

Synopsis :

AFRICA - AMERICA

by

Philippe GUIONIE

Venezuela, Colombia, Peru, Ecuador, Bolivia and Chile – 2008 / 2010

In this body of work, Philippe Guionie takes a closer look at a little-known population with African origins, whose very existence is often ignored : black South Americans. Those living in the northern part of South America came to the fore after the struggles for human rights in the sixties, and have been the object of many photographic works. Those from Brazil or the Caribbean, who suffer from widespread but much-understated racism - even in Cuba - have inspired many photographers, whether it be related to their dances, their sense of rhythm, the sports they play or simply because of their looks. But I didn't realize the importance of the communities of black people of African origin in Venezuela, Colombia, Bolivia, Peru, Chile or Ecuador. Certainly it is hard to imagine blacks on the *altiplano*, and the clichés abound that countries colonized by the Spanish are populated exclusively by descendants of the conquistadores and the few natives who survived the massacres. These people, descendants of slaves brought here in the holds of the invaders' boats, are becoming more and more aware of their own existence.

You can see the inscription « Negro » painted like a huge affirmation on a wall in Ladrillo, while on another flaky wall the destinations « Gambia, Liberia, Cameroon, Gabon, Congo, Angola » mark origins on a face whose eye might soon be stabbed by the lance held by a warrior, half Greek, half African, aiming from the other side of the ocean with his feet firmly anchored, disappearing into the ground. The "Afro descendants" can claim a town called Africa as their own capital city, a real town in northern Ecuador. The journey, because it is more of a journey than a quest or an inquest, is shown through a combination of square and horizontal images – in medium format – which creates a dialogue between portraits and landscapes. Of course it is a little more complicated than that, because sometimes the landscapes include people who pose or who cross the image, and the squares can be framed more or less widely to focus more or less on the landscape of a face. And that is at the heart of the issue, the choice of the distance to the subject, which must be just right so as to avoid mannerism, to maintain a natural respiration, with a degree of equality, and the necessary rigour which never loses its flexibility.

The photographer allows himself to show his feelings to the public, in broad daylight, at the risk of abandoning reassuring barriers. As much when he sees a lone dog in the landscape as when he shoots the fleeting silhouette of a cow, or when he meets – and it is clear that they are genuine chance meetings – an old lady who spreads her arms wide while her wrinkled face laughs out loud, or a young girl, standing gravely, hands on hips, who is going to be nobody's fool.

The ease with which this work identifies with the difficulties of photographic documentary highlights the fundamental problems involved. It means discovering, recording, bringing subjects to the attention of the public and heightening their awareness of them. A sort of struggle against ignorance and abandon, for which photography is an excellent tool by virtue of its complex relationship with time, as demonstrated perfectly here.

Even if they continue to exist, the people and places that Philippe Guionie shot at a given instant will never again be what they were when he pressed the shutter. However an image remains of that infinitely short instant, less easily modified than others, and which exists only because of the meeting between the operator and whatever was in the frame at the time.

The image lives on, and gives us the illusion that it is eternal and that it is able to fight against the erosion of time flowing through the hour-glass. Better again, in this case, thanks solely to a decision by the photographer to choose a unique territory and its population, the travel log illustrates a secular story, no longer spoken of, which exists perhaps – without a doubt – in the stories told as an echo of Africa lost and the memory of slavery. And it gives it a new existence, through faces and places, it rebuilds it and brings us to that country which doesn't really exist but to which it gives a credible form.

As it is a story of photographic documentary crossed with the tales of a journey, it makes one think of an illustrious predecessor, Pierre Verger. This Frenchman travelled the world, and always curious of others' cultures, he visited these zones in Latin America where he wrote and photographed. He took many photographs, mostly of indigenous cultural traditions but there are some portraits of blacks in this part of the world. His passion for everything concerning black people and Africa was boundless and it was not by chance that he chose to spend the final years of his life in Brazil, at Salvador de Bahia.

More narrative than Philippe Guionie, sometimes using more anecdotes, he still did leave a collection of square black and white portraits, which are a pleasure to compare with those taken at the beginning of this 21st century. There are comparable angles, the same way of letting light play on the skin, the textures, keeping the décor in the background, and, more than anything else, that tenderness for the subject which illuminates the whole work. Even if both are curious about cultures and differences, neither Philippe Guionie nor Pierre Verger considered himself an ethnologist, neither sought to perform "scientific" photography. For them, photography was simply a means of expressing their points of view which accompanied their travels throughout the world.

Philippe Guionie, even if he shows obvious affection for this population of black South Americans, is more questioning the real existence of a descendant afro culture than confirming its presence in the community. The absence of group photographs, and the importance given to the individuality of perception and identity, shows clearly that the photographer is discovering, taking note. It is up to these people – and they are starting to do it – to determine if their identity is strong enough and if they wish therefore to start a process to have their existence recognized.

Even if an image of Che, as if lost on a barred window through which one sees two schoolgirls, might symbolize an alliance between social demands and aspirations for recognition of identity, it is a blurred image, nostalgic already, that ends the journey. The seaside, grey weather, a wooden jetty and regularly spaced lamps, calm wavelets breaking gently on the shore. Is it a jetty for boarding or disembarking? A direct view or a reflection in a blurred mirror? Most certainly an image of time, permanently renewed, immobile and without end.

Christian Caujolle