



VISUAL

A Look at Fernando Távora's *Quinta da Conceição*

Sebastiano Raimondo

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BIOGRAPHY

Sebastiano Raimondo, graduated in Architecture in Palermo with photographer and professor Giovanni Chiamonte. In 2014 he founded the group *Presente Infinito* with five photographer friends in the city of Naples. With them he edited the book of the same name, made several exhibitions in Italy and abroad, the projects Napoli – nuova luce in 2015 and *Madonie Paesaggi* in 2021 for the "Photography Strategy 2020" call for proposals of MIC. He was selected in 2020 by the German-Italian foundation VAF among the finalists of the 9th edition of the prize for young Italian artists with the project *Custodire soglie*, in 2022 he won the first prize at the photography biennial of Vila Franca de Xira in Portugal with the project *Reduce-re*. He lives between Portugal and Italy, is a doctoral student in *Architecture of Contemporary Metropolitan Territories* at ISCTE-IUL in Lisbon and professor of photography at the Academy of Fine Arts in Palermo since 2018-2019. He has published photographs and texts for: *Passagens* and *Caleidoscópico* (Lisboa, 2013); *Lições de Arquitectura* and *Circo de ideias* (Porto, 2017); *Sophia* and *Edições Scopio* (Porto 2018 and 2019); *Edizioni Caracol* (Palermo 2019); *Sacred* and *Urbanautica Institute* (Verona 2020); *Palermo/Periferie*, *Accademia di Belle Arti di Palermo* (Palermo 2020); *IX Premio Fondazione VAF* and *Manfredi edizioni* (Imola 2022).



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I began in the February 16 seminar with a line that John Chiaramonte made on the day of my graduation, “Raimondo graduated with a thesis on architecture in a Faculty of Photography.” I graduated in the Faculty of Architecture in Palermo and then defended the same thesis entitled *Uma ponte, photography as a way of inhabiting and building the world* in the Escola de Tecnologias e Arquitetura of the ISCTE in Lisbon; here I am finishing a PhD with a similar methodology that investigates how contemporary Portuguese photography has been shaped. Although I come from architectural studies, my interest is mainly photography.

The pretext of working in Fernando Távora’s garden is not only about this architect’s work but about an idea of the Portuguese landscape from some architecture and photography projects.

The occasion of the seminar “Ci sono sempre relazioni profonde – Fotografare l’architettura di Fernando Távora” carried out in Roberto Collovà’s studio in February 2023, was an intermediate verification step between the experience of the place with the camera and the printing of the photographs in the darkroom that took place the following March. For the seminar I had prepared digital contacts of the negatives produced, paginated according to the path studied for the shooting days, in order to make clear the experience made. I had not chosen the most beautiful images, that was not what interested me on that occasion, but what I had managed to see there. I had selected a large number of images, variations of shots on certain moments in the garden that seemed to me to have a certain intensity, images of wide views and others of details that were symbolic to me, subjects that I observed several times during different days, times and seasons because they were enigmatic and images whose reasons I would later study.

Going all the way to Porto with a backpack and tripod of a certain size and weight had forced me to plan ahead, without this I would have risked losing a lot of time figuring out how to move around the garden, taking away valuable time from understanding the project. Planning a trip from Palermo to Porto during the winter with a large format camera is not the easiest thing, I would never have been sure of finding possible weather conditions and I was also ready for the use of



a more comfortable tool to put under my coat or umbrella, accompanying the images to the drawing. As luck would have it, on the last visit in January, despite the intense cold, there 4.0 As luck would have it, on the last visit in January, despite



the intense cold, there were amazing light conditions as I had hoped for. In the previous August visit I had taken notes on framing, how the sun moved, and where to set up the tripod and camera; a search for the *genius loci* behind the location of a building from which to look and relate to the activity and being of gardeners and visitors. For this reason in August I spent more time exposing less film with a smaller, easier camera, while in January I spent less time and exposed more film and plates with the large format camera.

Sometimes the method does not apply slavishly, like a container to be filled to carry a content from one part to another, it cannot be identical time after time, just as the design need not always precede the project.



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I think it is the place itself that suggests the way it wants to be looked at.

I inhabited the rooms of this project in different seasons and with different photographic cameras. When the opportunity arose to participate in the seminar, I decided that the most natural and consistent tool with my experience in photography, and in that place, was the large format camera, with the 120 color roller in 1:2 format and the 4x5 inch flat plate in black and white, tools that I prefer to use when I feel the need to linger a lot and observe carefully.

The first observation of the contacts was a way to verify what I was able to see and what questions the images were able to ask me about the direct experience made. The question of verification¹ arises from my need to understand, through the practice of photography, a cultural genesis of the garden and landscape². The object of study of this practice were places united by my assiduity and pleasure in frequenting them, in which I recognized an archetype of garden and landscape construction, distant enough to be able to look at them from one another and show their differences. The choice of this tool for looking implies an increase of friction in direct experience, and the slowing down of the time of perception. In this intense experience, even from the physical point of view, observation itself can distort the possible result. I felt it was important to take this positively into account in order to have a greater awareness of the subsequent

¹ See: Ugo Mulas, "Le verifiche 1971-1972", in Ugo Mulas, *La fotografia* (Torino: Einaudi, 1973): 143.

² The first fundamental references to this practice are in the volumes of Luigi Ghirri, *Paesaggio italiano* (Milano: Electa, 1989), *Il profilo delle nuvole* (Milano: Feltrinelli, 1989) and Giovanni Chiaramonte, *Nascosto in prospettiva* (Milano: Ulteyra – Itaca, 2007).



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reconstruction I would make of it. Each phase of this photographic project built up during its making and reworking by large or small steps the previous phases.

The garden is a landscape architecture that changes over time; its rooms are alive and depend on the care and manner in which they are inhabited.

This is a different place in Roberto Collovà's images, as in those of Alessandra Chemollo and Ivana Barbarito, because it was lived in different times, with different purposes, if any, and produced by different visions and ways of living. I went to photograph using notes and memory of a natural path born spontaneously from a certain habit. I have been frequenting the city of Porto for quite some time, I have been also a guest at a friend's who lives not too far from La Quinta, when I first went there it was a very pleasant discovery, and it is still one of my favorite places in the city. I have always experienced it when I needed to find time to go over a presentation, read something, take notes, or just take a walk.

The printing stage refined my project by necessarily transforming the previous sequence, in the relationship between the images and in their selection. The process of printing directly from negative allows for the re-presentation of the experience that occurred in real space as a result of the comparison between memory and what remained in the images. The discipline required in the dark-room (as much as the choice of paper, color filtering, contrast, cropping and print size) is not mechanically obtuse but a methodological tool to achieve that comparison. The summary of ten images here, digitizations of prints made in March 2023, are for this reason other than those presented during the seminar.

I was not able to study the drawings of the garden (probably they never existed except those of the tennis pavilion and Siza's swimming pool) but starting from these images, and from the comparison with those previously created by the other authors, a discussion was generated which my seeing questions us about the nature of this garden and the cultural nature of the landscape: a project that calls into question the concept of historical linearity.

The fragments scattered throughout the garden like relics suggest this ambiguity, a deception masterfully set up by Távora by declining variations of the garden theme as if they had their origins in pre-existences built over the centuries, suggesting that the project is the relationship of each of these by means of the fences that delimit them. The walls, the buildings, the relationships between the floors, the stairs, the doors and the scattered remains are all staged with the aim of undermining the certainty of their previous existence in defined times and in the space where we observe them today. It seems like a way of saying what the photographic image is and the similarity is amplified knowing that there are no drawings of the general project that serve as a reference.

From 1993 to 1996 the "Incontri di fotografia di Coimbra" (the subject of my Ph.D. thesis) organized by Albano da Silva Pereira and Teresa Siza were concerned with composing an image of contemporary Portugal that had not previously been a concern. The 1993 edition was dedicated to the declaration of intent that would guide the authors to work in the following years, in the general



catalog of the international collective exhibition entitled Jardins do Paraiso, among the many authors there were the photographers Gabriele Basilico and Lewis Baltz who also contributed a text.

Basilico writes about a journey sitting in a car where he cannot sleep, he observes a fascinating sequence of images that follow one another from the window, he says that the photographer tries to recompose the disorder of the outside world through the frosted glass of his photographic camera and the operation always



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oscillates between the naivety of simply recording the reality of the world out there and the embarrassing impotence of not being able to understand the linear mechanism that built it.

Baltz, on the other side of the ocean, in a landscape that is not surprisingly called landscape in a different way, warns the reader against the certainties of a clear distinction between total artistic freedom and mechanical description of reality.

I don't believe that there are places that are more capable than others of evoking an idea of the construction of the Portuguese landscape but I believe in the possibility that in some there are still traces that suggest the different ways in which it was built.

In the *Quinta da Conceição* of Távora there is the enclosure of the cloister of San Francesco, with the remains of a hermit convent, there is one to show the spectacle of the machines of the protected port among the trees that attenuate the noises, one with red walls which functions as a passage and at the same time the scene of a theater with its steps, and there is that of Siza whose walls are like those of a bastion, white like a contemporary fortification on top of a hill.

Transparent, opaque, permeable or impassable fences, from which scenes can be seen or onto which scenes are projected and the pattern of time is recorded, sewn into a project on the complexity of the landscape, where the fragments function as metaphors to question perception of coherence between its parts.



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