

RITA MAGALHÃES

ENORA

OPENING SATURDAY 6 FEBRUARY 4pm

9 FEBRUARY – 3 APRIL 2010
TUESDAY - SATURDAY 3-8pm

Looking at the world through a crystal ball.

When Walter Benjamin wrote *The work of art in the age of mechanical reproduction* in 1936, where he states that photography and copies deprive works of art of their "aura" he surely didn't have works such as those by Rita Magalhães in mind.

This artist, born as freedom dawned in Portugal (1974) is one of the rare romantics in the panorama of contemporary art, itself sinking into indifference or, as Gilles Lipovestky puts it, into an age of emptiness. Her works are gifted with a mystery we must urgently rescue so that the soul does not remain hidden or just above water. Thus, the work of Rita Magalhães counters the trend of some current artists to stress the superficial and the definition and perfectionism of an image, as they see photography as a faithful and oft perfected vision of captured reality.

This artist is interested instead in capturing moments resulting from the passionate contemplation of places and moments by using the capacity of photography to more easily accompany and register the sceneries memory can only fleetingly grasp. The camera works thus as a pencil and a sketchbook, more suitable to the speeds of current life. In this aspect, the manner with which she approaches situations is much more in tune with painting, and this stems from her academic formation as an artist. In her works photography fills a role of renovation of the pictorial register, granting it a fresh breath of life or, if you will, a new aura, a new veil. To remove this intermediate stage before the reality captured by her would be a criminal act akin to removing the *patine* from an old painting. The values of time and memory that are crucial to this artist's work would be destroyed.

Roland Barthes stated that photography is a mirror with a memory. Registered moments become dead places, or rather living ones shaped like a simulacrum. This is a spectral facet, which in truth speaks to us of a reality that is closer than the objectivity of things and of the world, and it communicates with us beyond vision.

This created spectre is not, however, devoid of sense or without weight, for it is rather of a force equal to the fear we have of ghosts in an empty mansion. It is sublime. The aesthetical references of Rita Magalhães are proof of the fascination exerted by masters such as Caspar David Friedrich, as well as other artists who, in spite of not being a part of the romantic movement, such as Vermeer and Caravaggio, can transform any theme, from the most banal to the conventional, into a personal statement regarding the depth of the soul.

Art historians such as Heinrich Wölfflin would say this is one of the characteristics of Northern artists, and a counterpoint to the formality of Southerners, an opposition similar to that between Baroque and the Renaissance. As it happens, it is precisely from northern landscapes that Rita Magalhães draws inspiration to produce this series, depicting ports from the north of Europe.

In this sense, the series shown here shares a link with the research conducted by J.M.W. Turner – a master painter devoted to the sea – on the English seafront. As with all passions, Turner dedicated several hours and a few years to the observation of his beloved. To him, the sea was an inconstant and tumultuous element in permanent transformation. Hence, each of his paintings of it was always different. As a good mariner, he observed maritime life from every angle, from its shapes and temperament to the industrial equipment and people living off and around it.

The *Enora* (2009) series draws its name from the technical name of one of a ship's equipment elements (the base or opening that supports the mast), chosen by the artist for its feminine connotations, and is the result of a similarly enquiring study. In this series (Turner was also a serial artist) Rita Magalhães comes close to the quality of the sketches of the English master, especially his aquarelles. In them, Turner perfectly captured the weather that dotes the pictorial surface with a veiling identical to the one sought after by Rita Magalhães in her images, transmitting the magical, nostalgic force provided by the observation of the world from a window on a rainy day, or through a crystal ball, transposing her images into our intimacy. Likewise, for the artists contemporary of Turner, painting the sea and all that was associated with it belonged within the private sphere rather than to the general public, since the latter was more interested in another kind of painting. Diaries are equally something belonging to the private universe of Rita Magalhães, in that they aid the development of a true visual archaeology.

A maritime port is thus understood as a truly romantic setting: a point of passage, of departure, of arrival, of love found and lost, of lives and deaths. It is a spot on the horizon, or, in a tempest, a shelter that reveals one's fears and the power of *chaos* inherent to the *physis*, to nature.

In the 1840's, Turner was fascinated and influenced by the photographs he saw of Niagara Falls, especially by the way the camera was capable of capturing water in a suspended moment. This suspension, similar to that of our breathing when seeing a ghost or the contemplative sublime present in the forces of nature and world, is the underlying theme of the work of Rita Magalhães. She suspends time and the pictures that speak to our memory, and, in doing so, makes them eternal, granting them a true soul.

Carla de Utra Mendes