

DEATH AND TRANSMUTATION (OF THE CIGARETTE)

Attention, please: stop, look and observe. The format is square, but the open mouth, veiled by the smoke, is a circle. With this image – the fifth in the series – Rita Barros achieves the squaring of the circle. She also circulates the square through the whole series. I don't know what to admire most in this set of photographs (and in each one of them) – its narrative quality or the formalism of the *mise-en-scène*.

I look for the telling detail, and I find several. For instance, the ash-tray (which can only be where the photographer placed it, marginal and off-centre, until it assumes its dominant, central position in the last image of the series). The cigarette is a mere excuse, a probe with which to explore the space around it – up, down and sideways, for the actions of the smoker are centrifugal. The secret – as someone else said – is not to inhale. A woman smoking is a much more interesting and significant proposition than a man doing the same thing. Just think of this series with a man as the protagonist; no-one would care. The cigarette is a phallic symbol that wilts and dies, crumpled and squeezed in an ashtray. It suffers the tragic ending of a candle. The battle of the sexes. The rest I leave to the imagination of the reader.

A beautiful woman experiments with a last cigarette. The composition is masterly. Framed by the black, curly hair, the oval face forms a circle. The background (and the table in the foreground) define a rectangular, Cartesian space evoking Mondrian. Note the strategic position of the ash-tray and the articulation of the arm, at the elbow. Any series – and this one, in particular – is an essay on movement (which is, simply, a combination of space and time). The mind dreams on and the arm moves, commanding life. (Incidentally, this is my way of reading António Gedeão's poem, *Philosopher's Stone*.) With the elbow resting firmly on the table – the fulcrum requested by Archimedes in order to lift the earthly globe – the smoker's forearm oscillates to and fro as if it were a pendulum. Meanwhile, the smoke rises ethereally. Winged ashes. Only the profane trinity of elbow, pack of cigarettes and ashtray remain motionless, like stones in repose.

Photographs can be read as poems and this series of twelve images displays internal, partial rhymes: the trio of arms in the fifth, sixth and seventh, the pair of heads (also the arms) of the ninth and tenth, etc. The only one out of sync is the last – the red apotheosis of the ash-tray and its solitary cigarette butts. It looks like an open, abstract mouth with carious teeth or a dangerous *vagina dentata*. It reminds me of the babbling protagonist-mouth of Samuel Beckett’s play, *Not I*, which begins with “... out ... into this world ...” and ends (?) with “pick it up -”. The author-actress is absent. Like a naughty boy, she can always claim: “I didn’t do it”. It was someone else smoking.

Rita Barros’s *Last Cigarette* (2004) is – to put it in black and white – a great series and a masterpiece of photography. I should rather say red and black (instead of black and white), for here the sober colour palette plays a fundamental role. Red is the new white. In the nineteenth century the extraordinary Eadweard Muybridge meticulously analysed the motion of animals (*Homo sapiens* included), in grids of consecutive images. *Last Cigarette* is a Muybridge chronogram for our time. I suspect that this last cigarette is the first of a new series, and that the ash-tray will have many refills. Long live this *Last Cigarette*!

Jorge Calado, 2010

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