations and the sense of imagination conferred upon them. This requires great courage and confidence. A compliment that reflects on Aurore Valade.

1. Mario Praz (1896-1982), a great specialist of Italian and English literature but also a critic of visual arts, and author of books on mannerism, interior painting, neo-classical tastes and the “philosophy of furnishing”.