

Hélène Binet: *Time After Time*

27 September – 23 November 2019

Preview 26 September 6-9pm

The Image and its Shadows

In Hélène Binet's photography, direct light and diffuse light form different kinds of shadow. The direct light highlights texture but also occludes, forming contrasts that emphasise depth and volume. Diffuse light flattens and also renders details differently: in the Classical Gardens of Suzhou, China, a wall becomes an imaginary landscape, its stains beginning to resemble clouds. The effect recalls Leonardo's remark: "Look at walls splashed with a number of stains, or stones of various mixed colours. If you have to invent some scene, you can see there resemblances to a number of landscapes, adorned with mountains, rivers, rocks, trees, great plains, valleys and hills, in various ways".

In Chinese, one word for photography is Yingxiang, which translates approximately as 'shadow image'. Shadows conceal, but a shadow is also a doubling, an index of the object that causes it. Photography, this form of writing where light is a type of ink, illuminates as much as it obscures. Binet's photographs of China are calligraphic, painterly; creeping moss on the walls creates the effect of feathered brushstrokes, while slender bamboos rise in bold lines from the stone floor, bisecting the frame. Her images of Hadrian's Villa, Rome, render its subject even more abstract. The images are undiluted play of light and shade, where the deep blacks of a stone archway, seen from below, meet the white drift of a cloud, pushing towards and away from one another.

In *Towards a New Architecture*, Le Corbusier announces architecture to be "Pure Creation of the Mind", a phrase that Salvador Dalí would later deploy in his 1927 pamphlet, *Photography, Pure Creation of the Mind*. The authors are thus engaged in dialogue, though each has a very different idea of purity: sobriety for one, excess for the other. And yet, both emphasise the transformative power of a mindful practice of visual forms. Photography and architecture have been intertwined from the outset. Henry Fox Talbot experimented with the specificity of photography by taking pictures of his house, its interior and exterior, its objects and garden. 'Camera' is the Latin word for a room, an architectural space from which one may look out, the window a framing device for contemplating the world outside (or indeed for letting light in). Le Corbusier also writes that "architecture is the masterly, correct and magnificent play of volumes in the light". With a reversal of terms, we have here a succinct definition of photography: a masterly correct and magnificent play of light on volumes.

Hélène Binet photographed the convent of La Tourette completed by Le Corbusier in 1960. This building is a pure but concrete "creation of the mind", replete with architectural quotations and sculptural interventions that call to mind a form of Baroque modernism. In one of her photographs, we see a wall made of windows, two squares framing and reflecting the inside and the outside of the edifice, being at once mirror and window, producing a fragmentation but also an analytical framing of our visual experience. Through a pane of glass, we see a concrete pyramid, a quotation of the pyramid of Cestius in Rome, a city where "the sunlight is so lovely that it excuses everything", as Le Corbusier puts it. The effect of the photograph is difficult to articulate: it reminds me of Gustave Flaubert's attitude towards a landscape, exclaiming only that it was "indescribable." The eye sees, but does not speak. The same goes for photography: a detailed description will only end in aporia.

If, for Le Corbusier, architecture is a machine for living, it is also a machine for seeing. The building acts like a camera. Hélène Binet's lens enters into a dialogue about seeing these buildings differently, often getting close, defamiliarising a once-familiar building. She demonstrates eloquently that photography, as architecture, can be a pure creation of the mind.

Text by Olivier Richon

Olivier Richon is an artist working with photography. His photographic practice proposes an investigation and celebration of the artifice of representations. His essays on the photographic image are informed by art history, philosophy, literature and psychoanalysis. He has been head of Photography at the Royal College of Art since 1997.

Hélène Binet was born in 1959 in Sorengo, Switzerland, and studied photography at the Instituto Europeo di Design in Rome. Over a period of twenty-five years Hélène Binet has photographed both contemporary and historical architecture, including the work of architects Caruso St John, Zaha Hadid, Daniel Libeskind, and Peter Zumthor, as well as the works of past architects Alvar Aalto, Geoffrey Bawa, Le Corbusier, John Hejduk, Sigurd Lewerentz and Dimitris Pikionis. In 2014-15, Binet's work was included in the Barbican's exhibition of architectural photography *Constructing Worlds. Dialogues*, a major exhibition of Binet's work, was on show at the Bauhaus Archive in Berlin in 2015, combining images of famous contemporary buildings with lesser known works of historic buildings or landscapes. In 2019 she opened her first solo show in China, *Dialoghi: works from 1988-2018*.

Binet is the recipient of the 2019 Ada Louise Huxtable Prize, awarded to a woman who has made a major contribution to architecture, and is one of the Royal Photographic Society's Hundred Heroines. She lives and works in London.