FOTOGRAFIE DI
JESSICA LANGE
still image

Looking at the World
Anne Morin - Curator of the exhibition

There are photographers who seek to tell the story of the world. Others strive to reveal it. Jessica Lange unquestionably belongs to the latter.

For more than thirty years, alongside the film career that has made her known throughout the world, she has been quietly building a photographic body of work of remarkable discretion. It is a body of work born away from the public gaze, with neither ambition nor intention of being shown, accumulating slowly, in shadow and in silence. Throughout all these years, photography has remained an intimate space for her—a silent, almost secret practice, in which each image came to join those that preceded it, like the pages of a journal for which she alone was the intended reader.

For Jessica Lange, then, to photograph is above all a way of inhabiting the world, perhaps because images, as Georges Didi-Huberman has written, are as much bearers of desires as they are of memories.[1] Her wanderings—through the United States, Mexico, Italy, Russia, and elsewhere—never arise from a documentary impulse to capture, collect, or pin something down for display. They stem instead from a state of openness to reality and to the present moment. She gives herself over to it without condition or concession.

To walk, and in doing so, to inhabit the time of walking. To look, then stop. To wait. To wait a little longer, until the almost imperceptible stirring of reality occurs before her eyes. To anticipate it by a fraction of a second, guided perhaps by an exceptionally acute intuition. The image carries within it the long duration of walking and contemplation, and beyond that, both the slow sedimentation and the sudden crystallization of the real.

This inward disposition—this willingness to "let things come to oneself"—recalls the concept of the dérive as formulated by Guy Debord in 1956: "The dérive is a technique of rapid passage through varied ambiances." (2) To be sensitive to the forces of attraction and repulsion within a place; to accept encounters, incidents, chance—whose role, Debord would add, "is less decisive than one might think." In Lange's work, this drifting extends beyond geography. It becomes a way of being in the world, a constant receptiveness to whatever may arise without warning. What the camera records is never the event itself; rather, it gathers what ordinarily remains invisible, what lies in its recesses, before or after it: light slipping across a wall, a gesture held in suspension, a gaze drifting away, a presence that hesitates and withdraws. Could this, then, be The Unbearable Lightness of Being? (3)

FOTOGRAFIE DI

JESSICA LANGE

still image

Yet Jessica Lange's singularity lies not only in what she photographs; it resides equally in her formal language. Her visual writing—its texture, its materiality—is immediately recognizable. Her blacks possess an exceptional depth and density: saturated, weighty, profound; while her greys unfold through an infinity of subtle, almost translucent gradations, their glow already beginning to disperse. Each image is imbued with a density, an atmosphere that, beyond the notion of reality as an "epidermis" so dear to Antonin Artaud, seems intent on reaching a more secret, distant and profound dimension: the place from which reality itself might spring, and where words have no place.

This elemental dimension becomes still more apparent in the photogravures, which hold an essential place in Lange's work. The richness of the process lends the images a singular material presence. The inks seep into the delicate texture of the Japanese paper; the contours of forms are barely edged by a slight excess of matter, lending them the faintest suggestion of volume, while light slowly emerges from the depths of shadow.

Some images seem veiled, as though a fine film had settled over their surface, tempering, muting the brilliance of whites that might otherwise be too loud. This visual quality moves Lange's work distinctly away from any strictly descriptive conception of photography and towards a territory in which the image acquires a sensuous, singular, even cultic dimension.

For although all these photographs—with the exception of the Freak Show series—originate in the real world, they never seek to offer a faithful transcription of it. Photographic matter performs a genuine transfiguration. Landscapes become mental spaces; architecture seems suspended outside time; figures acquire an almost spectral presence. Imperceptibly, the image slips from document into a form of fiction—not narrative or cinematic fiction, but a fiction that remains elusive because it cannot be named.

This ambiguity is one of the great strengths of Lange's work. Her photographs seem to elude any fixed temporality, bearing within them a form of deliberate obsolescence, a patina that removes them from the immediacy of the real. They establish a distance, a suspended space in which the visible ceases to be a certainty and becomes instead a sensory experience. Rather than simply showing us the world, they reveal its zones of uncertainty: those territories where reality slowly allows itself to be overtaken by the imaginary.

This retrospective brings together more than thirty years of photography. Yet it does not follow a chronological course. Instead, it traces the movements of a thought, the cycles and rhythms of a life. Each section offers a variation on the same gaze, an autonomous territory entering into dialogue with the others, until together they form a larger vision.

MINISTERO DELLA CULTURA
DIPARTIMENTO VALORIZZAZIONE PATRIMONIO CULTURALE
Musei Reali Torino
MUSEI ITALIANI
Arte natuRa paEsaggio Storia
diChroma photography
Con il patrocinio di
CITTÀ DI TORINO
TORINO METROPOLI
Città metropolitana di Torino

FOTOGRAFIE DI

JESSICA LANGE

still image

With Dérive, looking becomes experience. The city is transformed into a space of wandering, where every walk opens onto the possibility of an unforeseen encounter. Highway 61 follows the road of memory: a geographical itinerary becomes autobiography, connecting a Minnesota childhood to an America marked by time and absence. The photographs made in Chiapas during the five nameless days of the Mayan calendar suspend the boundaries between reality and ritual, between human beings and myth. In Mexico, night becomes a theatre. Bodies appear, disappear, brush against one another in a light where the documentary gradually gives way to an almost mystical experience.

Elsewhere, the World section affirms that landscapes are never merely places. Russia, Finland, Italy, the United States: borders dissolve in favour of the same quality of presence. With Freak Show, Jessica Lange turns her gaze towards the margins, continuing a longstanding reflection within American photography, from Diane Arbus to Mary Ellen Mark, in which difference, the grotesque and the monstrous reveal less about the Other than about the nature of our own gaze. Presence of the Past explores the traces left behind by a silent America—deserted towns, abandoned houses and forgotten promises. The Landscapes, printed as photogravures, become almost interior landscapes, in which the very substance of the image seems to hold time still. Finally, Gestures reminds us how deeply the actress nourishes the photographer: the movement of a hand, the inclination of a face, a posture are enough to give rise to a story without a single word needing to be spoken.

Different as these series may appear, they tell one and the same story: that of Jessica Lange's attentive presence in the world.

This photography imposes no discourse. On the contrary, it leaves an empty space in which the viewer's gaze may come to dwell. Nothing is demonstrated. Nothing is explained. Each image remains open, available, unfinished, as though silently awaiting the person who will come and look at it.

For more than forty years, these photographs have remained the silent companions of Lange's journeys, her doubts, her wonder and her solitude. They were intended for her alone. Today, Jessica Lange has chosen to open this intimate territory to us. She offers us more than a body of work; she shares a way of inhabiting time and looking at the world that may ultimately be nothing more—or less—than this: "To celebrate in silence the present that is passing between us now and makes us into apparent beings." [4]

1. Interview with Georges Didi-Huberman in Le Monde, on the occasion of Soulèvements, 2016.
2. Guy Debord, "Theory of the Dérive," first published in Les Lèvres nues, 1956.
3. Milan Kundera, The Unbearable Lightness of Being, 1984.
4. Valère Novarina, Vous qui habitez le temps, 1989.

*Excerpt from the exhibition catalogue published by Moebius

Con il patrocinio di