

Veritas Feminae: a visual encyclical about the immanent feminine

If every man would have the sensibility to immerse himself in the human being like Alec Von Bargaen does, the world would definitely be a better place. A sensible globetrotter (not a tourist with a camera), a man of nowhere, a living melting pot and a curious artist who has not lost his capacity for astonishment, has made him a man of everywhere, and triggered his sharp eye to capture realities in transit and trace parallels. His exhibition *Veritas Feminae* (Woman's Truth) is an example of how a solid contemporary artist operates in terms of concept and workmanship. In his new series, using photography-based, multimedia portraits of marginalized women, Von Bargaen expresses the multidimensional feminine reality. But more than a collection of "multimedia portraits", this exhibition is an inner trip decoding the ontology of the female role in society throughout history and an exploration beyond their proxy-body: what you see is a mere representation of the complex universe beating in their inner-selves. It is in this sense that his artwork truly exceeds the bidimensional format, crossing borders to portray a trans-historic and cross-gender reality. His lucid approach to women as fragmented icons —highlighted in gigantic photographic mosaics made of detailed tiles—, results in an artwork of great visual richness. From this point of view, *Veritas Feminae* is a visual encyclical, a circular letter, an exhortation to delve into women's minds, breaking stereotypes, and at the same time, it is a sort of mental impossible, a dog chasing its own tail: since it may be hard to accept that a male artist is entitled to create such a magnificent and compassionate defense to women's singularity without falling in the ordinary clichés about women.

On top of all this, *Veritas Feminae* is also a retelling of myths and stories from a contemporary perspective, "a love affair" in which the artist has captured, in the blink of a shutter, a dozen women he has met in passing, giving each of them later — in the creative complicity of his studio— a stage and a background story of an important historical or mythological character. In his own words: "An abused woman from the south of Spain becomes the first female Pulitzer-prize winner for poetry, **Sara Teasdale**. A fuchsia-haired junkie in New York City's Union Square becomes **Nancy Spungen** from the *Sex Pistols'* Sid and Nancy fame. A Cambodian refugee in Myanmar becomes **Isadora Duncan**, the pioneering, communist ballet dancer. An androgynous bipolar artist from Chicago becomes the French novelist and feminist extraordinaire, **George Sand**. An Arab woman in a small town on the outskirts of Jerusalem, head covered and an outline of a smile peeking out from beneath her hijab becomes not only the representation of the Palestinian/Israeli conflict, but also the incarnation of the both worshipped and despised **Golda Meir**. A tattooed installation artist from London becomes the controversial Mexican **La Malinche**. Two beggars, one from The Irrawaddy Delta, the other from Cambodia, represent not only the multiple historical conflicts on the borders of Southeast Asian countries, but they become the core of two of the most fascinating women in history: **Queen Elizabeth I** and **Mary Queen of Scots**. A prostitute from the Kathmandu Valley becomes Homer's **Penelope** awaiting the return of her beloved Odysseus. An abandoned girl living in New York City's Penn Station becomes the

admired and troubled Eleonora Fagan, best known as **Billie Holiday**. A blind woman in central India becomes the wunderkind cellist victim of Multiple Sclerosis-**Jacqueline Du Pré**. A young Vietnamese girl sold for pennies to tourists by her own family becomes **Mary Magdalene**".

While this is an outstanding and elaborate exhibition, there are details worth to foreground in this brief review: Without any makeup, Von Bargaen transforms a European girl — British installation artist Katie Surridge— into her *otherness* (*La Malinche of Playground and Carnivals and Other Vague Recollections*) revealing the ethnic hardness of a strong and passionate female —a rebellious woman of many faces and many attitudes embodied in a single shoot—, and creating at the end a subtle sense of a "National Geographic" reverse exploration (exploitation) of image.

There is a Place Where The Pavement Ends and The Street Begins (his homage to Nancy Spungen, the queen of punk, in collaboration with artist Lyndsey Wardrop), is another piece I would like to comment on: The symbolic violence suffered by a woman used and abused, scrutinized and beaten by the media, a soul looking for her own self under the shadow of her man; is portrayed with the scratch marks of broken glass (framed and unframed). Scars; marks; wrinkles... depict the real topography of the face more than features: "the very narrative of life can be found therein", to put it in Jonathan Middleton's words.

The video and image installation that gives name to this exhibition: *Veritas Feminae* (George Sand) is praise - worthy, as well. In this piece, the artist portrays a photographer and artist from Chicago who "lives in a sort of alienated state", capturing her in five different photographic animations: "...where the images fade out and in —just like the presence of this woman in other people's lives— and the sudden shifts of background female voices, from cheerfulness to pain and anxiety", as points out Mariagrazia Costantino, Artistic Director of OCAT Museum, Shanghai. This is an explicit example of Von Bargaen aiming to catch and expose his subjects' psychologies, creating portraits of the women he had met in their living, ethereal and immanent presence, showing their strong and free spirits in a cinematic sequence.

The female figure has been epitomized and worshiped in art even before the Venus of Willendorf and is a very recurrent subject in photography, thus what is very impressive in Alec Von Bargaen's *Veritas Faminae* is not the subject but how the artist brings a new shade to the topic retelling timeless paradigms with an honest and respectful twist. Von Bargaen's project not only gives anonymous and victimized women the same dignity of their famous pairs, but also reveals the tortured lives and the extraordinary battles some women have to face.

Joaquin Badajoz. The Roads, September 2013.