



Toni Catany, the poet of photography

Toni Catany (Llucmajor, Mallorca, 1942) is everything that he portrays, everything that he sets in the cage of his images, everything that attracts him and that he desires —gestures, gazes, features, tones, colours, shadows, states of stillness— and that he possesses when he takes his photographs. The art of his gaze has led him to capture images of his Mediterranean, of the naked dancer, the still life, landscapes and moments portraying his travels. Treated with a very particular sensibility and highly personal aesthetics, the bodies or objects that become the protagonists of his photographs are truly like the words of a poem: essential, revealing, indispensable, deep and echoing. Hence, we can say that, in his lyricism and undisputable mastery of light, Toni Catany is a poet of photography.

Toni Catany expresses himself through his photographs. His work, photo by photo, like the pages of a calendar, is autobiographical: it shows the fortuitousness of the days, the events, the journeys of his life, and he goes out in quest of images for ideas or music that, also fortuitously, seize his imagination and then come to constitute the backbone of his projects. Toni Catany sees and experiences the world, and from the everyday impact of routine events and of flavours, nights,

melancholic moments and joys, he finds expression in the language of images for what he feels and what his eyes see. It all passes through him. As he very aptly says, “I transform what I see and try to make the photos flow from within me”.

A self-taught photographer, Toni Catany began to exhibit in 1972, after which his work has appeared in more than a hundred individual and collective shows around the world. His images, suspended in an unreal time, floating between past and present and swaddled in an artistic ambience of melancholy, have captivated viewers everywhere, and part of his work is presently scattered in many collections worldwide, both private and public. He began to experiment with the old technique of calotype and black-and-white photography and ended up combining this with more modern methods (Polaroid prints transposed in colour, and now digital photography). Since the calotype process required long exposure times, he needed objects that did not move at all, which is why he turned to still-life compositions, even though this subject material did not interest anyone at the time. Beyond fashions or trends, Toni Catany set out on this adventure and, when all is said and done, the still life is one of the great themes of his photographic *oeuvre*, bringing him well-deserved repute and international renown. His still-life photographs show flowers, figures, fabrics, embroidery, rotting fruit, old toys, shells, and so on, as his book *Natures mortes* (Still Life, 1987) reveals. Toni Catany selects the objects he photographs with precise intent and expresses his feelings through them. “I was putting a lot of myself in those objects and people understood that, and then everyone went about interpreting the image in their own way”.

Another prominent theme in his photography is that of naked bodies in movement from which detail is subsequently chosen (*Somniar déus*-Dreaming Gods, 1993). His photographs of male nudes are nothing less than horrifying because the models look more like sculptures than human bodies. Again, in *Obscura memòria* (Obscure Memory, 1994), Toni Catany set about photographing classical sculptures of ancient Rome in Italy, Greece and Egypt and managed to

make the naked marble sculptures from the classical period throb with life and look like humans.

Augustine, Bishop of Hipona, said, “The world is a book and people who do not travel only read one page of it”. Toni Catany is a good reader of the world: his photographs reveal to us how many chapters of the world have passed before his eyes: the landscapes of Mallorca before anything else, immediately followed by the tement of the Mediterranean and its ruins —“homes of the gods”, as he calls them— from the Balearic Islands through to the Italian marbles, the old Libyan cities, the Greek islands, the colonnades of Syria, cafes of Morocco, minarets of Istanbul, medinas of Tunisia, temples of Sicily, the eternal vestiges of the countries of the Nile, cut-outs from the past viewed with eyes of the present, all of which were brought together in the much-lauded and prize-winning *La meva Mediterrània* (My Mediterranean, 1991). Other landscapes such as the thick, slow oil-water of the Venice lagoon (*Venessia*, 2006), the Caribbean of faces, bodies, fruits, forests and multi-hued cities, or the pastel-toned Africa of the tropics also attract Toni Catany and we have here, by way of a sample, some snippets of the beauty with which he is presently working.

In January 2007 I had the privilege of accompanying Toni Catany to the Ethiopian highlands. The route through rock-hewn churches, the palaces and obelisks of the Queen of Sheba, palaces of Gondar, the source of the Blue Nile, the green waters of Lake Tana, the Coptic Timket festival celebrating the Epiphany in Lalibela with its procession of multi-coloured umbrellas and crosses sparkling in the sun offered him many fine occasions to capture images. But Toni Catany had come to Ethiopia to find “an Ethiopian king”, because at the time he was working with the poet Josep Piera on *Visions de Tirant lo Blanc* (Visions of Tirant lo Blanc, 2007) and he needed this character from Joanot Martorell’s marvellous novel. On seeing a face that seemed to be one that could appropriately be crowned king, Toni Catany, sought permission, asking —almost always without much

success— his subject not to smile, and then took the photograph. One day, in a vacant lot not far from our hotel in Lalibela, a lanky lad dressed in a track suit covered in dust finally managed to be the king of Ethiopia. In the course of this journey we also visited the ancient city of Harar, a mythical enclave of Muslim Ethiopia, a holy city of Islam with what seemed to be a thousand mosques, its population of Somali origins dressed in totally African style with a multitude of hues, headscarves and turbans, and houses and streets painted in pastel shades. Toni Catany’s camera didn’t stop, as it sought walls of encrusted colours, the combinations of pinks, blues and greens, the tints of the people’s robes in this mosaic of time-aged paintings in colours that were once bright. The morsels that appear in this volume of *Transfer* are from there, from those days in which Toni Catany was accumulating colours inside his camera once he had borne off therein his king of Ethiopia. Some of the other photos in this issue of *Transfer* are from Venice, of its water-alleys, also painted in combinations of shades in an interesting interplay that compares the pulchritude and conservation of the coloured facades of the much-revered Venice with the decrepitude of the colours consumed by the sun and the monsoon rains of holy Harar.

Toni Catany’s photographs are strangers to the passage of time and this is why they are universal. The exquisitely beautiful mystery that shrouds them makes them extraordinarily suggestive to their viewers. People everywhere like them. A lot. It is no accident that *Life* magazine named him one of the hundred best photographers in the world. The best thing of all, though, is that one perceives that Toni Catany has enjoyed taking them. And he’s enjoying even more the project he’s working on now (portraits in colour, a book on the Caribbean, digital still lifes in black and white. . .). We hope to have them soon. As Tirant lo Blanc hoped for his king of Ethiopia. As Harar hopes for the warm monsoon rains. As *Venessia* hopes that its lagoon will not sink it. As we hope that beauty will save us ||

Manuel Forcano