

ET IN ARCADIA EGO

The German thinker Walter Benjamin wrote that any product of fashion has something of a corpse: its object is a seasonal fruit, ephemeral, with an unavoidable expiry date. If a photographic image is an instantaneous statement of something that will not exist the moment after, then fashion photography is exponentially the one that provokes the highest degree of obsolescence, because its object is precisely assigned to be an immediate past. The peculiarity of David Armstrong's images in the context of fashion is his capacity to fix that apparently trivial quality: through an enormous level of iconicity the model is frozen and fashion is also stuck becoming a past that has something of a present continuous, switched into a time that has something of an ideal. The advantage of his regard is his sensibility for a genre of beauty that can be identified with adolescence but that is not always representing a teenager body: it deals with the capacity of showing a fragile beauty, of the kind that can be lost at any time. His photographs, by the effect of the light or by a gesture, reveal a will of transcendence. They reach an epiphanic condition: they seem to capture a unique phenomenon that cannot be repeated again. That transcendent disposition maintains an equivalent relation with the melancholic nature of the photographic medium. But, as in a double negation, it's in his fashion photography where it's revealed most clearly the difference with the real that his way of looking imposes to the images: a possibility of redemption by beauty.

Any image taken from a model is a confrontation. Armstrong's photographs are portraits. His methodology goes through an intense level of attention: the process seems to be slow, cautiously. The poses of the models reinforce the capacity of evocation; the way they look shows a deep introspection of the portrayed character. The languid rhythm of the gestures is stressed by the softness of the light stemming from the bodies. Its eroticism is transferred from the general atmosphere, from the compo-

sitional control. Beauty is presented as an epiphany, an instantaneous and meaningful sign of the things and bodies, in an unstable, fragile combination. In a wide way it refers to a tradition, that of the aesthetic movement of photography from the 19th century, that made always from the images a kind of a painting. Julia Margaret Cameron's *flo*, the mythical repertoire of Frederick Holland Day or the classical antiquity filter of Wilhelm von Gloeden are like a Victorian ghost that takes shelter in Armstrong's rooms. The act of looking at his images starts up an analogue mechanism of reading: the void of its lack is filled with past phantoms. All his models are exchangeable and at the same time rarely unique and they are also exchangeable with a tradition that, although it's never a direct reference, makes denser the sense of the image. The selection is the process that implies the past, that achieves to made the allusion not to become an analogy but, as the styling, a tradition that pass through. The repetition of fashion details, as the collars that come from a vague past, takes us to something that contains tradition as part of a personal universe, as a private encyclopedia that every picture comes to update. It's like this beauty, as an image, is never taken for granted. The desire of the photographer is an awareness of a loss: that produced for the beholder in the distance between the shooting and the subsequent effort devoted to the selection of the most perfect take. The strange melancholy comes from the awareness of the loss that has emerged in the middle, in the process: a feeling that is like the void that follows the moment of the orgasm.

In his essay on photography, *Camera Lucida*, Roland Barthes laid down two types of photographic images: those that have to do with desire and those that deal with mourning. Psychoanalysis stated that the impulses dominating the psyche are eroticism or death. The frozen beauty, the suspension of adolescence in the moment of its blossoming is, in these photographic images, an index of a mourning unfolding. Benjamin wrote that: "Every fashion is filled with secret resistances to love" (Footnote needed). All these pictures have something apotropaic, as monuments erected to a desire that at the same time act as a defense against it: as the suspension of the possibility to touch in an ideal desire.

The sensibility of the images opens the reading into an exercise of identification that is never with the model, unreachable, but with the look of the photographer. In a fleeting instant we recognise ourselves in that reciprocal look, that is

to share his desire. In a way, we are what he is, by means of a mirror quality. As the images are a sublimation of eroticism, we feel exactly that: we are inclined to regret the absence of that admirable beauty founded as a prosthetic memory of something we've already lost, that we never had before but as a longing, as the photographer himself. Those portraits by Armstrong deal with the Arcadia: the myth of Paradise only exists as the expression of a primordial wish. Paradise was invented only to be lost, as an infinite longing.

By the fact of a reflected narcissism, the spectator assumes the identity and the mood of the photographer. The admiration of the beauty is followed by the recognition of the detention of the living creature, of the taxidermy operated in the bodies. With the ghostly quality of the tradition, of a beauty that will fade, of photography itself, everything is carried into a last possibility of desire. The condensation of history is personal history, the sublimation of sex is a sublimation of love, all incarnated by a beautiful man's body. As in the heroes of Poussin's painting reading in a lost tomb *Et in Arcadia Ego* (that means: "Even in Paradise I exist"), Armstrong pictures are epitaphs for the longing of a desire that will never arrived to be fulfilled, but that will provoke another picture. Once and once again.

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