

Ariane Lopez-Huici. Dances of shadows and flesh

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***Solo absolu* or the misgivings of Onan**

In a celebrated essay written in the eighteenth century and devoted to the condemnation of onanism, Dr Tissot, a medical practitioner and adviser to the Vatican, recounted the story of a 17-year-old watchmaker who found his health languishing as a result of his masturbatory practices: “On seeing that he was wasting away in the most dreadful fashion he decided to change his ways, but it was too late ... Overcome by spasms and diarrhoea ... He slavered night and day, his strength was spent and he abandoned his profession ... He lingered on, lying in a sack of straw, emitting a foul smell and paralytic ... he lost his memory before he died, and his body was covered with oedemas.”¹

It is clear that the story of Dr Tissot and his unfortunate watchmaker was not an isolated case in the abundant mythology and literature on masturbation that has been produced over the centuries. We now know that in many primitive cultures these practices are observed with total normality and even indifference. The reader will recall the tolerance towards sex in classical times, and even the effrontery of Diogenes the Cynic, who took pleasure in masturbating in public places. With the advent of Judaeo-Christian morality in the Western world, onanism began to be considered a sinful practice.

For the Catholic Church, in addition to being a vice and a pernicious aberration of the flesh, masturbation introduced a grave distortion into the Christian's relationship with God. In one of the many chat forums currently present in Internet one can read the following opinion of an anonymous member of the faith:

“It is tremendous because you have the spirit of the living GOD dwelling in you and ready to help you. It is fearful because, if you sin with your body (especially sexually), you will grieve (sadden) the Holy Ghost. GOD sees everything you do and knows every thought you have. With masturbation the person concentrates his attention on his own flesh. As the desires of the flesh are contrary to those of the Spirit, masturbation incapacitates our ability to advance in the way of the Spirit.”²

The thing about masturbation that worried science, basically, was the conviction that the habit was connected with loss of health and physical wasting away and – perhaps something much more dreadful – that it might turn into a mental disorder which would be hard to cure if the practice continued beyond the age of adolescence and became a vice in the adult man or woman. Throughout much of the 18th and 19th centuries, the remedies used by medicine to cure this pathology were fairly close to torture. In 1893 Dr Deguise explained to his colleagues: “For a whole year, despite the entreaties of the young patient, I maintained pus in the canal of the urethra by means of repeated cauterizations; they caused an irritation which made any touching impossible. That young man, who has since become an adult, is now grateful for my tenacity.”³

The repression of masturbation affected not only its numerous practitioners but also those who enjoyed scientific or political power and eventually dared to proclaim publicly that it was a healthy and even recommendable

practice. Only ten years ago, in 1994, this proselytism caused Ms Jocelyn Elders to lose her office as Surgeon General of the Public Health Service in the United States after daring to make various declarations on television in which she said that she was in favour of teaching masturbatory practices in state sex education programmes.

A couple of years before the abrupt dismissal of this minister, a friend of the photographer Ariane Lopez-Huici, a dancer and poet who admired her work, suggested that they should do a project together. At that point the project had no name or content. The only thing that they were both clear about was that, whatever it turned out to be, the work should basically involve risk. It was a question of doing something that was essentially a challenge, something hard to do, something for which it was worth sailing close to the wind.

For some years Ariane had been interested in the representation of the male body. So they began by doing a series of nude photographs in which the model was the artist's friend. Because of her dissatisfaction with the results, but especially because the risk that they were seeking was not made clearly explicit in the pictures, Ariane suggested to the dancer that they needed to go further. After a period of reflection, her friend finally dared her to photograph a man masturbating. Himself.

The sequence of photos devoted to masturbation entitled *Solo absolu* (Absolute Solo) brought about a substantial shift from the photographic proposals that the artist had produced previously. Starting with this series, which we can consider a turning-point, Ariane developed a new mixture of visual procedures, themes and iconographies which have defined her present artistic language.

The photographs that make up *Solo absolu* contain subtle levels of reading. This series brings out Ariane Lopez-Huici's fascination with the human body in complete nudity, a contemplative delectation which with time, as we shall see, has acquired certain connotations of a sculptural nature.

In the sequence of photographs devoted to male masturbation the artist tackled one of the crucial focuses of reflection for her subsequent explorations: the confrontation of the individual with his or her fears.

Ariane Lopez-Huici has concentrated her attention mainly on the tangle of prohibitions that stifle the individual's sexuality and imprison it in a maze of moral regulations which prevent the shedding of inhibitions. One of the many consequences of this repressive corpus is the confusion and accompanying phenomena of contamination in which unstable concepts such as eroticism and pornography are currently evolving.

Solo absolu is certainly a bold assault on one of the most controversial social taboos, masturbation. But we believe that the analysis of this series conceals a different and no less significant line of subversion. We are referring to the audacity involved in breaking down the barrier of one of the most notable areas of demarcation between men and women: their acts of masturbation. The intrusion of the camera into this erogenous space is an extraordinary challenge. The artist's experience with her model thus becomes a subtle, confidential mixture of erotic excitation and creative process. In it we see one of Ariane Lopez-Huici's most important victories: the triumph of intimacy over intimidation.

Shadows

“Why is there a shadow there?” (making a shadow with one hand).

GALL (aged 5): “Because there’s a hand.”

“Why is the shadow black?”

GALL: “Because ... because we have bones.”⁴

As we were searching through Ariane Lopez-Huici’s old photographs in her Paris studio we were powerfully impressed by one that she took inside the Pantheon in 1990 during one of her visits to Rome. The formal appearance of this work, *Oculus*, suggests a connection with a Suprematist painting. A whitish light resembling a lunar eye is strangled by a circumference which seems to restrict its expansion. The shadow dominates everything, like a great unmoving stain, preventing light from spilling into the building.

On more than one occasion Malevich said that the origin of his *Black Square* was to be found in the sets which he designed in 1913 for the Futurist opera *Victory over the Sun*.

In the first act the backcloth “represents a black square, the embryo of everything that can be generated in the formation of terrible powers ... In the opera it signifies the principle of victory”.⁵

In this mordant work, theatrical prototypes such as the tough Futurist, the gravedigger, the “new recruit” and the coward embody a heroic struggle with the sun, the emblem of power. Their struggle seeks to bring about the total transformation of the world. “Its heroes identify with the sun’s

challengers, they are the new versions of Prometheus and Phaethon, battling for an inversion of values.”⁶

Malevich had covered the dark backcloth with night, with its silences and mysteries, and had proclaimed the triumph of the shadows, “the embryo of everything that can be generated in the formation of terrible powers”.

If we go back to *Oculus*, in the middle of the glowing lunar eye of the Pantheon we can make out the spindly shadow of an almost imperceptible totemic element (an aerial? a pinhead? a sign? a mast?). In Ariane Lopez-Huici’s archive we found a couple of photographs from her series *In abstracto* where, a year before, almost like a premonition, the artist had photographed a metal fragment of a grating which bears a remarkable similarity to the enigmatic spindle in the eye of the Pantheon. Or was it a shadow?

In Ariane Lopez-Huici’s photographs we can find a new link in the battle fought by the heroes in the gloom. Once again the shadows claim their victory. Is it not, perhaps, the shadow of that kind of metal phallus which indicates the *corporeality* of the estranged fragment? And is not the mesh interwoven by the shadows of the grating, the squares mapped out by its geographical demarcation, its *corpus*?

Is it not in a world in semi-darkness, in which Ariane’s Promethean characters seem to dwell, that the celebration of the body and its convulsions is held? Is it not in the enveloping shadows that we witness the birth of Aviva’s body? Are not Holly and Dalila baroque warriors sprung from myth to fight against the trappings of morality?

Stone

In the classical age, myths found their embodiment in theatrical performances or, paradoxically, through transmutation into statues. Thanks to the miracle of photography, Ariane Lopez-Huici's pictures bring about a kind of act of statuary refounding in which various heroes of contemporaneity are set in stone. Might not her pictures of ebony warriors be a silent clash of bronze sculptures? In the same way that Brancusi learnt to photograph his sculptures in order to discover and master the secrets of their shadows, Ariane needs to photograph her models in order to capture and exorcize their doubts and fears. As in the series *Solo absolu*, the artist needs to break in upon the intimacy of her characters in order to win their complicity. Aviva's fears of her nudity or the taboos imposed by Islamic tradition on Dalila Khatir are summoned in Ariane's photographs to a dance of liberation, an act of Dionysiac purging. These naked women with their rotund bodies stage a veritable feast in honour of flesh and life. Like the naked bathers frolicking in the paradises painted by Henri Matisse and André Derain during the birth of modernity, Ariane's women are odalisques who redeem their fears with their nakedness and their dancing. The photographs of this dithyramb of the flesh *objectify* this catharsis, giving them monumentality and the enduring existence of myths.

Seen from this perspective, in her solitary dance Holly reveals herself to us as a naked colossus, a giant statue that brings forth and celebrates the power and veneration of the flesh. Of life.

¹ Quoted by Fernando Arrabal in *Onanismo (El arte de dudar de las certidumbres)*. Text published at www.islaternura.com.

² Text published at www.foroscristianos.mercadocristiano.com.

³ Quoted by Fernando Arrabal in *op. cit.*

⁴ An experiment carried out by Jean Piaget in 1927 in order to study the responses of children concerning the origin of shadows. Quoted by Victor I. Stoichita in his essay *Breve Historia de la Sombra*. Ediciones Siruela, 2000, p. 33.

⁵ Kazimir Malevich, quoted by Victor I. Stoichita in *op. cit.*, p. 197.

⁶ Javier Arnaldo: “El triunfo sobre el sol”, in *Analogías Musicales. Kandinsky y sus contemporáneos*. Museo Thyssen-Bornemisza, 2003, p. 126.