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An unexpected Europe.

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Having travelled the twenty-seven countries of the European Union with the curiosity and dedication of a 19th century explorer-photographer anxious to exhibit and comprehend these countries seeped in History, enigmas and on occasions exoticism, Jordi Bernadó has appropriated the myths and legends of this vast territory which was the birthplace of our culture, displaying its masterpieces, but also exposing its stigmas.

Indeed, Bernadó comes across successively as erudite, historian, architect, sociologist, but most often as storyteller; in a seemingly lax style sustained by the extreme rigour of his compositions and a perfect mastery of colour ranges, he employs the vocabulary of documentary photography and applies a perfectly assembled visual protocol –distance from the object, framing broad enough to contain the scene in its entirety, neutral point of view– whilst unfurling a narrative reliant on an analysis of specific places, of historical events in a specific timeframe: in a way, the golden rule of 17th century classical French theatre.

It all appears so simple; photographs flow from one to the next, in a reasonable and reasoned succession. Interlinked chapters reveal territory, History, architecture and culture in rigorous order.

But just when you think it's all well understood, a doubt springs from the irony that lurks in the intentionally repetitive quotes and from the subversive force of simulation. You hesitate, faced with this sarcastic, Utopian yet fatalistic description of the real world, between the truth of a historical reference verified by photographic proof, by the evidence of a postcard, and the iconography of a cartoon or even the philosophy contained in Flaubert's Dictionary of Received Ideas: "MEERSCHAUM. Found in the earth; used to make pipes" or "RUINS. Induce reverie; make a landscape poetic" followed by "EARTH. Refer to its four corners since it is round."

So you become more alert in viewing the images and you begin to decipher the narrative, or at least you make a cautious attempt in that direction. For at the very same moment as Jordi Bernadó offers us the vision of the sea foam that frames the shore on which rests an innocent and insouciant nymph Europe, –maiden of noble Phoenician lineage who is to bequest (for reasons unknown) her name to our continent– Zeus appears in the form of a superb white bull who will carry the scared, seemingly overwhelmed yet consenting damsel far away beyond the seas. Later, as gods, goddesses, nymphs and heroes share Mount Olympus itself, we are gripped by a doubt: those rocks that loom closer, that gradually materialise as the pictures progress, have we perhaps not mistaken them with the mythological bull? And, in the gush of foam at Petra tou Rominou, aren't we glimpsing the delicate silhouette of Aphrodite, who appeared on that island at the world's junction, located on the cross-roads between the four cardinal directions?

Evocations of Aphrodite, representations of Venus will thus serve as points of reference, refrains, links in this flamboyant European narrative that describes contrasting peoples and languages, varied religious practices and beliefs, knowledges, powers, thoughts and values in endless confrontation yet unified by that symbol of beauty.

Thus, shortly after stating his intentions in Crete –an island narrated as the venue of kidnappings, alliances, marriages and births– Bernadó is quick to set up the backdrop for our shared culture with a tribute to the Parthenon, the model for the Ancient Greek temple where man meets god. Having cast our modern habitats into a cloudy darkness, he exposes, in a halo of light and from a low angle, the archetype of the Classical temple, gaze focussed on the stylobate, the three tiers of steps that support the Corinthian columns crowned by the entablature. Fine connoisseur of the history of

architecture, he displays and repeats at will these examples of temples spread far and wide across European space and history, whether they be ancient vestiges or replicas erected in line with the Disneyland model. Just as he pays tribute to the temple of Hylates with an unadorned analysis of its structure and skeleton –foundations ending in a levelled base, description of pilasters and columns–, he also suggests, in the form of a comic strip, an imaginary temple of Paphos with its flawlessly painted, even painstakingly polished, Ionian capitals and entablature, despite the fact that the building itself dithers between a suggestion of a Greek temple and a Chinese gabled house.

On the other hand, from Budapest to Helsinki, he frequently uses references to Classical temples in order to suggest religion, political power or cultural traditions. He resorts both to the form and the decorative motifs, warping them into elements of derision, into incongruous connections, into intended or unconscious arrangements –such as this fresco at a restaurant in Cracow, or that building rising over a square in Helsinki– and even sometimes into a nostalgic evocation of a hurting past, as in the peristyle of a building in Berlin.

However, whilst exploring the iconography of Classical European culture through archaeology or architecture, Bernadó is also skilful at handling statuesque imagery, and more precisely Venus and Aphrodite's various modes of representation.

Having intentionally and scrupulously avoided including the presence of any human being whatsoever in his corpus in order to reinstate the notion of Universal Time, he is by contrast prone to combining representations of contemporary characters with those of Classical goddesses. We may thus find ourselves faced with a fresco at Agia Napa where the Caryatids in the foreground dominate a frieze of 21st century heroes, while later on ephebes, cherubs and Venus vie for relevance alongside... the air conditioning unit fitted below them.

He makes the most of these incongruous coincidences, never hesitating to place the patrician next to that graffitied character that would have delighted Brassai or Prévert. Better still, the replication of the figure of Venus gives rise to unlikely encounters when we take a closer look at the souvenir shop or the pseudo-painter's studio. Here, indeed, we find mythology mingling with God and his Saints, the painter's palette with nude studies, without neglecting the guitar, lest we forget the scene is taking place in Barcelona. The embroidery stall, in turn, juxtaposes virgin with child, little shepherd girls and nymphs, with no irony beyond the artist's very own.

Jordi Bernadó ironizes with the figure of the Venus of Palepaphos emerging from a roof, half lightning rod, half TV aerial; underlines the kitsch element in the neon silhouettes at Simancas or the beauties of Innsbruck; derides the absurdity of Venuses, virgins, cherubs, dogs with bows and garden dwarves. Yet, in his recovery of these ironic picture postcard scenes, we perceive no contempt, but rather a clear-sighted and well-intended nostalgia.

Likewise, his evocations of our History's greatest pages waver between the narrative rigour instilled by the décor and verified by historic truth –realism in the Hungarian cavalrymen's uniforms or precision in the arms and armours in the Hall of Battles at Innsbruck– and the humoristic slant in these fictions that make a travesty of reality. Thus, illustrious characters assert their presence through copies of copies of once-famous ancient portraits, arranged and displayed as they used to be in the palaces of the world's great and good. We soon find ourselves lost in an ambiguous narrative, in these displacements of History and in these incongruous juxtapositions of events and locations, like Louis XIV posing between two Greek columns in a luxurious contemporary dining hall in Nice. However, Jordi does not hesitate to undo the ambiguity when these juxtapositions, these contractions of space and time, become excessive. He gently reminds us that we must never trust what we see, that it's nothing but a great fiction, a theatrical performance, as underlined by the trope-l'oeil stage curtains in Oviedo or the little theatre in Berlin.

When he turns to more serious subjects that deal with the pain of the past, Bernadó, as the excellent stage director and master of architecture he is, presents his absurd situations, incongruous coin-

cidences and bizarre locations, then resorts to black and white in order to translate the austerity of Berlin's urban layout or the dereliction of Bucharest. These images appear not to belong to the same world or to the same time. Walls are blind, windows dislodged on one side, images suggest syn-copated angles and the effects of perspective touch on the implausible. We are no longer amused, but called upon to reflect.

He later suggests just how hard it is to perceive reality, particularly when our vision of a city is sliced up by the presence of reflections in panes and shop windows. The procedure he applies is certainly not new, and many "street photographers" have used it before, but here Jordi draws poetry from this bird's wing in what could well be an aviary in Paris, from those surrealist Magritte-style silhouettes in a shop window in Brussels, from a bucolic view of Stockholm or the accumulation of luxury in Helsinki. With greater subtlety, he conjures the ghosts of Tamariu or Sophia by drawing vaporous veils between the viewer and the scene.

But soon again he expresses a sincere joy in confronting the natural against the artificial, as in that leafy bedroom ceiling in Helsinki or that series of trope-l'oeil windows that transform the typical homes of Slovenia into terraces. Likewise, one can no longer be sure of which trees are more alive, if those of Gijón or the ones painted on a wall at Benetússer.

He further peppers his discourse with incongruities, bizarreness and implausibility, mystifying us and making us smile. He returns to his favourite play on references to conjure the myth of the leaning Tower of Pisa in the architecture of London or the palace at Tartu, which share nothing in common –location, material, form– beyond the insistent tribute to the Pisan masterpiece. Under this procedure, we find references to Flaubert's aphorisms, or allusions to the exquisite corpse so fond to the Surrealists; a game that, by warping senses, finally arrived at nonsense.

Thus, nothing more trivial than a golf course in Portugal, with the hole designed to ultimately receive the ball, which, under Jordi's take, becomes a cordoned-off boxing ring. Later, the displacement of a shopping cart into a children's play area in Amsterdam appears so obvious that it would seem to require no further attention. Likewise, it takes a while to identify the road sign abandoned among the countless crosses in the oratory at Kryziu Kalnas, before we find ourselves wondering about the role and purpose of the boat suspended from the brick façade of a building in Helsinki. But certainly the strangest composition is the image from Lleida where two comfortable slippers are offered up to the audience in front of an empty bench while a look-alike London bus with opaque white windows awaits its hypothetical passengers. The scene is so well accomplished, one would think it was a site-specific art installation.

In the field of pastiche, Bernadó excels particularly under the chapter that I would describe as "parody of the border", as a tribute to the famous photograph of New Mexico published by Robert Frank in his book *The Americans*. We are all aware that the symbol of European unity lies in the abolition of borders, formerly the dividing lines of political power. But how are we to verify their true disappearance if we cannot even find their traces?

Thus, the image of the trench at Dojc cannot help but remind those who knew it of the dividing line in the fields between East and West Germany, an apparently ludicrous border, yet so terrifying. Later, having left behind the plant traces, the grassy meadows of Cyprus and Menorca, or those stubble fields of Mostoles, our artist conjures the symbol of boundary demarcations in their modern-day forms, spreading out on the tarmac at Sintra; while saints and guardian angels never stray far from the political lines that cross the hills of Ireland or the road to Senica.

Planted in the middle of the fields of Dojc or elsewhere, saints have always been willing to grant their protection to the pilgrims of Europe, ever since the very first pilgrimages to Santiago de Compostela.

Taking his use of previously unexplored forms of irony even further, Jordi Bernadó readily manipulate the symbols connected to the use of colour, venturing into startling associations, such as the 18th

century Sèvres porcelain blue that graces the impressive gate of a Swedish manor house; next he multiplies the Greek flag's blue and white, deftly connecting it to a pedestrian crossing in Palencia, or transforming a façade in Oropsea into a true Cubist painting.

This attempt at describing a united Europe in tender, ironic (yet never malicious), amused terms is reminiscent of Philippe Beaussant's definition of Europe in the 17th century, when: "a Spaniard called Anne of Austria was queen of France and governed with an Italian Prime Minister; when a Frenchman was king at Madrid, a Pole at Lorraine, a German at Buckingham; when a Saxon field marshal led the French army against the Prussians; when Henrietta of France was queen in London and Henrietta, her daughter, and hence of England, reigned over the hearts of Paris; when indeed only the Popes were truly Italian, in order to better be universal..." We could conclude that, if in the Baroque period Europe was one, it was certainly not uniform.



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