



40 days and 40 nights in Montecristo

DAVIDE TRANCHINA

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edited by

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APM

Imaginary Photography

IRENE CAMPOLMI

For the second year in a row, the Italian Embassy in Denmark has the pleasure to collaborate with Copenhagen Photo Festival, one of the most important events in Scandinavia for international photography, by opening the doors of the wonderful Palazzo Gluckstadt in Fredericiagade, to an exhibition dedicated to talented Italian photographers.

This 18th Century historic building created by the famous Danish architect Nicolai Eigtved is not just the Residence of the Italian Ambassador in Copenhagen, but represents also a living showcase of the rich and dynamic cultural and diplomatic relations between Italy and Denmark. It has been hosting Italian Ambassadors to the Kingdom of Denmark since 1924 and it displays astonishing art pieces such as antique Venetian mirrors, baroque canvas from Capodimonte Museum's collection in Naples, equally combining Danish and Italian style in its architecture and interior design.

After the 3 young talents of last year, the public of Copenhagen Photo Festival 2017 will have the opportunity to meet two Italian photographers: one of them, Davide Tranchina, is already internationally very known and will guide the spectator into an incredible, almost metaphysical journey in the island of Montecristo, the most enigmatic and inaccessible among the Italian islands, located in the Tyrrhenian Sea and part of the Tuscan Archipelago; the second one, Lia Ronchi, is a young artist from Milan, who is the winner of a National competition for an "Artist in Residence" program organized by the Italian Embassy and the Italian Cultural Institute in Copenhagen and dedicated to young Italian photographers. I look forward to welcoming you from June the 3rd to June the 11th to the exhibition at the Italian Ambassador Residence in Copenhagen.

**Stefano Queirolo Palmas,
Italian Ambassador to Denmark**

40 Days and 40 Nights in Montecristo is a photographic series telling the story of a nocturnal walk that the photographer undertakes from the sea shores to the top of the highest hill in Montecristo, one of the most mysterious islands among the Italian archipelagos¹. Though, the research object of this project is to explore the imaginary dimension of photography rather than investigating the constellations supposedly visible at night from the island. The series examines how photography goes beyond the overloaded imagery that we confront daily and aims at exploring new imaginary territories. It presents photos of places, objects, and landscapes that do not, actually, exist. At the same time, these nocturnal images long for introducing another world and way of looking at it. In the series, the subject – whether this is a nightly glimpse of a constellation, a natural element or an animal – is artificially recreated in the darkroom. Are these images actually false or, even more, not authentic? Does the connection to an actual referent give more importance or credibility to a photograph? I would not say so.

In fact, Tranchina shows us that photography can not only capture a glimpse of reality but the whole imagination. Rather than a documentary or a representative photography, he suggests what an imaginary photography could look like. By bringing up to the surface those images which usually get trapped on the backdrop of our eye and memory, Tranchina gives them a narrative power. He reproduces residual ephemeral images and transforms them into esoteric visions. Suddenly, the memory kept by the eye's backdrop of the retina is brought up to the surface and then impressed into the medium. It is commonly acknowledged that, with eyes wide open, we can see 'better'. However, with eyes closed, our vision is empowered, and our memory merges with our imagination, thus offering a repertoire of random images. Like phosphenes, Tranchina's photos are characterised by the experience of seeing the light even though the latter is in fact not entering through the eye. Phosphenes are generally induced by a movement or

Fictions and surfaces

LUCA PANARO

a sound that is associated with optic neuritis, an inflammation that occurs to vision. It seems like a sign that only by altering the normal physical conditions, one could capture the memory. Tranchina's images are a remembrance of reality mixed with imagination. They bring representation to a zero degree, where shapes, forms and contours are determined by a process of deduction through which the photographer distances himself from the realm. According to Tranchina, distance is an efficient way to cope with images' saturation in today's world. When vision is saturated, and there is no other space to see beyond the limits of one's own view, there is actual room for imagination. The exhibition is structured in a way that recalls Tranchina's imaginary walk as it is described by the photographic series. The exhibition path starts at the entrance and continues along the staircase of the palace. The photos are aligned in a way that reminds the sequence in which the photographer might have actually seen those landscape views while climbing the hill. The more one walks up along the stairs, the closer one gets to seeing what the photographer saw in his imagination: sky views full of stars, which are sometimes interrupted by silhouettes of trees or animals that obstruct the perspective. The viewer's walk along the staircase reminds Tranchina's fantastic journey climbing Montecristo's hill. But it also connects to the purifying process of deduction that photography undertakes every time it refuses to merely represent the visible world. Every time it reaches an original dimension that goes beyond just mirroring reality, the medium and the collective imagery are empowered. Tranchina immerses us into an ancestral dimension, where it is barely impossible to distinguish dream from reality. He creates the space for an imaginary photography, once whose potentialities are still to be discovered.

¹ The island is renowned for being inaccessible to the general public for decades and has acquired a mysterious, intriguing character.

The photographic series *40 days and 40 nights in Montecristo* is the result of a metaphysical reading of the island of Montecristo, the most enigmatic and inaccessible Italian island, off the coast of Tuscany in the Tyrrhenian Sea. Davide Tranchina has acquired images for 40 days in search of ancestral forms and for 40 nights under starry skies, artificially creating in the darkroom a feeling of tangible reality using an early photographic method called *cliché verre*. Working over a glass plate with silhouettes and splashes of paint, Tranchina obtains images on paper mixing the worlds of engraving and photography. His research is focused on representing visual fragments deposited in the retina, in which the perception of the physical landscape merges with the viewer's inner vision. In these images, thanks to the intrinsic language of photography, one can no longer tell what is dream and what is real. What photography teaches us, after all, is that true and false are two sides of the same coin coexisting in the image since the birth of the medium. As David Levi Strauss claims, seeing is believing. It has always been, long before Niépce and Daguerre revolutionized the visual technologies with the invention of photography. Yet photography shaped the gaze anew and greatly changed the relationship between seeing and believing. Today's world has brought this feature to the extreme, but cultural history shows that humankind always relied on lying as an asymptomatic carrier of truth. Tranchina directly engages the viewer. He uses his visual product as a generator of uncertainties and doubts over which the viewer is allowed to ponder: Is this a real recording of the world or just a representation? Why mimic reality in the darkroom, when it would be much easier to just go out and get it? As Zygmunt Bauman puts it, since man creates this world, man can also recreate the world. In no other time in history such an assertion appears to be true as it is today. Contemporary photography took this road at the end of the last century, and since the 2000s artists truly threw themselves into

the ambiguity arising out of the photographic medium. The vision of sublime starry skies allows Tranchina to reconstruct the suspended and timeless atmosphere that characterizes the island of Montecristo, bringing us back to primeval times on Earth, where, in the dark impenetrable night, man looked at the Universe. Photo paper is used as the surface on which the perception of the physical landscape merges with the viewer's inner vision. In daylight images, the octopus, the spiral, and the starfish appear as fossils of a past that is bound to linger, albeit as just a faint trace. It doesn't matter if one of the above comes in the shape of a mosquito fumigator – it nevertheless serves the recording purpose of an unlikely encounter on the island during the artist's long investigative hours. A set of Polaroids witnesses Tranchina's stay on the island showing the same register of ambiguities of his main body of work. His own shadow, in perfect iconographic continuity with his main series, unobtrusively reveals itself, showing up just a little to certify a presence and evoke a distant feeling which is also further emphasized by colour alterations.

A second topic, which allows us to place Tranchina's work in a wider contemporary context, is surfaces. Today, images are the direct expression of a "society of transparency" as defined by the Korean philosopher Byung-Chul Han. This is a society which manifests itself as an "appearance of surfaces". It's the coming of a new aesthetic that stands out for its production of formally sober but visually dense and colour-charged images. Cleanly shot and rigorously composed, these images are never abstract – one can envisage reality behind them at all times, even when they are constructed in the dark room. A recognisable feature is their obvious two-dimensional nature: they appear flat and no longer claim to give the illusion of depth, thus effectively erasing the long perspective tradition handed down from painting. All of this reminds us, of course, of Tranchina's glass images – *cliché verre* means just that – and their being generated out of a sheer surface faithfully reproduced in a final

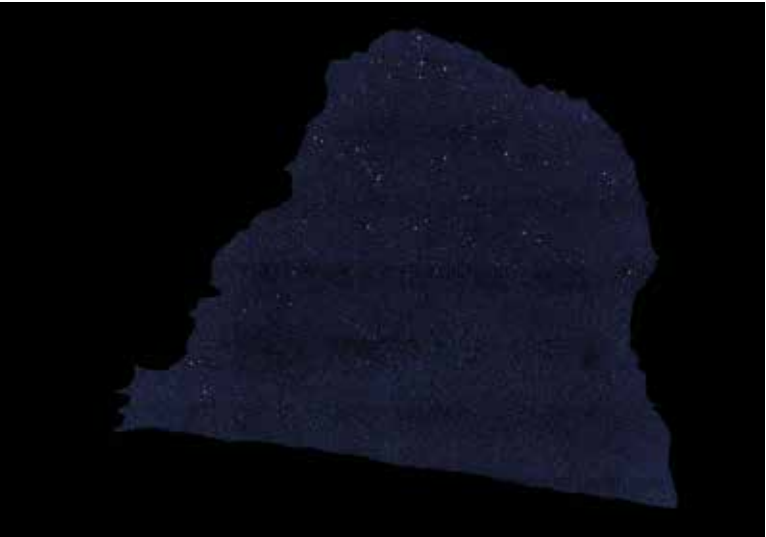
print. Surfaces alluding to more surfaces, the two-dimensional nature of clichés enduring in the final print: contemporary photography seems to have embraced this logic at the expense of the Renaissance idea of a *window* meant as a perspective view piercing the two-dimensional medium. Starting from images coming out of a primary world – be it the primary world of photography or the origins of Earth itself – Tranchina has been proposing for some time works designed to let us experience distance, using images as a sort of time machine bringing the past into the future and infinity to the origin. Photographic ghosts, shadows of landscapes and archaic animals also appear in Tranchina's series from the past years, next to space images and wondrous planets being revealed the moment they are struck by rays of light – realities which exist only during the brief moment they appear in front of the magical lens. The fact that these surfaces are tangible is not relevant – what matters is the fantastic narrative that the artist achieves without ever leaving the physical space of his studio.











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Curated by Irene Campolmi, Luca Panaro

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