

CANAAN ARCHIVES, THE MAJORCAN PERIOD

What characterises the so-called advanced societies is that they today consume images and no longer, like those of the past, beliefs; they are therefore more liberal, less fanatical, but also more false.

ROLAND BARTHES

In the mid-seventies my father was a young solicitor who had recently settled in Madrid. At the time neither he nor my mother suspected that a casual call from the Canaans at the office door was going to influence their lives and to a certain extent mine as well.

I never met Carl and I was a child when I knew Aurelia. To my eyes the Aurelia of those days, a lady about eighty years old with the features of a half-caste and an almost undecipherable accent when speaking Spanish, was something from far away, well outside the scope of the schoolbooks of the time. Walking through the corridors in her house was like being in a geography and history lesson with a chaotic chronological order. Pictures of African tribes and Oriental statues were jumbled up with knives, spears, daggers or the latest model of video recorder. Amongst all the objects perhaps the most fascinating was a small pair of stereoscopic binoculars that reproduced 3D images from places all over the planet. My brother Daniel and I could spend hours stretched out on the floor with our eyes glued to the binoculars, in ecstatic rapture at the sight of these images. It was an advanced course in the history, but it was also our first contact with the artificial paradise of photographic images.

Who would have thought that after more than a decade spent roaming around half the planet, Majorca would be the place the Canaans would choose to end their journeys. Looking at the first photographs taken on their arrival in Cala Rajada in the early 1950s, they remind me of two explorers viewing unknown territory. In these first photographs, the Canaans themselves disappear from the picture as they take shot after patient shot of the same kind of scene: deserted dirt roads, almond trees in flower, the crystal clear water of the sea, the ruins of a castle. Now and then a lone human figure appears in the distance, sharing the astonishment of his donkey as together they gaze at the camera. I can imagine both Carl and Aurelia returning the gaze with a mixture of surprise and recognition. These are not the sort of pictures taken by a tourist recording a moment as he passes through, they are more like images taken by someone who wishes to furnish proof that such a place still existed in the Old World.

It is paradoxical that the very circumstances that gave the Canaans wings to travel around half the world were at the same time what they were fleeing from. In the mid-1950s the United States as a triumphant major power was beginning to extend its young capitalist spirit out into the world. At the time, Carl was an auditor for the various foreign offices of CALTEX, an oil company, and Aurelia, a keen artist, accompanied him and painted everything she saw. Although I never knew

Carl, seeing his photos I cannot help but think of him as a kind of American style Albert Camus. I can imagine him at his desk with sheets of accounts, adding and subtracting and then adding again never-ending balance sheets like a modern Sisyphus. It would not take Carl long to come to terms with the absurdity of the American saying: “keeping up with the Joneses”. The anxiety inherent in the constant competitiveness of the new consumer society meant that when the Canaans arrived in Cala Rajada, in their eyes this backward corner in its pre-capitalist primitive state seemed like Paradise regained. Another paradox is that having decided to settle in this orchard, it was to build a hotel that they baptized with the sumptuous name El Castillo. We can safely assume that it took time for both Carl and Aurelia to distance themselves from the New World and its Disney-like vision of history in order to really embrace the old one; and then, when they finally managed it, modernity surprised them.

The fascinated Canaans photographed the craftsmen and techniques used in building their hotel from start to finish. There are also pictures of what would become their faithful team of employees: Pilar, Guapo, Gabriel, Matías... About this time the Canaans began to stop taking snapshots of what they saw as they themselves started to become the objects of photography. In the early days these were publicity photos of the hotel, but little by little the origin of the photographs becomes confusing. In many cases they are pictures from various sources taken by the hotel guests. To a certain extent, the Canaans slowly began to integrate themselves into the landscape of Cala Rajada like one more exotic element. And this went so far that when economic development began in earnest in the mid-sixties with the explosion of the tourist boom, the Canaans’ with their old-fashioned ways, threatened by the new machinery of modern hotels, became as obsolete and archaic as the Cala Rajada they had first encountered. So once again they packed up their things and dusted off their photographic equipment to go on what would be their last journey.

On reading the affectionate comments written in this book by the people who knew them or in some way had to do with them, I am happy to know that the Canaans did not simply come to Cala Rajada to take advantage of the carefree wisdom in which the inhabitants of Capdepera, the “gabellins”, were immersed at the time. The Canaans brought with them more than the wonders of the New World, their presence served to widen the narrow horizons prevalent here in those days. Both Aurelia and her husband made room for a whole host of people who found in El Castillo the understanding and freedom that society then denied them. Homosexuals, homeless souls, immigrants and of course Marcelo, impetuous of spirit in spite of his physical handicap.

The road taken by the gabellins after the ambivalent legacy of the Canaans is something on which only they can pronounce judgement. As far as my experience is concerned, the browser, energetic, unorthodox and nonconformist spirit of Aurelia has always been a source of inspiration.

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