

Synopsis

IN THE SHADOW (OF STEPS) LOST

By
Philippe LARODIE

2007/2008 - FRANCE

There are many ways of showing reality. Of course, it is always possible to throw a harsh light on a scene, and photography lends itself particularly well to this exercise. It becomes, as it were, anatomic, anthropometric. But if one does this, presenting a finite product which leaves no room for interpretation, for suggestion, there is a danger one might not see below the surface of things and so miss the point.

Another way of approaching reality, just as the impressionists did, is to leave room for the undefinable, for one's feelings, one's emotional perception, and, paradoxically – since what is at stake here is images - for the invisible. Just as in a speech where silence, when used wisely, may prove to be as important as words.

We must be grateful to Philippe Laroudie for mastering this alchemy by which the truth – literally, the extraordinary truth – of the prison is not revealed through irrevocable, peremptory, aggressive or simplified features but is translated and interpreted with delicacy, sensitivity and decency.

Here, the relationship to men and things is different. The men are mere shapes, fleeting shadows, overwhelmed by a decor they cannot control. And the merest object, perceived as ordinary when “outside”, is loaded with a powerful symbolic dimension, like that telephone, a hypothetical link with relatives who experience prison in their own way. Light is not absent, but it passes through bars or grates, when it is not artificial.

The person who shows us all this is not an indecent voyeur, but a witness, deeply concerned to understand and help others understand this world which, it seems, he has tried to be part of so as to give a more faithful account of its complexity. He has done this humbly: there are no moralizing or pretentious lessons in these photographs, no soothing clichés to please right-thinking people who feel reassured to see what they themselves have not been subjected to. Only fragments of wrecked lives, fragments of suffering but also sparks of hope since life goes on, as we can see from that hand which the bars cannot prevent from turning towards the sky.

And so the photographer, through his camera, has succeeded in transcending the perspective of a mere visitor. In a way, he is the eye of a prisoner observing his companions, but also that of a warder who himself lives his life in prison. He does not pass any judgments, does not sympathize. He shows things and evokes them soberly, subtly, he expresses them. Philippe Laroudie must have read Saint Exupery who wrote that the most important things are not seen with the eye but with the heart.

Marylise Lebranchu