Rafael Navarro: The Tree of Liberty
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I first met Rafael Navarro in another city. We were introduced to each other. It turned out we were neighbours. We lived just a few hundred metres apart without ever meeting. Life has a way of leading us along unchosen or unwanted paths - for better and for worse. That's how it almost always turns out, no matter how hard we try to make things happen differently. Perhaps that's what art is - an opportunity to make things just the way we dreamt them. To live the life of someone else. No better or worse, just different. Another. Life.

Rafael Navarro's artistic career could in some way be described in this way, like a dream, a second opportunity, a place in which to experience the beauty that life sometimes denies us, a tailor-made happiness, a halfway house if you will, but ours all the same. A shared haven, reality stripped bare, clean, free of sweat and suitcases, of tiredness, of chafed feet, of arguments, of the smell of fried squid, of solitude - a visual limbo in which one can rest at last, fix one's gaze and rest.

We agree to meet again. At home this time, in our city. Since then we have done some books together, travelled together and worked on publishing ventures. I have written about his photographs. Rafael Navarro is the consummate professional. It is a joy to work on projects with him. He knows his place and how to work in a team. His dialogue is fluid and the aim of his empathy is efficiency. Rafael has the grandeur of someone who has learnt that one never arrives, that everything has to be demonstrated and at all times, that the game is never won, that a name can never be used as a safe-conduct or as an excuse for looking down your nose at anyone. That is why he is better than so many others. Whenever he goes out to fight bulls, no matter the size of the bullring, the future and silence opens out. Everything remains to be said. The audience is always worthy of respect - it is for this reason that in Spain we also call the audience el respetable. The greater the expectation his work arouses, the greater the responsibility and the workload.

I cross a couple of streets and head south where the city rises up, perched on a hilltop. Years ago this area marked the boundary between the metropolis and fields of maize, apple orchards and farmland. It was a no-mans land where houses and factories stood like islands in what were then the outskirts. Grey brick monstrosities began to rise up over the irrigated land, asphyxiating the houses built in the early part of the last century and devouring them like a jungle. A tiny house with a stairway and a porch still stands opposite where Rafael Navarro lived, hemmed between two concrete monsters, crushed, awaiting its end. Rafael Navarro's house has also been demolished, to be replaced by an aseptic block of flats. The city I knew as a child has slowly disappeared and has become a crude succession of brick eyesores. All very new. And brilliant. An exact replica of a rich man's new house.

I remember that in order to get in you had to walk along a long passageway that led to a large courtyard with an old tree in the middle. By the side of the courtyard stood the house, reminiscent of a country house, where Rafael Navarro grew up and lived until very recently. When you knocked on the door a Great Dane would come out to greet you and spend the rest of the visit coming in and out of the study. Leo would sit looking at me with big childlike eyes begging me for a biscuit. The ground floor of the house was covered in tiles. At the time you had to climb up stairs, go down passages, go downstairs again, and go through the laboratory until you came the study, a large, open space with big tables, photography books and a large number of small objects, each relating a story and a journey of its own. There were very few photos on the walls.

As I walked down that street it was very difficult to imagine that secret courtyard and that country house in the middle of the city. They reminded me of the secret gardens hidden behind
the walls of old Avignon, a city that was my accomplice for some important years of my life. Behind the main façade of the imposing Palace of the Popes, stretches the old town, a spider’s web of twisting, damp side streets and alleyways with enchanting nooks and crannies, eyecatching squares, large gates and empty churches. It was a quarter that tourists hardly ventured into. Adjoining the rear of the fortification and on the threshold of the medieval city is the prison. From the top of the promontory that stands over the city alongside the Palace of the Popes can be seen the barred windows of the prison. I have sat on the balustrade in the gardens listening to the shouted conversations between prisoners and their families. Philippe Sollers wrote a story about these furtive conversations, so private and yet so public. The prison is now devoid of prisoners and words of hope and passion yelled from its papal walls. The labyrinth of streets is still there, though.

As I said, tourists do not venture into this maze of irregular passageways. In the medieval rump of Avignon there are no souvenir shops, no shop windows with pullovers, no bars, no drunks. In the medieval rump of Avignon there is nothing at all. Only silence, dampness, large gates, windows with lights that burn for eternity and high walls concealing secret gardens, the existence of which is only betrayed by the tops of the trees that peek over the walls. Many a pleasurable afternoon have I spent walking these streets. I still do so whenever I have the chance, in solitude listening to my footsteps, or with friends chatting. When I visited Rafael Navarro’s house for the first time I felt as if was walking into one of those gardens forbidden to the passer-by of the Provencal years.

The photographer’s work also conceals a postern gate that communicates the public and the private through a wall over which the tops of the trees can rise. Jealous of his privacy, the images create a perfect scenario of representations that are free of references to the real and the everyday. The bodies that Rafael Navarro photographs have no face because they lack an identity. What interests the creator is the staging of forms and textures, a process that even reaches abstraction through the course of his work. His photographic biography contains very few self-portraits, concealed in the reflection of a mirror, behind a photograph, conveyed in a fragment.

Sunday morning. I have joined Rafael Navarro on a walk to La Aljafería, the one-time palace and residence of the Muslim ruler Abū Djafar al-Muqtaṣarī, the barracks used by Franco’s forces and now the seat of the Parliament of Aragon. He has been commissioned, along with four or five other Spanish photographers, to take a series of photographs of the castle. We walk through several of the halls. He takes some photos, very professionally. He photographs what interests him most: rough surfaces, lights, shapes. Maite is on hand to provide him with everything he needs: rolls of film and lenses for his Hasell camera. He uses up four rolls and we go off for lunch. It’s a weird profession that of a photographer.

The photographs are developed in the afternoon and meetings arranged to get an idea of the results. La Aljafería. Everything is very clean and well tended. A security guard follows us wherever we go, not to keep an eye on us but to act as our guide. He eventually leaves us to our own devices. Everything is so clean. We walk among the rubble where I played as a child. Rafael photographs the street corners where we all used to pee, the graffiti that still reveals my love for Conchita, with its heart pierced by an arrow bearing her name. Thanks to a museum exhibition these shows of affection have been saved for posterity: Luis and Rosa, 15-6-67. How wonderful it was to love someone. Rafael frames the arch at the entrance to the church of San Martín, alongside the wall where old men used to warm themselves in the winter sun. The wooden door of La Aljafería lay flat on the floor like a gate in a derelict farmyard. We walked over it and climbed up the Renaissance stairs to the Throne Room.

What I enjoyed most of all, however, was to walk along the forbidden passages up to the Torre del Trovador, or to go down to the well in near darkness and risk slipping and breaking our necks in the process. There was rubble and rubbish everywhere. One day we collected flies in colour-coded glass jars, the prettiest of which were iridescent green. These were the shit flies.
We caught other insects too. We ended the day using them for target practice. The railway lines lay further down. We used to lay coins on the tracks, wait for a train to pass and then hunt for the crushed metal. The tracks were shrouded in mystery and death - tales of old men and the insane who threw themselves in front of the trains.

The suburb of La Química, known as such because of the factories it was home to, lay on the other side of the tracks. They have given it a new name now. The factories have gone, and they are building a tunnel for the tracks. La Química had a reputation for being rough. A journey to the Tudor battery factory was fraught with serious danger. Once we had to flee through the Castillo Palomar. The natives defended the territory with sticks and stones and we had no right to walk through there. Rafael never peed on the walls of La Aljafería or engraved hearts in its Mudejar plaster.

He was already making a living back then. He had responsibilities. His photography career was just starting. There were trips to Barcelona; the Alabern Group with Foncu, Manel Esclusa and Pere Formiguera; the first trips to Arles with a portfolio under his arm; the conviction that whatever happened, what was said, that guy in front of me, Rafael Navarro was not going to be better or worse, just himself. And with that selfsame faithfulness, with that selfsame coherence and honesty, he has patiently built up his photographic oeuvre, ever loyal to the beauty, the exquisiteness of lights and forms, to the female body, to the bodies of chimera-like women. A platonic prototype in the most philosophical and aesthetic sense.

Those female nudes Rafael Navarro photographed represented a distinct move away from the Spain of the holy priests and Resurrection Sundays, furtive kisses and forbidden, punished bodies forced to say three Hail Marys and a Lord’s Prayer. A grey Spain. Not the black one of Gutiérrez Solana. No, not that... the grey version, which is even harder to digest. Even the police, the high priests of institutional order were nicknamed Los Grises (The Grey Ones). To get a little fresh air you had to go all the way to Barcelona, where life started to resemble life a little more. Things, History and Time seem to have turned the tables, the Eucharists and blessings, and to enjoy a little fresh air that didn’t reek of a rotting small town run by oafish, small-minded bigwigs, you had to carry on travelling to a place where enthusiasm and tiredness can save us from all the bosses and saviours of the nation.

Rafael tells me that on one of those journeys he was questioned at the border by an overzealous policeman about the photographs of bathroom accessories and fittings he was carrying with him for work purposes and which, among the taps, U-bends and brackets, contained images of women washing themselves behind shower curtains. The collection was confiscated. His explanations counted for nothing. Fortunately for Rafael Navarro, and for us today, his first portfolios of naked female bodies always managed to avoid the all-seeing eye of law and order –so intent on keeping us wholesome and pure– and find their way across the border.

Reality is not what it seems to be, says Plato in The Republic, the most influential of all the treatises that have been written on the theory of the image. It is only a representation. Truth goes beyond the material realisation of what we can see. Our senses lie because genuine existence corresponds to the universe of ideas, something that exists out there, and to see it we have to come out of the cave and into the light, a light that dazzles us. That is how the artist sees photography, as the ideal truth and as light. If someone ever managed to escape the darkness in which we exist and tell us they can see from the outside, we would not believe them, he adds. Rafael Navarro has sought to escape the shadows and tells us his experiences. I, for one, believe him.

As I see it, Rafael Navarro’s photographic career revolves around the female body, and is intersected by the journey he embarks on and abandons, the roads he takes and returns on to reflect once more, photographing the very origin of his photographic source, the female body. In doing so he combines two modes of expression: the series and large formats.

It is a journey that is also marked out by two types of tributary: homages to other artists he admires and the quest for abstraction. These homages include the series of photographs enti-
tled *Patzcuaro-17*, from 1983, a logbook and an aesthetic nod to Manuel Álvarez Bravo, who he met in Mexico and with whom he would become close friends; *Homenaje a siglo y medio* (Homage to a Century and a Half). In a 1989 series created at Château d’Eau in Toulouse, he pays tribute to the pioneers of photography by offsetting the transparencies and reflections between his own images exhibited in the museum hall and the apparatuses and images of the first exponents of the art of light. Finally there is *En el taller de Miró* (In Miró’s Workshop), a series composed in 1996 in homage to the Mallorcan painter and portraying his studio just as he left it, and capturing details as a means of interpreting the letter and spirit of the artist, recognisable in the images of Rafael Navarro. “Portray” is exactly the right word. It is through Miró’s objects and tools that he cast a subtle and penetrating look at the atmosphere and presence of the creator through the traces he leaves behind him.

His abstract works also include *El Androbosque* (The Androwood) (1986), the first of a series of large-format images that create a composition made up of a variety of photographs with the aim of creating a single image. These works, of a format larger than that habitually used by the artist (at least up until his most recent works), often play with the conceptual resource of repetition, in some cases, or abstraction, in others, and a combination of both on some occasions.

*El Androbosque*, as I said above, is the first incursion into this kind of territory, an incipient path that adds to the spine of the body to which, as I say, he would return faithfully to over and over again. On one occasion I used the title of one of his series as the title of an essay in which I define the work of Rafael Navarro as a *Ciclo oferente* (Offering Cycle). I think his work, apart from these brief interruptions, is a cycle in which the artist repeatedly makes himself available, offers himself and offers us a vision of the female body.

This initial multiple composition would be followed by *La sombra inextinguible* (The Eternal Shadow) (1986), in which forms, or rather, shadows can still be glimpsed. These photographs of shadows provide a hint of what would later become pure abstraction, such as the two works entitled *El silencio* (Silence) (1987), *Ritmos* (Rhythms) (1992), probably among the most geometric, or *Transfondo vital* (Essential Undercurrent) (1993), an journey into the textures of light, closely related to the two-photograph portfolio entitled *Texturas* (Textures) (2001). *Los cuatro cie-los* (The Four Skies) (1995) is another proposal that takes an abstract course, and in the triptychs of *El Sol y La Luna* (The Sun and the Moon), completed three years later, he once more exalts the reality of stone by virtue of a symmetry that results in a proposal that can be considered equally abstract.

A significant part of his oeuvre revolves around differing approximations and interpretations of femininity, both in major works devoted to the study of the female body, such as *Las formas del cuerpo* (Body Forms) (1996), or large-format pieces that allude to or conceal quotes, allusions to maternity, such as *El guño de la vida* (The Token of Life) (1987), which also encompasses another personal tribute to the Argentine painter and sculptor Lucio Fontana, or fragments of bellies such as the pieces *Duo* and *Los siete signos* (The Seven Signs). Even when there is nothing that outwardly suggests his subject is the body of a woman, it assumes a latent presence as a mark of a physical identity that was once there but has gone, as the series *Huellas* (Traces) (1984), which comprises one of his furtive self-portraits.

A significant part of his large-format works, with the exception of the geometrical abstractions I refer to above, appear time and time again and use single feminine elements or ones associated to other materials (wood, stone, glass), through a single presentation or drawing on the resource of seriality. *Ella* (Her) (1987) is structured in virtually the same way as a cinematographic montage in which the female body is at one with the canvas and the wood in a visual and subtle game of appearances and disappearances, an image not overly distanced from, albeit less complex and suggestive than the one he proposes in the aforementioned 1993 work, *El ciclo oferente*. In *El callejón sin salida* (No Way Out) (1989), the artist works around a dialogue with two fragments, one objectual and the other feminine, once again, namely the arm of a woman.
In *El despertar* (The Awakening) (1989), *La obscura transparencia* (The Dark Transparency) (1990) and *Tientos* (Touches) (1995), Rafael Navarro experiments once more with the fusion of heterogenous elements, death and life, inert and animate, between stone in the first instance, glass in the second, or silk in the last, and the body of a woman.

Ever since his first work in 1975, *Formas* (Forms), Rafael Navarro’s concerns have taken in many different paths, experiments, tests and incursions, all of them marked out by the female body. After *Involución* (Regression) (1976), a cinematographic sketch on making the negative positive complete with perforations in the film, and *Agur* (So Long) (1977), the photographic narration of a farewell, these series give way to large images that bear the imprint of femininity, culminating in an overwhelming, new tribute to the female body in one of his most ambitious series *Las formas del cuerpo* (Body forms) (1996). In *El aroma de la entrega* (The Aroma of Surrender) (1998) and *Ritornello* (1998) he reinterprets proposals that are present in earlier works based on the composition of multiple images in a single large-scale unit, and closes the cycle of offerings with his final series *Ellas*, begun in 2000 and devoted once again to the female form, although on this occasion he resorts to large formats occupied by individual photographs.

Later on, and by way of a break from *Ellas*, he would continue along the same lines with the series *La danza de la vida y de la muerte* (The Dance of Life and Death) in 2003, where the female body is once more the protagonist and incorporates the dimension of movement, another key element in the work of Rafael Navarro. We can trace the movement both in his series, where a single image is developed throughout the course of various stages, as is the case in *Ella, El árbol de la libertad, El aroma de la entrega* and *Ritornello*, accentuating the cinematographic sequentiality, either by using the most photographic resource of allowing the model to imprint herself on the negative at low speed so that the resulting image offers imprecise, swept forms that narrate the gestures and the fleetingness of time, moving before the camera to create a personal interpretation of the experiences of the first avant-gardism and the futuristic portraits of the Bragaglia brothers. Going back in time, we come across major spaces where the artist explores this selfsame area, as in his series *Easiones* (Easions), his second work, completed back in 1975, *El desafío* (The Challenge) (1990) and his *Poema fantasmagórico* (Phantasmagoric Poem) (1999), in which he combines visual sequentiality and instability, or a significant part of *Las formas del cuerpo* all the way through to *La danza de la vida y de la muerte*, which closes, once again, the circle.

I have intentionally left his series Dípticos (Diptychs), probably the best known of his works, until the end. Completed over an eight-year period between 1978 and 1985, the Dípticos are a type of compendium or summary in which the trends, concerns and resources contemplated by the artist converge.

The Díptico, which features the coming together of two heterogenous elements superimposed on each other, sometimes with common elements or motifs, and other times with no apparent link between them, responds to one of the most important expressive formulae that modern art has contributed to visual language, now so prevalent in many aspects of our culture. Here he unites two different images in a single space in an effort to generate a spark that Pierre Reverdy defined as “poetry”.

Although the French poet was the first to coin this definition of “image”, in the widest sense of the word, in his journal Nord-Sud in 1918, the copyright to it belongs to Lautréamont and the writers and artists wrongly labelled “decadents” at the end of the nineteenth century, who provided direct inspiration for avant-gardists such as Aloysius Bertrand, Remy de Gourmont, Schwob, Jules Renard, Huysmans and some of the so-called symbolists such as Odilon Redon, Gustave Moreau and Pierre Puvis de Chavannes.

In 1869, the author of the *Cantos de Maldoror* would define beauty as, “the fortuitous meeting on an autopsy table between an umbrella and a typewriter”, words that inspired Man Ray’s famous composition of the same name. That same idea, together with the definition put for-
ward by Reverdy, was taken almost literally in the first Surrealist manifesto of 1924 signed by Breton, and reproduced shortly afterwards by Max Ernst to describe his collages. It is, furthermore, a largely cinematographic procedure, language founded and constructed upon the montage of superimposed images that Eisenstein appropriated to explain what the filmmaker saw as “shock montage”.

In the most geometrical of the Dipticos the two images possess a strong visual link that fuses them together in a single expressive unit. Much less evident, and all the more enigmatic for it, is Diptico 60 in which the nude bust of a woman cupping her left breast in her right hand is crowned, as if in replacement of the head, by a track that winds off into the distance in the top half; or the disturbing 22, which combines an almost black canvas with a fabric that hangs phantasmagorically from the void with dyes that can be linked quite easily to the aesthetics of Magritte; or the clearly surrealist Diptico 41, in which two amputated hands break their way through a stone wall and form a pedestal for a dry, shadowy tree.

The figure of the woman also occupies a significant place in the Dipticos, appearing in multiple forms through nudes, glances, gestures, presences and absences. Geometry also has an equally important role to play as does movement, abstraction, seriality and a concern with time, as well as references of a markedly cinematographic spirit, such as the tribute he pays to Hitchcock in number 38, a terrifying and distressing journey to the roots of the house on the hill. The series also features another of the artist’s very rare self-portraits, this time camouflaged behind the sketchily portrayed vision of glass.

The originality of the Dipticos is that although this was a self-contained work, he has recently rewritten it in large formats, synthesising it with the latest trends in photography, using dimensions that are enormous in some cases, and in which, unfortunately, the size of the photograph does not always coincide with the interest of the image. From their new dimension, these Diptychs take on an added plastic nuance created by the imposing dimensions of this postmodern interpretation.

Before concluding, I would like to pore over a detail that may pass unnoticed but which takes on, nevertheless, a significant interest and importance when given the attention it deserves. When we take a quick glance at Rafael Navarro’s work there are two aspects of his work that attract our attention: the aforementioned Dipticos, and the omnipresent body of the illuminated, caressed woman exalted by photography from myriad perspectives. Interwoven throughout his work is the permanent and, in my opinion, key motif of the tree, with all its symbolic weight.

Calm appraisal of the sixty-nine diptychs that make up the series reveals that the tree is present in thirty-five of them, either exclusively or in the form of fragments and vegetal elements linked to the tree such as thickets, bark, a dry leaf or wood. Other basic elements such as water, which occupies a relatively important space, the earth and air are also present along with the door, which is equally imbued with symbols. None of them, however, appear with the insistence and the relevance of the tree in its multiple guises.

An habitual symbol of life, of transformation and time, of the link between life and death through the seasons, a large part of the trees that appear in the work of Rafael Navarro are still lives, leafless and naked. They remind me enormously of those drawn in ink by Ribemont-Dessaignes in the surrounds of Vence when hardly anything else mattered and the cutting avantgardists were but a distant memory. Among them only Diptych 14 recreates the image of a single tree, naked yet covered in leaves to reveal the cycle of life. The two trees in Diptych 1, photographed in different lighting conditions, also have foliage, as do some other trees, most of them turned into fragments. The predominant tree image, however, aside from some exceptions I will point out below, is that of a naked tree, already dead or awaiting its renaissance. The roots of Diptych 38 drown in the darkness, in the night of the earth, in the latent gloom that lies threateningly beneath the house. At the same time it is dead and living, as Bachelard says, an immortal root that the light of the tree and hope dreams from the land of the dead.
The aforementioned composition *Ella*, from 1987, one of my favourite images, shows the metamorphosis of the female outline we can make out beneath the canvas, which becomes a tree first of all and then the body of a woman, thereby recreating the transformation from the inanimate to the vital pulse, from death to fertility. *El Androbosque*, which, as its title suggests, refers to an anthropomorphic representation of the wood, with a nod to Shakespeare, and which marks out one of the most interesting journeys embarked on by Rafael Navarro, is a composition made up of fragments of dry branches. *Las formas del cuerpo* comprise various photographs in which the shadow of the branches and leaves falls on the body of a woman.

When he creates leafy and luxuriant trees, as he does in *El árbol de la libertad*, he celebrates hope, life and fertility. The clothed female figure walks with her back to us towards the density of the tree to return naked and facing us, on a kind of journey of initiation. It is a huge tree, dense and full of vitality and which shelters and protects. The mutilated trunks, bark like deep scars and withered trees have all been left behind. What is surprising, however, is that *El árbol de la libertad* is not a tree. Plato was right. Rafael Navarro has come up to the light and has seen. And he has told us about it. It is a medieval tower devoured by vegetation, blocks of stone covered by undergrowth and branches, transforming the inert, lifeless stone into the luxuriant tree of life.