

## Book Review The passage - Marialba Russo - Postcart - Snaporaz

One of the prerogatives of photography is having to place oneself at a certain, calculated distance in order to watch and record, and by virtue of the meters and centimeters decided upon, narration or discovery can start, hence vision and knowledge.

"The Passage" is a work that contains the shots of the well-known Italian photographer Marialba Russo collected in 1979 in Campania to document - a poor and simple word, only useful as starting point - the arcane and archaic ceremony of the *incanata* - or the "passage" - used to ward off future physical infirmities of younger boys' beardless bodies. The images thence mark the phases of a single example of this process: starting from a rapid presentation of the place and the characters involved, the scene quickly moves into the woods, oblivious of any urban or perversely cultural heritage, no longer trampled by those who look and pass indifferently by them, but by those who still see in them the receptacle of the sacred, of the still alive symbols of a tradition to which to entrust one's answers. Just to make HD Thoreau's words come true, the visual abandonment of any urban coordinate decentralizes the gaze to incorporate it into the wild aesthetic that even the trunks of cherry trees, altars chosen for the ritual, can assume. The moment that is represented in front of Russo's lens is a contact with the sacred which is very different from the chaotic uproar of the Sicilian processions immortalized by Ferdinando Scianna, closely connected to the village and urban context: the city seems unable to disconnect the human multitude, the polyphony of voices, the cacophony of shared ecstasy. And this is how, forgetting the advent of the *póleis* for a moment, one returns to the collected ranks of true fear in the face of the unknown moves of fortune and of future, remembering an earthly body too fragile and in need of protection to be requested elsewhere. In the rhythmic cadence of the images, we see the laceration by two men of one of the many slender trunks that fill up all the corners of the depth of field of the images, that laceration through which the metaphorical passage of the boy's body will take place, promptly undressed and left for a moment in a white and bewildered nudity: this is the instantaneous apex that precedes the beginning of the passage by a single click, or rather by the request made to other forces so as to keep that physicality, still intact and completely healthy but irreparably corruptible. In this way, we see the boy lifted by his arms and ankles and made to float through the hollow wound of the trunk, at that moment a symbol of the regenerative power from which, like plant bodies, one hopes the boy's organism will take on. Photography has taken the vision and conception of faith and the sacred to extremes, no longer able to invent the symbolic form of the object of faith but only able to transfer its effects to the flesh of the faithful on film: one cannot give, in photography, a true face to the forces to which the men in Marialba Russo's images appeal, but one can know the movements and expressions that are implemented and consecrated as a reflection, by virtue of them.

The book, published by Postcart Edizioni - Rome, is part of the series "*I Quaderni dello Sguardo*" conceived by Russo herself, and in its immediate simplicity a few dozen images without captions are enclosed. In the introductory text, stated by the journalist Marino Niola we read that in the author's images "an idea of the human still a child of nature emerges. And it is precisely in this co-belonging that he finds an active healing principle". Coincidentally, precisely to Joseph Niépce's, one of the fathers of photography, we owe the discovery of the destructive power of the sun where even rocks are victims and only during the night, when the light rays no longer reach them, they are able to regenerate and heal themselves back to their original condition. Hence, light becomes not only an archetypal element of the photographic image, but also a perfect metaphor for what Marialba Russo's work intends to

represent: the wound that is inflicted on the trunk, just as light inflicts on matter, finds hope of healing thanks to the laws contained in the unknown dictation of nature and to which man, at least until more than forty years ago, has never stopped invoking and turning to. The wound in the trunk will heal thanks to the ox dung, will then be applied at the end of the rite, at the end of that triple passage of the child's body suspended in the arms of the men who support him, a passage destined to end where it actually begins, and with the same wedding ring. In Marialba Russo's work, there is no going out of the woods: the rite ends with a shortened distance, with a final close sequence on the detail of the trunk to which a holy card of "Maria Santissima" has been tied to, contained in a food bag and secured with two turns of thick wire. There, the expected miracle takes shape in the reconstruction of the trunk, in the final disguise of Mary, in the final generation of which she too was the first witness, thus of the prodigy finally made visible to the eyes. The sacred image is immortalized in its natural cancellation, in its irreversible masking in the form of a new plant-related and living element in a final image which, like a photograph, will contain the memory of each previous representation of the passage, sealing its process and completion. Thus, the *incanata* succeeds in affirming the extreme conviction that the human body is in all respects equal to the natural world, definitively making the metaphor a scientific fact, the healing glimmer and power of the myth.

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