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Hannah Starkey ***A Project for the Castle***

Marcella Beccaria

The modern era has left us the legacy of an immense expansion of the "field of the visible", thanks to a continuous diffusion and multiplication of images. At the same time, contemporary geography is a mutable and constantly reproduced landscape, both in its tangible aspect and in its virtual one, delineated in recent decades. For some time now people have lamented that in a world so teeming with images, it is difficult to concentrate on the value of vision and therefore on the value of experiences, whether relevant or absolutely banal, which rapidly follow one after another in everyday life. It is difficult to escape the growing sensation that the immense accumulation of the visible, by opposite effect, can end up diminishing, if not annulling, our capacity to recognize the importance of situations that we see and experience over the course of our lives. Hannah Starkey's photographs stem precisely from this awareness, which profoundly marks contemporary culture.

Even if Starkey's photographs are not self-portraits, they are autobiographical in that they are tied to her experience as a woman who lives and works in a cosmopolitan city like London, having moved there from her native city of Belfast. To shoot her images, the artist uses professional actresses whom she chooses, much as a film producer might do, based on the "roles" required for each photograph. "Seen from a female perspective - the artist says - the constructed scenarios in my images explore women's lives through their everyday interactions. Each photograph portrays actresses recreating an ostensibly insignificant, or banal, moment that is often unnoticed as we go about our daily routine."

Thus the artist conceives each image as a *mise en scène*, a narrative fiction where the subject, however, is the immediately visible reality that makes up everyday life. Not only the subject of investigation, but also the photographic technique employed deals with the world of women. In fact, the choice to recreate an image similar to reality, rather than seeking it "live," has its origins in a way of "seeing" that can be considered culturally "female." Indeed the field of feminist studies has been a major source of criticism of the idea that photography can be an objective tool, capable of capturing reality. In this sense Starkey's work, and her insistence on the idea of staging defined aspects of life in a large city, can be seen in critical relationship to the modern era's tradition of "street photographers," who traveled the already chaotic metropolises, electing unaware passers-by as their protagonists.

In their totality, Starkey's images, usually entitled only with the name of the month during which they were taken, compose a unique story that is articulated in various episodes. The attention to moments that are of apparently minimal narrative relevance derives from the artist's stance toward the people and situations encountered, a stance she has defined as that of "a perpetual tourist." As noted above, her analysis is above all of women, so that her photographs as a whole become an

introspective investigation, one that examines, or in some cases anticipates, moments tied to the artist's biographical experience. Her insistence on the act of looking, often a dominant motif in her images, emerges from the importance that Starkey attributes to the fact that observing others is a way to learn about ourselves. Indeed her photographs describe women who are looking into a mirror, who are observing each other or whose attention is drawn to someone located outside the field of the image. Even in its restrained immobility, the geometry which derives from her compositions establishes a narration that alludes to the complexity of social structure and to codified behaviors based on age or class, within the female universe that populates the city. As the artist herself has noted, her work, while dominated essentially by female figures, does not focus exclusively on women, in that the themes addressed relate in a broader sense to aspects of life in the contemporary urban context.

Hannah Starkey's new images at Castello di Rivoli are among her most recent works and are concerned with the inherent transcendence of adolescent life. In *Untitled-December 1999, 1999* the setting is that of a student's games room. A young woman lights a cigarette, standing close to an open window to avoid detection, assured by the presence of a friend, a boy who as if in a dream, seems to emerge from behind the curtains. There is no action; the world lies outside and the walls of the space close in on the girl. There is a palpable sense of vitality withheld, which the few years of adolescence seem to impose on those who are anxious to enter adulthood, still seeing the future as a promise of total freedom and autonomy.

Yet another interior frames *Untitled-September 1999, 1999*, where a group of girls eat lunch during a break. In the background is the figure of another young woman, separate and apparently excluded from the circle of friends seated at the table, subjected to a physical and psychological isolation - an occasional experience that seems to be shared by everyone at some time during their teenage years. "The recorded moments described - Starkey observes with regard to these images - transcend into modern allegories, as the subjects remain anonymous, masked by fashion and by the trends of this era. Allegories that replace the traditional religious narrative with spiritualism and mysticism."

In *Untitled - August 1999, 1999*, three young girls, wearing high heels and miniskirts, meet beneath a wall marked by ordinary graffiti and by the outlines of religious figures. Their attention is drawn to a girl of the same age who, in her turn, seems amused by something that is going on outside the image. Her glance is aimed at the same space that we, as observers of the photograph, occupy, and that symbolically becomes the field of real life, still separate from the world of adolescence. According to Starkey, adolescents "appear to float in and out of reality, heroines of their own fantasy. These images depict an incidental point in time, when all the elements of what seems to be an everyday encounter collide and become sublime and iconic, highlighting the beauty of a single moment, soon to be dispersed."