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Saturday, 23 March 2019



Loup de verdure | 2017 | Louise Narbo (courtesy of the artist)

WHAT YOU CAN DO WHEN
*SEEING WITH ANOTHER
PERSON'S EYES*

Fátima da Cruz Rodrigues



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I have decided to share my reaction to an exhibition of photographs by Louise Narbo, which brings forward the questions inherited memories pose for those that choose to explore them. First, the title of this exhibition at Galeria Adorna Corações in Porto - *Seeing With Another Person's Eyes* (*Ver com os Olhos de um Outro*) (1) - is itself suggestive for people who, like me, are interested in the intergenerational transference or transmission of memories. Second, Narbo's photographs provoke us to think about the processes that make up post-memory, that is a "second-generation memory, the child of a first, witnessed memory (living, present, experiential), marked by silence" (2).

As its title suggests, the exhibition offers us material to look at from other people's perspectives. But *Seeing With Another Person's Eyes* goes further than this, allowing us to imagine the multiple constellations that might result from combinations of gazes. In this way, the exhibition calls into question what exactly we are able to see through others' eyes. This is itself a complex question, since at stake is no simple substitution of vision. We cannot only see through another person's eyes. As well as the other eyes that have been borrowed or forcefully deployed, we also see from our own perspective, from our embodied lifetimes of accumulated experience, sensation and sense. Consequently, what we see, though mediated by the other person's gaze, is necessarily different from what the other sees. It is, then, not just a question of substitution. The exhibition suggests a much more complex process of juxtaposition, articulation, intersection, crossing and confrontation of perspectives that do not necessarily converge. These processes of juxtaposition might produce countless outcomes and perspectives, given the indeterminate number of possible combinations. Narbo's photographs propose to reduce these combinations to a relation. They focus on two particular gazes: a woman's and her father's unusual point of view. This combination structures the works' discovery of a new perspective on the self. The result is an open solution to the problematic of the juxtaposition of perspectives that Narbo seeks to understand.

The exhibition brings together photographs from two series: [Vision fantôme](#) (Ghostly vision) and [Jeux de greffes](#) (Grafting games). The first explores the self-portrait. Through the artist's reflection in a fogged-up mirror, most photographs reveal little more than a silhouette. Some reveal parts of a female body, including eyes; visible eyes, defogged, but closed. For Narbo, this work, which began as an exploration of aging, became a way of exploring how to represent her father's vision. The shift came when, in the course of the work, she remembered another, older photograph which she had called "the ghost". She realized this ghost probably corresponded to what her father could see. Narbo tells us: ["for me this moment was a revelation; his gaze lurking in the shadow of my own"](#).



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In the *Jeux de greffes* series Narbo explicitly explores her father's gaze, affected by bad eyesight that has been getting worse. In these photographs, the artist seeks essentially to uncover the relationship between her father's vision and his own perception of himself and the world. In the work she experiments with various combinations of vision through different implants that she puts in her father's eyes. The gaze appears shattered by the fragments she applies; sight is clouded or covered by natural and artificial objects (veins, leaves, trees, sky, clouds, string); sometimes sight is amplified by glasses that reveal different eyes pointed in different directions. Her photographs are grafted with what appear to be filters or accessories installed over her father's eyes to give him different experiences of perceiving reality. This series also includes portraits, less hazy than those in *Vision fantôme*, with visible features, but that appear scratched, torn or invaded. These represent the different vision produced by the different implants applied to the father's eyes. Another "ghost" haunts this collection, in a photo where a silhouette appears, a shadow that could be the artist's own, or someone else's or even something else. This grafting game seems to play out a search for a solution to the problem of bad eyesight. *Vision fantôme* incorporates this field of vision and from it the photographs interpellate the perception that Narbo presents of herself. A blurred, hazy, dazed perception; a perception at times marked by attempts to try to see with her own eyes that, although closed, occasionally appear through mist of vapor on the mirror that reflects them. In this work she seeks to discover and understand how her father sees and how that vision affects her own. She also explores this vision through the various experiences she rehearses and that lead to what seem to me to be responses to the questions that this exercise provokes.

She leaves this response open with Alice, a photograph of a woman's face superimposed with watching eyes. Wide, open eyes that contrast with her father's diminished eyes. Eyes that this time she imposes on herself and that evoke the possibility of acquiring another vision of the world than her father's. An emancipated vision, but a vision that also belongs to someone else. Thus Alice does not solve the problem of a diminished field of vision. Rather, I think, it leaves open the possibility of thinking in other combinations and perspectives beyond her and her father.

For me, finally, *Seeing With Another Person's Eyes* challenges our ability to imagine multiple, often disparate, constellations of possible visions of the world and of the self which can result from superimposing perspectives. In this way, the questions, provocations, and provisional and open solutions that Narbo's photographs pose in relation to how she sees the world through her father's



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eyes present a challenge to those interested in post-memory. Post-memory, as coined by Marianne Hirsch, describes the relationship that a second generation establishes with the traumatic experiences that preceded them. (3) In this sense, post-memory refers to a connection to the past that, as Hirsch puts it, is “actually mediated not by recall but by imaginative investment, projection, and creation” (4). This particular relationship with the past is thus a relationship conditioned by multiple interferences. These affect the transmission of perspectives about the past and that necessarily condition the receiving eyes. Narbo’s work can help us question the relationship between someone’s inherited gaze on the past and their own. The work suggests that another person’s perspective, and their particular capacities, affects the inherited vision. This vision, diminished or amplified, can cloud, obscure, or deform the receiving view; but it may at the same time provoke the heir to explore the ways that their perspective belongs neither only to them, nor any longer only to the bequeather. And this question, which starts with recognising this inheritance, can also be the starting point for other visions. Not only those we involuntarily inherit or absorb, but which we choose to adopt.

When I saw this exhibition could not help but remember Margarida Calafate Ribeiro’s sense that post-memory is a “powerful type of memory that comes more from silence than from words, more from fragments than from complete narratives, more from questions than from answers.” (5) *Seeing with Another Person’s Eyes* explores the influence of fragments of someone else’s eyes on a journey of discovery of how superimposing different combinations of perspectives affects the vision we have of ourselves and the world. It is a work that examines how other peoples’ perspectives conceal, reveal, obfuscate, disturb, and challenge their descendants’ points of view. This exhibition proposes questions more than answers in relation to what we are able to see *with another person’s eyes*, and what we are able to do with what those eyes reveal.

Louise Narbo was born in Algeria where she lived until 1962, when that country became independent of French rule. She started to take photographs in the 1980s and from 2006 she began to exhibit her work in France, Belgium, the United States, England, Italy and Portugal.



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(1) The exhibition ran between 19 January and 28 February 2019.

(2) Ribeiro, Margarida Calafate (2016), *A Casa da Nave Europa - miragens ou projeções pós-coloniais?*, in António Sousa Ribeiro; Margarida Calafate Ribeiro (org.), *Geometrias da Memória: configurações pós-coloniais*. Porto: Afrontamento, 15-42, p.34.

(3) Hirsch, Marianne, « Postmémoire », in *Témoigner. Entre histoire et mémoire. Revue pluridisciplinaire de la Fondation Auschwitz*, n° 118, 2014, p. 205.

(4) *Ibid.*

(5) Ribeiro, Margarida Calafate (2016), *op. cit.*, p.34.

Translated by **Alexandra Reza**

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