

The Heart of the Algarve

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Photography can be a game of sorts playing with our expectations. Take the Algarve, for instance, which is Patrícia Almeida's theatre of operations in this book. We know something about it from hearsay as a *locus classicus* of contemporary hedonism. And we have seen announcements, in airports, of flights to Faro, the port of entry. Anyone curious to know about European society and culture and about our present plight would probably want to know what the Algarve looks like, if only as a test of preconceptions. Here it is, and more or less as you would have expected: mainly youthful flesh, blue denim, neon signs and tacky settings, frayed and scuffed.

Not all of us, though are interested in Algarve *per se*, placed between the mountains and the Golfo de Cádiz. That doesn't matter, though, for *Portobello* is mainly about something else: photography, for a start, with its vocabulary and syntax. It is also a work of the imagination, projecting an alternative world in which a lot of what we have come to expect is stood on its head.

The Algarve, however, was a good starting point for it looks, even to the casual eye, like some kind of experimental zone in which versions of the future are under consideration. It is just the kind of place in which we expect unusual behaviour and where, for a time, we will suspend judgement. It is rich in symptoms of culture in a state of disequilibrium; and it is just the sort of place which Japanese photographers would have searched out over the past decade or so. *Portobello* has a Japanese look to it, although without some of their informality. The Japanese, as published mainly by adventurous Little More company, have specialised in tropical paradise on the edge of collapse: Okinawa and the Philippines especially – overcrowded, impoverished and gaudy. Their tendency, exemplified in Omori Katsumi's *Very Special Love* (1997) and Nomura Keiko's *Deep South* (1999), has been to survey shanty-towns and their inhabitants trying to make the best of their conditions.

Patrícia Almeida is, by contrast, more of a constructivist – with a liking for organization. She makes comparisons and demonstrates meanings. Nature, for example, features in *Portobello* in the shape of residual rocks and desultory trees holding on along the margins of a settled world. It is also represented by the ocean keeping time just off stage or in the background. Nature, as so often, keeps Culture company – in this case a notably flimsy version made up of neon enticements and stick-on stars. In Japanese reports from the extemporised paradises of SE Asia there is a greater emphasis on materials, on what ever might be held, eaten or smoked. Their advertising signs rust and rot, whereas those in *Portobello*, hastily applied, simply wear out.

Nature features less because it is ever-present than because it brings animation to the scene. It has anthropomorphic potential. The ocean, for instance, keeps to its wakeful and watchful ways even during the night. Turn your back on it and who knows what will happen. The rocks and stones which lie outside the perimeter fences might be taken to be indifferent to the temporary works within. The Pyramids, long ago, may have addressed themselves to eternity but *Portobello*'s paper stars will barely see the night out. You couldn't put your trust in any of this décor, yet all the same this seems to be what makes the place.

Portobello is a fable, and fables have always taken place in bizarre settings: in forests punctuated by dangerous crags and inhabited by ravens, in dark caves where dragons lurk and in beautiful landscapes, too good to be true. Fables also feature heroes, heroines, custodians, passers-by, unwary travellers and creatures in disguise. The innocent traveller in these tall tales takes a wrong turn or drinks of the prohibited elixir – upon which things go from bad to worse. Patrícia Almeida's cast list, on the face of it just a set of portraits, could easily take its place in one of these fables of old.

Portraiture has many types and phases in photography, and recently we have become used to full-length pictures of adolescents and of youngish people taken by Rineke Dijkstra and by Lise Sarfati in particular. A full-length portrait taken in the 1920s, which is to say in the age of uniforms, was nothing out of the ordinary. Garments made up a key part in anyone's identity. Recently, though, the body has been differently understood – perhaps in relation to some universal scheme of beauty closely associated with the camera and the printed page. Standing figures, in the context of pleasure and semi-nudity, can often give the impression of being at a

loss, of having little idea of where the owner belongs in the overall scheme of attractiveness. In *Portobello* such figures look vulnerable, like tragic heroines in waiting.

Fables, of the kind brought to mind by *Portobello*, always make use of a selection of minor characters: doormen and porters, for example, who keep an eye on things, offer advice and are at home in the situation – for they would be at home anywhere. There are good examples here of such characters who have turn aside momentarily from a task or routine to pose, out of courtesy, for just as long as it takes to secure a picture. You take the cigarette from your mouth, smile and then resume whatever it is that you were doing. In more elaborate versions of this kind of picture the subject takes up a favourite position, relaxed and even intimate, and hold an object dear to him or her. You will see such pictures in the oeuvre of Diane Arbus – as in *Portobello*. They stand for ordinary life.

Fables, if they are to have any relevance to the lives we lead, need a supporting cast of people who will open the gates and show the way. At the centre of events, however, there must be something truly strange – to sharpen our attention. There maybe devils incarnate; and in this respect Patrícia Almeida's portraits of men repay study. Some of the men she chooses for inclusion make an exhibition of themselves, frowning and pouting. In imagination at least – their imagination, that is to say – they are ladies' men and stern warriors, but in the fable of *Portobello* they play little more than walk-on parts.

Her sample men have learned how to behave for the camera from conventional male formats: footballers in advertising roles principally. They are, in essence, shadowy figures who can be seen through the printed originals. Photography has always been interested in the gap between original and copy, or between what was originally of interest and what subsequently meets our eyes. In Patrícia Almeida's inspection of this scale she finds that there are indeed stars with a high degree of originality. Paradoxically they epitomise inauthenticity for they are men/women.

Here again, the photographer, with her liking for organisation, prepares a scheme of things. She begins with people who have done no more than dress up: men as women, but with a shambling gait of men out for the evening. These brutish figures prepare the way for women – a set of Irish Valkyries – who seem to act like men. These symmetrical inversions familiarise us with the idea of role change and even of the world running somewhat out of control. Standing apart, however, there are men who seem to have achieved state of womanhood even if it is an imagined condition having little to do with the feminine. These people, it seems, have no trouble at all with the camera and with the idea of being seen, and they constitute the mystery of the heart of *Portobello*.

Christer Stromholm, the Swedish maestro of the 1960s and author of *Friends of the Place Blanche*, was the first to specialise in this other state of being, which attracted Diane Arbus as well. All the others in this strange tale of the Algarve act subordinate parts, aspiring to ideals which they can never attain as footballers and as athletes. Or they act in charades – those Irish women, for example, as salacious cowpokes. All these are calculated acts in a context of carnival. The true stars of the show, however, seem to be able to live their roles to the full, as if they – and only they – had access to the model. They make up the fabulous element at the core of Patrícia Almeida's book.