

Raymonde April: A Portrait

The portrait is a recurring theme in Raymonde April's work. For the past fifty years the Quebec photographer has been taking pictures of the world around her. By now, her personal archive is vast: photographs of herself, her friends and her family taken at different points in their shared lives, abound, as do images of the rural and urban landscapes she knows well, punctuated by pictures from her travels. For April, the act of photographing is a way of understanding what she sees, of bearing witness. Yet there is an affective quality to her work, an air of lived familiarity about it. This and its scope, which encompasses her life as an artist and relationships formed in the art world and beyond, gives her body of work both breadth and autobiographical depth.

To create a work for an exhibition, she delves into her archives, covering her worktable with prints, selecting a few to pin on her walls, until she decides on the ones that resonate with the idea she has in mind – in this case, the portrait – her portrait. It is a story we compose together at separate moments, she the artist, I the curator, and you, the viewer. The selection pushes the boundaries of portraiture as traditionally defined, to include places she knows well, the studio, and casual gatherings of friends. Some of the images have been part of other series and here find a new context; others have never been seen before. The story they tell is framed temporally, from the early 1970s to the present. It moves geographically from Rivière-du-Loup on the Lower St. Lawrence River, where she grew up, to Quebec City, and on to Montreal, before reaching out to Mumbai in India.¹ It returns in a loop to Rivière-du-Loup with the death of the artist's mother.

Artistically, April's early work references literature and film. She names Marcel Proust, Marguerite Duras, and Chantal Akerman among her influences, but also the "cinema direct" of the Quebec filmmakers associated with the National Film Board, like Pierre Perrault.² Of photographers, whose work she knew at first only from magazines, she cites Robert Frank and Diane Arbus. Her choices reveal an affinity for the subjective voice and the documentary, but also an interest in formal experimentation. We see its expression structurally in her work, in the ways she deploys the fragment to create a discontinuous narrative line – the ellipse – as well as formally, in her use of available light to create an expressive fluidity, or the spatial instability of the mirroring effect in certain images. Yet in spite of the importance April has given to the creation of open-ended 'auto fictions', her work is built on close observation and the photographic document, which with time inevitably takes on greater historical weight. The loosely chronological organization and

¹ April was awarded a four-month artist's residency in Mumbai by the Conseil des arts et des lettres du Québec in 2012. She returned there periodically for several years.

² Sheilah Wilson, "An Interview with Raymonde April," *BlackFlash*, Vol. 3, no. 2 (Spring 2015), pp. 54-59.

filmstrip linearity of this work for the Portrait Gallery foregrounds the temporal dimension without thereby intending to diminish other potential readings.

Photography was not part of the formal curriculum in the visual arts programme at Laval University in Quebec City, where Raymonde April was studying in the 1970s. Its history, while honourable, was still viewed as separate from that of the fine arts in many schools. She adopted it as her preferred medium nonetheless, regarding it as a practice where she was free to be herself. In the wider art world, its position was changing as well. The work of pop and conceptual artists had turned the attention of the art world onto banal and overlooked aspects of the everyday world. Women artists, influenced by second-wave feminism, created photographic essays in which they explored issues of identity, using themselves and their own bodies as their subjects. 'Camera art' and 'performances for the camera' became common expressions in this milieu, as artists embraced photography as an essential adjunct to a variety of conceptual projects, blurring the line between document and art.

Although April does occasionally pose her subjects when photographing friends – as we see in her early portrait of Serge Murphy (1975), then a fellow student at Laval, or the portrait of her long-time friend Michèle Waquant (1993) – it is the self-portrait that best lends itself to formal experimentation. We first glimpse her face in a mirror, partially obscured by her camera, in a portrait of Marcel Michaud (1974) [fig. 1, image 9], a multi-layered study of photographic space that visually reverses the positions of the photographer and her subject. (A similar reversal occurs many years later in *Mirror* (2002), a portrait of April and her camera-shy mother in the mirror of a Paris hotel room.) April's sense of humour is visible in *Self-Portrait with Bag* (1978), in which the artist gives expression to the fictional and narrative potential – a sunny vacation in some exotic location? – of an alligator bag bought for a song in a second-hand store.³

Formal concerns are a constant in April's early self-portraits, but two threads in particular connect them: their theatrical qualities on the one hand, and their reflections, often subtle, on identity, on the other. The two come together in the condensed narrative sequence of *Portrait of the Artist 1* and *Portrait of the Artist 2* (1980) [fig. 2 & 3, images 32 & 33]. An aura of mystery links the two: in the first, an androgynous figure, the artist clad in a man's trench coat, about to enter a darkened room, gazes at some empty canvas stretchers and a photo of a snowy mountain-top pinned to a wall, while in the second her figure is glimpsed through the doorway of an unlit room. Empty except for a couple of canvases and some Solander boxes stacked against the walls, it appears to be an artist's studio. Both figures

³ The image, which appeared on the invitation to April's exhibition at Powerhouse Gallery in Montreal, attracted the attention of the French magazine *Le Nouvel Observateur*, which included it in an article on the 'photo in the photo' in their December 1978 special issue on photography.

remain on the threshold, their identity obscured. Bracketed by the figures of the artist – the first brings to mind a detective beginning an investigation – and the empty studio, the two images hold in suspension references to the practice of art. In popular culture the studio has often been the setting of heroic narratives of the male artist, usually a painter. In this self-portrait, April skilfully employs the vocabulary of film noir to throw doubt on such gendered narratives, while providing compelling evidence that photography is the path she intends to follow.

The recurring self-portrait in April's work is also a tool with which to examine her position as a gendered subject and social actor. This does not preclude storytelling, as can be seen in *Woman at the Motel* (1986) [fig. 4, image 58], in which she plays the central role in a narrative that invites completion. The opportunity to find an unusual audience for her portrait came with an invitation to show her work in a public site of her choice in Sault Ste. Marie.⁴ She printed the image the size of a billboard and installed it on a display panel high above one of the parking lots of the Algoma Steel complex, the city's industrial heart. April's gesture of placing this very specific, yet enigmatic image where it would be seen daily by steel workers arriving for their shifts in the morning and leaving for home in the evening – a woman in a man's world – allowed her to play the role of *agent provocateur*. At the same time, the motel-room setting and its placement on a threshold between arrivals and departures speak both to her own position as a stranger in town and to the universal experience of not quite belonging.

A technique that April employed to expressive effect in several self-portraits from the mid-eighties is the blur. Although blurring occurs elsewhere in certain photographs taken under available light conditions, the artist's out-of-focus face in this group of self-portraits taken at arm's length, which one writer described as her "heroic self-portraits," is clearly intentional.⁵ We must remember that the instantly available image of the digital age, which allows the photographer to see immediately whether she has achieved the desired effect or not, had not yet arrived. In the analogue era, the image on the negative remained unknown until the film was developed. April's refusal to distance herself from the lens of the camera was at the time a formally experimental gesture that conveys a quizzical, provisional attitude to its mediated seeing. In *Silhouette* (1983) [fig. 5, image 38] the artist's features are entirely obscured, although the studio background is clearly visible. Her monumental silhouette dominates the scene, her identity resting not on her appearance, but on her role as photographer. Different moods, alternately self-scrutinizing and vulnerable, find expression in other self-portraits from this group. Their self-revelation is guarded,

⁴ April's billboard was part of *Sans demarcation: A Cultural Exchange Project Between Ontario and Quebec*, which took place in Sault Ste. Marie between July 1 and September 30, 1987. Normand Thériault, a well-known art critic and curator, was the exhibition's commissioner.

⁵ Serge Bérard, "Raymonde April: Autour du portrait," *Parachute*, No. 43 (June/July/August 1986), pp. 10-13.

however; the blur sees to that. Collectively, these images may be read as explorations of the physical and psychic dimensions of photographic space in which she stands as a marker of nearness: the zone of ambiguity.

Alongside these works, April's shared studio emerges as a subject in its own right. When she is alone, the leftover scraps of materials from other projects stimulate her imagination. The three images that follow *Silhouette* give proof of its transformative potential: inside, *Chair and Triangle* sit for their portrait, while outside its lofty windows a miniature building appears, perched atop the roof line of a distant façade, and a plunging view on the street reveals a snowy island floating past the brightly lit shops. Seen through her eyes at these moments, the image is more alive than the reality. At other times, the studio is a place of encounters, discussions, and dinners with friends [fig. 6, image 42], and becomes a defining social space in addition to its role as a setting for playful self-creation and discovery at this time in her work.

In April's later self-portraits, the distance between herself and the camera is greater. Even alone, she appears integrated into her environment and the solitude of the earlier images recedes. Though her dual identity as observer and observed remains central, her eye is constantly alert to the details of her surroundings and to the everyday lives she witnesses. In this, she echoes the project of James Joyce in *Ulysses*, who "wished to reassert the dignity of the quotidian round, to reclaim the everyday as a primary aspect of experience."⁶ It does not seem irrelevant to make a connection between their subjects, in spite of the distance between the writer and the artist: Joyce, as an Irishman, and April, as a French-Canadian, share an implicit understanding of the impact of colonial history on the conscious and unconscious experience of the people they are closest to, and realize the significance of locating the universal in the most ordinary of lives.

However, unlike Joyce, who lived most of his life in exile, April was fortunate to come of age at a moment when Quebec's growing political and cultural self-awareness offered a supportive environment for artists, who could take their place on the world stage without leaving their native country. Her artistic journey took her by the 1980s from provincial Rivière-du-Loup to cosmopolitan Montreal at a time when newly formed artist-run galleries⁷ were offering a forum for experimental work, and a new cohort of private galleries, led by Gilles Gheerbrant and closely followed by René Blouin, Chantal Boulanger, and Jean-Claude Rochefort, was opening its doors to promising artists. Caught up in this effervescent environment, April photographed the vernissages and after-parties [fig. 7, image 54] that animated the artistic community of which she was a part. The period of

⁶ Declan Kiberd, *Inventing Ireland: The Literature of the Modern Nation* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1995), p. 330.

⁷ April was a co-founder of the artist-run centre la Chambre Blanche in Quebec City before moving on to Montreal.

separation from her rural roots also allowed her to see the landscape of the Lower St. Lawrence River with fresh eyes when she returned to spend the summers there, and to discover in the countryside something of herself. [fig. 8, image 112] A certain connectedness to place grounds her work and sharpens her eye to the smallest details of daily life, be it in Montreal or in places as distant as Mumbai.

April often likens the way she puts together her images to creating a “photographic sentence.” She chooses them intuitively for their contrasts, their different perspectives; together they add up to a whole, an overall meaning rather than a story.⁸ A suite of six images near the end of the exhibition provides a singular example of her way of working. Exceptionally, she has organized them chronologically, from March to November of the same year, beginning with a shot of the archival files in her Montreal workroom and followed by one of family images spread out on the table in her chalet at Anse-au-Persil, where she spends her summers. [fig. 9, image 148] It is August. The two photographs make visible the alternating distance, near and far, that she maintains with her family and the place where she grew up. A snapshot taken at the same time, of her mother at her sister’s house in Rivière-du-Loup, underlines the connection. The death of her mother brought April back from Montreal in November. The three last images in the suite – an unmade bed, a lock of hair, [fig.10, image 151] and her sister gazing at the autumn colours of the landscape and the vast St. Lawrence River from their mother’s empty apartment – stand for her disappearance. The poetic compression of April’s visual sentence – so specific in its details of time and place – opens it to broader reflections on place and family, and our complex relationships to each.

It can be difficult much of the time to recognize life’s grand patterns in its disorderly details, but it is through the intersecting layers of experience, with its messy rhythms of departures and returns, ruptures and reconciliations, that they emerge. Although she looks for the archetypal associations of an image in constructing her photographic sentences, April has always paid attention to the world around her. It is this tension in her work between the autobiographical, documentary material out of which it is constructed, and the creative and transformative impulses that inform her narratives which distinguishes her work and draws us to it.

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⁸ Raymonde April, “De l’ull a l’aigua,” *Raymonde April*, exhibition catalogue (Barcelona: Fundació La Caixa, 1992).