





PASHA RAFIY PEOPLE AND PLACES

curator: Christian Mosar assisted by Charlotte Masse.

irm Heimann Berlin 2015 © Pasha Rafiy

1. PASHA RAFIY - PEOPLE AND PLACES

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Pasha Rafiy's portraits and landscapes are based on intuitive personal choices. Although the history of the locations, but also the biographies of the people photographed, may seem incongruous or anonymous, every image nevertheless tells a story. For his portraits, Pasha Rafiy invites his subjects to find their place in a landscape that is familiar to them, places that the photographer did not previously know. With very particular shooting choices, a certain distance with regard to his subjects, and full-length framing, the subjects of these portraits are isolated in a certain sense, detached in the midst of their environment. By decontextualizing in this way, Pasha Rafiy succeeds in giving a timeless character to his images. Whether anonymous, known or even famous; Pasha Rafiy's subjects are immobilized for an instant and photographed as if completely isolated from the surrounding landscape. They seem to be outside time, and yet at the centre of the action. These images illustrate a paradox that questions the concept of fame.

In the course of short contacts, Pasha Rafiy succeeds in establishing a complicity with his subjects, a relationship of trust that we can feel in these very direct encounters, these seamless portraits stripped of all artifice.

The portrait of Irm Hermann illustrates this method. Irm Hermann (1942-2020) was a German actress, particularly known for her roles in several films by Rainer Werner Fassbinder. Irmgard Hermann was born in Munich. She first worked as a secretary in her home town, where she met Rainer Werner Fassbinder in 1966. In addition to playing roles in Fassbinder's films, Hermann became his close confidante. Her portrait by Pasha Rafiy is a subtle interplay of form and colour, chance and intuitive choices. Irm Hermann is standing at the edge of a deserted, snow-covered path. Did she want to avoid walking in the snow?

In the same way, Soraya Ordubadi, at the top of *Milad Tower* in Teheran, chose to remain in the shadow, a deliberate distancing that is subtly underscored by Pasha Rafiy's framing.

As for the places chosen for his landscapes, they reveal their stories in a second viewing, informed by their title. For example, L. Ron Hubbard Way, a street named after the founder of the Church of Scientology, or a concrete wall, which is in fact a detail of one of Corbusier's housing units.

Pasha Rafiy's images invite us to review and to discover people and places. «People and Places» presents a series of still shots that reveal their positioning in a subtle and intelligent aesthetic.

2.

People of the Twenty-First Century

Notes on the Photographic Work of Pasha Rafiy by Josée hansen, art critic.

Excerpt from the book *Foreign Affairs* published by Lëtzebuurger Land Rotondes, 2016

Jean Asselborn in a suit and tie, standing on a rooftop in a city at the other end of the world; Jean Asselborn in a leisurely outfit, sitting in the garden of his home in Steinfurt; Jean Asselborn in full cycling gear, taking a short break during a particularly difficult mountain stage. Pasha Rafiy is always there, ready with his medium-format Contax, which he uses as a shield between himself and the world. For several months, Rafiy accompanied Luxembourg's Socialist Minister of Foreign Affairs on his official visits. The result is a film, *Foreign Affairs* (Les Films Fauves, 2016), but also a series of portraits that form part of an ongoing photographic project.

The first image in this book was taken in Tehran, the capital of the country Rafiy left at the age of five and did not return to for the next thirty years. Taken on the last day of a state visit, it's a spontaneous picture for which he asked the minister to pose in a corner of the garden at the Dutch Embassy. It was completed in a matter of seconds and inaugurated a kind of ritual that would be repeated on each leg of the journey, with the diplomat graciously acknowledging the photographer's nod and getting into pose as required. At times, his gaze seems distant and his face betrays a sense of tension and fatigue. Along with the relentless succession of backgrounds and situations that strikes the reader of this book, it proves that, contrary to popular belief, being a politician is hardly a glamorous affair.

Last year the Villa Vauban showed Michael Somoroff's exhibition *Absence of Subject* as part of the European Month of Photography. This series is based on portraits from August Sander's grand humanist saga, *People of the Twentieth Century*, from which the American photographer removed the sitters with the help of computer software. All that remains is a stove and kitchen utensils, a garden door covered in vine, a circus tent with two seats and a table set for tea, a farmhouse that appeared in the background of a soldier of the Waffen-SS, etc. By making the main subject of Sander's pictures disappear, Somoroff redirects the spectator's attention onto the social and historic context of the people documented by his famous predecessor.

Rafiy has been working as the artistic director of the Austrian daily *Die Presse* since 2008 – a job in which he is expected to screen hundreds of images every day, circulated by press agencies around the world. Attacks, accidents, handshakes, political rallies, protest marches, sports events, celebrations – all the cruelty and beauty of the world are within his reach in a few seconds. It is working with these images that led him to turn his attention to what goes on behind the scenes. To illustrate this approach, he cites the famous photograph by Annie Leibovitz of soldiers rolling up the red carpet as the helicopter carrying Richard Nixon, after he resigned as president in 1974, lifts off from the lawn of the White House.

Besides his day job, Rafiy has been working on a series of photographic portraits of personalities from the realms of art, philosophy, publishing, pop culture, etc., for the last ten years. Occupying the centre of the image, the individuals in his portraits are asked to look straight at the camera and strike the most neutral pose possible – not unlike the people in Sander’s work. The other characteristic of Rafiy’s portraiture photography is its attachment to wide framing, which encourages the gaze to explore the context: the Slovene philosopher Slavoj Žižek is wearing a T-shirt and is standing on an intersection in Vienna; the writer and publisher Glenn O’Brien, who cut his teeth in Warhol’s Factory, is shown in his apartment in New York; Kai Diekmann, the editor of the German tabloid *Bild*, is posing on the roof of the newspaper’s headquarters in Berlin; the gallerist Anna Augstein is seen in a park in Hamburg, etc. The common denominator between these people is that they are “stars” who are to some extent unknown to the public at large. In Rafiy’s portraits, their personality reveals itself through the conscious choice (or not) of a particular location as much as through their posture, gaze or charisma.

This idea to look behind the official, expected image was also the starting point of Rafiy’s film project. For this purpose, he and his cameraman Jean-Louis Schuller had to be “on the set” well before the officials turned up and stay long after the press photographers had gone, looking for flaws, the unexpected or quirky moment, signs of stress and weariness, the hits and misses of international diplomacy. While documenting the everyday life of a politician from a modest background rubbing shoulders with the world’s most powerful people, *Foreign Affairs* also shows the political machinery, with its swarms of advisers and its negotiations behind closed doors, of which the media merely show the results.

In the book, this procession of politicians, civil servants, press attachés and security guards is briefly interrupted by a picture that, literally, stands out from the crowd. It shows a young boy in a refugee camp in Iraq. Wearing a pair of jeans, tennis shoes and a shirt with a printed pattern, he stands in the centre of the alleyway that runs through the camp, holding a piece of paper in his right hand and making a dance sign with his left. A mixture of self-confidence and defiance, his posture is reminiscent of John Travolta in *Pulp Fiction*. Here too, it is the context that changes everything.

Rafiy’s subjects are posing; some are uneasy, clumsy, betrayed by their body language; others, in turn, are self-confidently flirting with the camera as only people who are used to be in the public eye do. Rafiy does not direct them, but merely observes the monodrama that unravels in front of his camera; at best, he tries to win their trust and make contact. He is not looking for the spontaneity or emotion of a snapshot to be published on social media. Nor does he work like a fashion or advertising photographer, bringing along a team of make-up artists, lighting assistants and executive producers.

Rafiy works alone. He likes to take his time to choose those whose portrait will enter his collection, to get in contact with them, meet them, agree on a location with them, install his camera. He works with analogue photography, never retouches his shots and uses only natural light. His is an art of slowing-down, concentration and focusing on what matters.

From the subject as the focal point of the composition, his photographs unfold in a centrifugal movement that directs the gaze to the rest of the information contained within the frame: the quality of a cloth, the makes of the cars parked nearby, the urban signage, the shop fronts, the brands of mobile telephones, the weather or the position of the sun – indications that ground the image in the reality of the moment. To the pomp and circumstance of power, Rafiy prefers the non-spaces, abandoned corners, patches of nature, infinite vanishing lines. His photographs often seem as though suspended in the chaos of the world: politicians shown from behind, soldiers relaxing before a motorcade flies by, streets of splendid nondescriptness. In this regard, they call to mind the aesthetic of the Austrian filmmaker Ulrich Seidl, with its wide framing and still shots which always last a little bit too long. In this torpor, this slowness, this other temporality, the German film critic Georg Seeßlen sees a powerful element of deconstruction – an assessment that Rafiy would certainly not disavow.

3. Framework program will be launched on konschthal.lu

FREE GUIDED TOURS OF THE EXHIBITION every saturday at 3pm

(no registration needed)

4. Press visuals & credits



Kunschthal Esch
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Irm Hermann, Berlin 2013
© Pasha Rafiy



Los Angeles, 2019
© Pasha Rafiy



Joey Soloway, Los Angeles 2019
© Pasha Rafiy



Soraya Ordubadi, Tehran 2018
© Pasha Rafiy



Johnny Ramone, Hollywood 2019
© Pasha Rafiy

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