



Mark Cohen / Bernard Plossu

Americas

March 3 → April 15, 2017

opening Thursday March 2 from 6h30 pm

While today some people threaten to build up impermeable borders and impassable walls, between the United States and Mexico, there is only one singular territory that neither really belongs to one or the other, but to both of them, to their interbreeding, to their « Indianity », as shown with the tales, existences, photographs, even legends that over the persisted for centuries. But whether it is materialized by a mountain, a river, a simple line of stones or a trace in the sand, the border always means separation and desires for crossings, expectations and dreams of the hereafter. And if they also trigger desires of passing, they also arouse thirsts for transgression, since the curiosities to see and to live what begins behind the line is are so big.

In the late 1960s, the French photographer Bernard Plossu discovers the United States from Mexico where some members of his family have emigrated, and where he started a few years earlier, in the Chiapas, a photographic practice. Bill Coleman, one of his most faithful friends, will become his smuggler and his guide. In the middle of the 1970s, he sets up home in New Mexico and starts a family. His photographic practice takes on a new scale in front of the immensity and the diversity of the places that are offered to the eyes of the budding artist. And as time goes by, Bernard Plossu intensifies this language about the meeting and the sensitive that distinguishes him, especially through the Fresson colour print process that he particularly appreciates. However he feels the need to go back to the edges of this Mexico that continues to haunt him. And South he goes, towards the « frontera », in 1974 for instance, in order to record the noises of the Mexican life against the silence of the American conformism, but also the precariousness, poverty and the disenchantments that those two countries have in common. « You don't take a picture, you « see » it, then share it with the others. I practise photography to be on equal footing with the world and what is happening. » Therefore, Bernard Plossu's photographs resemble an existential experience, an initiation story as well as a logbook that lasted for almost fifteen years in the American northwest, and whose thread extends infinitely like these long American roads that cross the territory while playing with borders. « In photography, you don't capture time, you evoke it. It runs like fine sand, infinitely, and the changing landscapes do not change anything about it. »

The American photographer, Mark Cohen, has followed the opposite path. While in the middle of the 1980s, Bernard Plossu leaves the American territory for good and returns to Europe, Mark Cohen initiates, from 1983 to 2003, a series of eight trips to Mexico that will take him to Mexico, Veracruz, Campeche, Oaxaca, as well as Yucatan. Although he says he has photographed it exactly the same way as Wilkes-Barre, his hometown, his Mexico is crossed by a gnawing energy, almost swallowed, as if he had let himself be snatched by what was lying there, under his eyes, during his urban rambles.

For, on the other side of the border, he is no longer the one who runs the show, and with this role reversal, his goal is to capture life differently: with tiny details, minuscule arrangements, singular attitudes, suspended gestures, furtive glances, translated into shades of almost dusty grey rather than black and white contrasts. His vision therefore went to discover the territory with nothing more than his instinct, his amazements, and his photographic obsessions.

« You must put yourself in a situation that is not about looking for [the image], but about wanting to find it, so that shows itself to you somehow, halfway between « creating a moment » and « receiving a gift from this moment ». For about twenty years, he faces this nervous tension as well as these poetic moments that characterize Mexico. And his framings – slightly wider and more open than the ones he usually enjoys – favour the diagonals that take the picture towards an off-camera territory of the representation in order to capture as closely as possible what is happening under his eyes. Everything unites and divides these two figures of contemporary photography. Mark Cohen was born in 1943, Bernard Plossu in 1945, but Mark Cohen has left his declining mining hometown of Pennsylvania on very few occasions and has spent about fifty years exploring it, while Bernard Plossu has spent his life travelling around the world, in Europe as well as in Africa, in the Americas as well as in Asia. Yet, they both share a direct and engaged approach of the world into which they have overtly immersed themselves, while displaying their admiration for the surrealist photography, particularly for the Mexican photographer Manuel Álvarez Bravo.

But if Mark Cohen swears only by Leica and the wide-angle lens, Bernard Plossu has definitively abandoned the wide angle lens in the United States, to use mostly the Nikkormat camera with a 50 mm lens. Showing both their works today allows to measure the proximities and gaps of their own visual languages facing a same situation and a same story, about the fascination/repulsion between the southern part of the US and Mexico, and conversely. But above all, it is about realizing the level of ethics, requirement and commitment of a photographer towards the world, the human condition of our world. And this has never been as intense and touching as in the images that Bernard Plossu and Mark Cohen offer us, during the time of an exhibition, on the picture rails of the galerie du jour. The borders can therefore be finer than what they seem.

Marc Donnadiou

Publications

Mark Cohen, *Mexico*, éditions Xavier Barral, 2016

Bernard Plossu, *Western Colors*, éditions Textuel, 2016

Bernard Plossu is represented by the gallery Camera Obscura (Paris) and the gallery Le Réverbère (Lyon). Thanks to Stéphane Brasca, curator of «Western Colors», exhibited in the Rencontres d'Arles in 2016.

*At the Maison européenne de la photographie. Until April 9, 2017
«Les rencontres de Bernard Plossu. La collection d'un photographe».
Curators : Pascal Hoël et Frédérique Dolivet*

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