



MARCO DELOGU  
NOIR ET BLANC

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# DELOGU'S FUTURESPECTIVE

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Photographs are allergic to the retrospective. The camera can't look back and instead stares dutifully at the present like an old man reclining on the porch of a sanatorium. It is for this reason—the camera's reluctance to look back—that the retrospective exhibition of photography is often so resonant and vital. I typically walk out of painters' retrospectives liking the artist less than when I walked in. It is as if too many stories have been told with too much background, too enthusiastically, in complete sentences. Every painting contains a description of its own history, the early sketches and tactical swerves visible in the finished form, whereas every photograph is ignorant of the process of its creation. The photograph thinks it is a finished product on a shelf—a bottle of artichoke hearts or a string of christmas lights—and remembers nothing of the hands, the chemistry, the changes in government, that led to its shiny presence in the supermarket. A photographic retrospective is an anthill, a set of drones working toward a common goal. A painting retrospective is a pride of lions.

For Marco Delogu, the occasion to look back at the Villa Medici has generated a lineage that is as clear as the vapor trails left in the sky over Fiumicino, a blazing white line of eyes and faces. Almost everywhere he has looked for the last twenty years of photography, Delogu has seen faces; those of horses, statues, sheep and blessed and unblessed men. His camera has been a method of address: a letter from one solitary person to another, written with directness, assuredness and candor. He must dream like the tired guards at the Bayon Temple at Ankor Thom, surrounded by monumental and relentless faces.

Portraiture makes it easy to understand why photography is valuable. We will never tire of the infinite ways a figure can be forced into a rectangular frame, and the photographic record of human figuration will teach future archaeologists more than the ruined architecture of the entire Khmer and Roman Empires. But photographic portraiture is also bottomlessly problematic. No photograph of a person, being flat, monocular, a mere lifeless object, is as interesting as that person themselves, whereas a photograph of an object is just another object. Delogu doesn't duck from this problem. He is untempted by sentimentality, uninterested in trying to force us to feel something that isn't there. His portraits ask us to reckon with the presence of another being, without asking for insight, truth, or even beauty. Walker Evans' "Sharecropper's Wife" and Dorothea Lange's "Migrant Mother" were made three or four months apart in 1936, and still serve as the most lucid Rosetta Stone for deciphering photographic portraiture. Made of a similar subject, with a similar objective, using similar materials under similar conditions, the two pictures laid side by side describe the portrait's two main

strains. Lange's picture aches toward metaphor, asking to see this hungry woman as a stand-in for starvation and the necessities of governmental action. Evans refuses to editorialize, treating his subject as distant but respected thing—meat in light—letting the camera's hungry but undiscerning eye open an investigation without solving it.

Delogu is born from the Evans tradition. He is the center of a wheel of investigations, and at the end of most of the spokes is a set of faces seen without sentimentality. He realizes that the camera can see only surfaces, and that any hope of capturing inner life must be achieved by navigating the wonders of surface. Looking at a Delogu is like coming across the Bronzinos in the hubbub of rank Mannerism in the Uffizi. Suddenly [*sigh*] there is just someone sitting there. But in this celebratory, retrospective moment, we are privileged to see something rare: a great change of course. His wheel of portraiture has come off its cart, and rolled into the weeds. Delogu's new forays into the landscape are so alert and aware, they feel like images made by a Kasper Hauser escaped from a windowless cell. They seem like pictures made by someone who has never seen outside, and is amazed with everything they come across, no matter how insignificant. These pictures of weeds and scrub trees and leaf litter and sand are defiant. They refuse to be about content. They refuse to be about form. They are instead, remarkably, about essence. They ask "how does it feel to look at the world?" and they say "I don't know why I like this, but I know I do." Delogu *is* a Kaspar Hauser here, escaped not from some sadistic captor, but from the studio, and the waveforms of attention a person in a room automatically attracts.

Loosed into the world, he hears music that is so materially different from anything in Delogu's oeuvre, that one must be prepared for the Webern to break out in a Scarlatti recital. The pictures are dissonant and unrelenting, admitting that the world's progress only occurs in single steps, and that each of those steps opens an entire universe of visual awareness. They are made by a man who has discovered the eyes in his feet.

I believe Delogu's new landscapes to be his most personal works. That may seem strange to say, with the various extroverted humanistic concerns in evidence in the portraiture, but in his odd, crisscrossed rectangles of land, Delogu is seen searching for meaning that he and he only can fulfill, where the Sardinian shepherds and immigrants with AIDS are beaming meaning from their very core. The photographer here has wrenched significance from nearly nothing, creating friction that powers an artist's life. These pictures are so awkward, so gristly, so un-Italian in their refusal to idealize. They make this book and this show hardly a retrospective, but a crazy gaze forward into new possibilities.