

Amor y Éxtasis Isabel Muñoz

Seven photographs
and a text by
Christian Caujolle

Immanences éditions
Anne-Lou Buzot
Florent Fajole
& Nicolas Peyre
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portfolios

Soissons, 2017

The platine over ink prints
of the seven photographs
from the series
Amor y Éxtasis,
by Isabel Muñoz,
have been made
by the author
on Arches Platine paper.

Christian Caujolle's essay
was translated
from the French
into English
by Michèle Bergot

The texts were set in
Adobe Caslon Pro,
Baskerville, and Bodoni 72
by Florent Fajole.
Letterpress printing
by Hannah Harkes
at Labora studio, in Tallinn,
on Labora cotton paper,
handmade by Tamara Sobaleva,
and on cellulose
Hahnemühle paper.

First edition print run
of thirteen copies,
of which eight
are numbered
from 1 to 8, and five
hors commerce
numbered from I to V.

These prints are numbered,
signed and titled
by Isabel Muñoz.

Size of the des prints
36 x 52 cm.
14.14 x 20.47 inches

Size of the portfolio
40 x 54 cm.
15.74 x 21.25 inches

Price: 12 000 euros

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Isabel Muñoz. El Amor y el Éxtasis *by Christian Caujolle*

Isabel Muñoz's already familiar series of photographs, in black and white, offer us a range of physical practices around dance and sport, all rooted in local tradition. Formally demanding and extremely precise, she is attentive to the slightest detail from the choice of camera angle, printing technique, size of the print right down to the choice of the frames themselves. For a long time she led us to believe that what she wanted was to explore certain "themes" such as the tango, flamenco, Oriental dance, belly-dancing, Turkish wrestling, Khmer ballet, but also architecture in the South of Spain, Egypt, Cambodia, amongst others, in which she frames the sensual and the erotic. If we look at the work as a whole, however, even if we take into consideration her lesser-known work around sadomasochism, drag queens, transvestites or transsexuals, it becomes apparent very quickly that behind this seemingly random sampling, she has in fact, over time, developed a systematic observation of the body, of sensuality, of sex itself. These universal questions, she transcribes onto very large format platinum prints, in which somewhat disturbingly the silky grain of the skin conflates with that of the film stock. As such, a false, or at any rate, superficial "image" of Isabel Muñoz has gradually emerged. That of a photographer, working in black and white, producing platinum prints on the subject of dance.

It is not a question of denying all the developments in her work around the dancing body, both playful and sensual. Nor the body in movement, managing to escape the pull of gravity by controlling its strength until it appears weightless; the body affirming or probing the complexities, the issues, the infinite conceptions of gender; the body as a means of affirming an identity. It is a question of looking around, of going to see her other work and understanding the issues raised.

It is easy to be seduced by the images, thus forgetting that Isabel Muñoz feels deeply concerned about the contemporary world, the universe in which she lives and creates and to which she reacts. It would be unlike her to draw attention to the fact that in Cambodia, she left the work she was doing on dance to devote herself, through the use of photography and video, to the young women exploited by prostitution rings. Similarly, although she had left for the Congo to photograph primates, moved by their closeness to humans, she ended up postponing the initial project in favour of working on the plight of women being used as weapons of war. This appeared essential to her. Similarly, it would be rash to believe that the photographer is an auteur, expressing herself solely in black and white, even though she does favour this stark and less "realistic" palette. This is because Isabel Muñoz adheres to a certain photographic tradition. Although she has always produced marvellous professional photographic work in colour, when it came to representing the Surma people of Ethiopia, which she had initially done in blacks, whites and greys, she chose an original colour palette to convey their coppery skin tone, the sense of their ritual painting and the function of the jewellery they wore.

The corpus chosen for this publication is in colour, essentially in colour, delving deeper into questions around the body, obeying a profound logic with regard to her previous work and the issues raised therein. Isabel Muñoz is interested in

the relationship between mind and body, which she examines in a singular mode, as always reaching for a form of perfection. Her ever precise, clinical and radical framing eliminates noise and goes straight to the core of the matter.

Just as, from the very beginning, she had worked with the greatest flamenco and tango dancers, insisting that they wear traditional dress, she had also introduced us to the Shaolin monks before they took to the stage, devaluing their extraordinary dexterity. Similarly, she was the first to photograph the Ethiopian Surma in all their pride, their bodies decorated with ever-inventive motifs. In this new chapter, she goes straight to the heart of her subject, revealing a world in all its complexity.

She decided to tackle the mystical body, often misunderstood and always the subject of doubt, contestation and controversy whilst remaining an object of fascination. The body in its profound relationship with a religious practice, striving for the sublime. The body surpassing itself, reaching beyond what is usually acceptable and attempted.

In all known religions the effort of control - or of detachment- of the body in order to reach God is offered as an example and practiced by the most exemplary believers. From fasting to wearing a cilice and mortification of the flesh, many Catholic saints practiced their religion with austerity and determination. Becoming a hermit, taking vows of poverty, of obedience, of silence, choosing to be cloistered or silent, accepting martyrdom with its painful and bloody imagery, is part of the Catholic tradition. The clearly stated objective is come close to attaining divine purity through a punishing path. Not to become God, nor to believe one is a living god, but to reach a degree of purity allowing one to approach the divine light. Since these notions of purity, light, path are a feature of all mystical faiths, it would be misleading to stop at the ostensibly surprising aspects of these practices. Regardless of what we see, it is not a question of seeking pleasure following a masochistic logic - at least this is not what is claimed - but an exaltation of purity, requiring a detachment from the contingencies of the “ordinary” body. Purity, in its absolute sense - as a requisite of mysticism - implies a transcendence of the material body.

Islam was where Isabel Muñoz sought contemporary examples. Particularly in two practices within Sufism, not to be considered as deviant with regard to this religion, but which are at the very heart of faith in the Prophet. Sufism is the mystical path of Islam, which goes back to the origins of this religion and to the first companions of the prophet. It is organised in brotherhoods and guided by masters teaching an open religion whose two tenets are the search for hidden meaning in the Koran and the search for inner truth: “He who knows himself knows his Lord”. Followers are persecuted by fundamental Islamists calling for a literal return to Sharia law.

So as to avoid any misunderstanding regarding a question that has produced millions of pages, and continues to do so, it must be said that the terminology used here remains, despite all attempts, only relatively precise. Not least because Sufism is based on an interpretation of the Koran and that the translations whether in Arabic or the English versions made by Sufi devotees, are themselves always largely imprecise. These have served as the basis on which erroneous positions have been taken. Something we would like to avoid at all costs.

First of all, Isabel Muñoz revisited one of the best-known Sufi practices, that of the whirling dervishes, popularised by the iconic cultural performance often assimilated to “folkloric” dance in Turkey. Wanting to avoid an “ornamental” approach,

and disregarding the aesthetic of these men transformed into spinning tops, their ample costumes inflating as they whirled around rhythmically, she singled out one dancer. This quasi monochromatic figure, whirling first slowly, then faster and faster until he surpasses himself, his right palm turned towards the heavens to receive Allah's grace, his left palm turned towards the ground to spread it. Far from the spectacle as performed in Turkey, this practice of the whirling dervishes she shares with us, to which access was extremely difficult, is comparable but intact in its purity and comes from Syria. The great Sufi mystic, Jalal al-Din Rumi, founder of the Mawlawi or whirling dervishes in the XIIIth Century, wrote "Come to me, be you Jewish, Christian or apostate", much to the discontent of Islamic bigots. This phrase can be found on his tombstone in Konya, Anatolia, visited daily by thousands of pilgrims.

She also offered us her vision, in colour, of a practice never before photographed by a layperson, let alone by a woman to whom this exclusively male world had remained closed. This occurred in Irak, during an important meeting of the followers of the Al Qadiriya brotherhood. Born in XIIth-Century Persia, the brotherhood gained a significant following in the Mediterranean countries, but also in Europe, in India and as far as China. A certain number of believers having reached an advanced state of self-knowledge and on the path towards God engage in physical practices, which for us are beyond belief. They transpierce themselves, sometimes without bleeding, swallow glass and razor blades, hurt themselves with tapered knives, drive daggers through their skulls... All this is done in a "transcendental" state, reached after collective chanting and praying to the beat of drums.

These practices are in accordance with the very principles of Sufism. From an ideological standpoint, Sufism is an esoteric and ritualistic current; it professes a doctrine affirming that all reality contains an apparent exterior quality (exoteric or *zahir*) and an interior quality (esoteric or *batin*). It can be defined by the quest for a spiritual state allowing access to hidden knowledge. The first phase is, therefore, to reject the common consciousness of the five senses, through the quest for a state of spiritual "inebriation", sometimes wrongfully assimilated to a form of ecstasy. The Sufis themselves prefer to refer to this state as "extinction (of oneself)" (*al-fana*'), that is to say an annihilation of the ego in order to reach a conscience of the presence and of the action of God. Once this first stage has been attained, the Sufi has to go back to the outside world he had initially rejected. The Sufi lexicon has several terms to refer to this phase corresponding to different aspects of this second journey: *al-baqâ*, "subsistence or permanence", lucidity (*sahw*), the return (*rujû'*) to the creatures. This description is of course simplistic: as shown by Sufi literature, the process is far more cyclical than linear and the interpretation of the terms in the Sufi lexicon is by its very nature, esoteric.

The path towards God can be attained through exercises within the brotherhoods such as wakefulness (*sahar*), fasting (*siyâm*), dancing (whirling dervishes), litanies (*dhikr*), literally "remembrance" of the name of God, controlling one's breathing. In the large, often secret, gatherings of the brotherhoods such as the one Isabel Muñoz attended at which she was briefly able to take photographs... These different moments of control and exultation of the body are ones in which tension mounts, rendering the very idea of a path towards God palpable. On these occasions, certain followers subject their bodies to different forms of penetration or laceration with instruments as symbolic as the dagger (although they can also claw at their own torsos

until they draw blood); some favour spikes made of metal or wood. Others do not even bleed and most seem not to feel pain and are able, for example, to drink boiling tea after their mouths have been slashed with razor blades. Though incomprehensible, these practices were experienced, seen with one's very own eyes. It would seem however, that whilst some performed for the photographer the impressive feat of sliding the point of a dagger under the eyeball, others, who did bleed, though not very much, were experiencing this stage of "mind over matter" on the path towards mysticism, for the first time.

It would be wrong to only remember the feats for their spectacular effect, since this is not their primary aim. In one of Isabel Muñoz's previous series, it was hard for the spectator to believe that a Shaolin monk could do a headstand and remain upright without the use of his hands, similarly that another could walk along a vertical wall...

The absence of blood, however, completely alters our perception. The choice of colour, the attention to the folds of the material, the presence and placing of the hands, the framing of the body's poses are all signs that recall a baroque representation of Christ-like figures and saints. They are also part of our vision of mysticism. Rendering the transcendence of the body visible, by showing impressive feats in which bodies seem indifferent to pain, even appearing to be beyond (above?) ordinary pain, is what baroque artists have been doing with their combination of gilding, sensuality, folds and blood in their representation of exaltation, martyrdom and sacrifice.

This series by Isabel Muñoz has to be viewed in its pictorial logic, after having, for example, gone back to Gregorio Fernández or Juan de Mesa's sculptures, or El Greco, Francisco de Zurbarán, José de Ribera's paintings. We will find echoes of comparable folds, identical poses, tones of blue, matching reds. The same look of pain and excess, of blood devoid of tragedy, of bodies bearing the promise of beatification.

These representations were of course criticised and considered excessive. Nevertheless, they represent a golden age of religious feeling and how it was conveyed, a rare visualisation of the inexpressible, the un-showable; the un-representable in fact. It is therefore necessary to exercise caution when reacting to images that are strange or less familiar to us, perhaps more so today than in the past. In point of fact, those to which we refer here are of the mystic body approached with a form of realism rarely found in the contemporary treatment of other themes, the often bleeding body but whose supposed suffering seems to be surpassed by an expression of plenitude.

Isabel Muñoz continues to question the contemporary body by tackling its extreme limits. She does not pass judgement, she inquires, refusing both description and spectacle. She picks contemporary signs, which are intertwined with an ancient spiritual and visual tradition. She reveals, quite bluntly, what is at the heart of her creation.

Because this question is eternal.



