

Fotografia italiana per una Collezione

La collezione di fotografia italiana Re Rebaudengo Sandretto

A cura di Antonella Russo



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Preface

The first part of the collection of Italian photography, which the Re Rebaudengo Sandretto collection introduces in this catalogue, inaugurates a program to re-evaluate the Italian photographic heritage especially contemporary, which has been disregarded for too long not only by museums and institutions but also by important art collections both Italian and foreign.

The primary role of this collection is to gather and preserve photographic works particularly representative of the historical period to which they belong. Its function is mainly public and consists in exhibiting, reproducing and circulating the collection in order to promote research and studies on Italian photography especially contemporary and possibly to stimulate the photographic production of young authors.

As far as the selection of authors included in this collection is concerned, it must be pointed out that the choice did not focus exclusively on recognized photographers but, together with very well-known photographers, the collection includes photographic works by authors who have so far received less attention, those who were left aside by the official history of Italian photography.

This is the most important function of the collection, to commit itself to a work of retrieving a body of less-known images which could help us reconsider the history of contemporary photography in this country.

Another feature of this collection is the acquisition of a series of images as opposed to single photographs. Indeed in most cases we have chosen to represent each author by presenting a kernel of photographs selected in collaboration with photographers rather than acquiring one photograph which could represent the *œuvre* of the photographer. In this way we have tried to avoid over-simplification but letting the complexity of the work of each photographer come through.

A section of the collection is devoted to the emerging authors of our photography and is this the part of the collection which is growing continuously. It is intended to document the passages of the most contemporary photography as it moves towards the twentyfirst century.

This collection concentrates especially on contemporary photography but it also includes photographic works which go back to the forties. It seemed arbitrary and problematic to indicate a fixed date to mark the beginning of the contemporary in Italian photography. This is especially problematic since in Italy more than in other countries, photography developed in a casual or incidental way, in the rather provincial atmosphere of photoclubs and groups of amateurs, which for decades represented the only way for a multitude of passionate photographers to become known. For a long time amateur photography clubs shaped the history of Italian photography and constituted its specificity. In place of museums, fine art academies and galleries, photoclubs provided structures where photographers could meet, promoted the works of hundreds of photographers and made arrangements for exhibitions and texts on photography and its codes to circulate.

Giuseppe Cavalli, one of the most committed promoters and founders of photographic groups and clubs was also the strenuous supporter of formalist theories in a period in which documentary photography and neorealism seemed to be the only acceptable and defensible form of photography.

Giuseppe Cavalli's photographs of the early forties testify to his formal rigor, to his culture, at once learned and provincial. He is especially interested in juxtapositions of unforeseen geometries and for a kind of printing which insists on high tones, on the verge of complete opacity of the image.

Both the subjects and objects are portrayed as isolated, estranged from the context almost as if to expose Cavalli's obsessive meditation on the photographic reproduction of a subject.

In the same years in which the debate between neorealists and formalism raged, photographic production based on researches on the Abstraction and *Informale* was taking shape.

At the end of the forties Antonio Migliori was already beginning his enquiry into the shapes and the "graphics" carved on the walls of his city, the anthropomorphic *silhouettes* or fanciful graffiti people inscribe on the walls of their town to leave a trace of themselves.

Migliori engaged in "private experimentation" freeing himself from the camera, working exclusively in the darkroom and dealing directly with sensitized materials. Migliori elaborates on all known photographic practices which deal with glass plates, emulsion and thus he redoubles techniques like *Cliché verre*, *Watergraph*, *Firegraph*, and *Cellograph* which consist in a re-invention of etching techniques and of the photogram. Migliori succeeds in highlighting the materiality quality of the photographic print letting the traces of his intervention take on new and unforeseen shapes.

The first abstract photographs by Pasquale De Antonis date back to the beginning of the fifties and provide us with some of his personal researches on the Abstract. His black and white photographs of 1951 are a photographic interpretation of the Abstract. Avoiding any manipulation on the negative, De Antonis worked on sensitized paper only through optics, exaggerating the focal length and checking at the resulting image on the ground glass. His

extraordinary colour photographs of 1956 are direct paper positives obtained by casting on the sensitized paper forms left by oily emulsions or by simple paper cuttings left randomly on the glass plate. De Antonis' photographs are self-referential and insist on their own form and on their composition. To remove any possible figurative reference and erase any possibility of reading the image in narrative terms, De Antonis does not give his photographs titles but numbers them progressively or indicates them with letters of the alphabet, thus leaving each image completely open to interpretation.

Ugo Mulas was not interested in researching on the Abstract or *Informale* as Migliori and De Antonis were. He devoted himself to the development of a personal and inquiring vision of Italian society of those years.

Often Mulas' photographs were considered examples of neorealist photography, his images from the mid fifties are a true event, a sort of miracle of Italian photography. His works on the Milanese outskirts open the doors of our photography on a more personal and imaginative vision of the contemporaneity. They reflect on everyday life in the outskirts and are both tragic and exciting, laconic and lyrical at the same time, producing a perfect alchemy of forms, subjects and emotions.

A section of the collection is devoted to the image of the South of Italy.

For centuries the South, in the history of Italian culture and photography, furnished an inexhaustible reservoir of both picturesque images, unforgettable panoramas and wonderful natural scenery, and documents of extreme poverty and degradation.

Already by the mid fifties, thanks to the research carried out by ethnologists and anthropologists, photography had become a precious means of gathering data and testimony which spoke of the cultural wealth hidden in the South, reservoir of archaic rituals and of a submerged repertory of ancient cultures.

At the beginning of the sixties photography became the chosen medium of authors committed in re-visioning and re-thinking the accepted images of the South.

The photographs of the series *Feste religiose in Sicilia* (Religious festivals in Sicily) by Ferdinando Scianna represent one of the most complete bodies of documentation of cultural anthropology in the history of our photography; It is an exhaustive anthology of rites and ceremonies now extinct and it also provides a ruthless commentary on these religious practices. They narrate the pragmatism of the rite and of all the *mise en scene* which accompanies the holy processions which exemplify the complexity and the sense of tragedy which pervades life in the South, perpetuated through a long series of ceremonies and endless rituals.

The early works of Mimmo Jodice, which date from the beginning of the seventies, reflect a similar urge to intervene in the redefinition of the image of the South. Jodice's first photographs were taken along the route of popular ceremonies in the Neapolitan hinterland and reconstruct an atlas of the rituals of Campania.

Jodice's images dating from the beginning of the eighties give us his photographic meditations on Naples caught in the manifestations of its everyday life. It is a surprisingly empty and unpopulated city, where walls and architecture speak of an hidden, underground violence.

The photographs from the series *Suor Orsola* pay homage to the old institution which, many century ago, was a center of European culture. Mimmo Jodice revisits cloisters and staircases searching amongst its walls, for the testimony and the atmosphere of a one-time glorious Naples.

To Jodice the South is a project to rescue a landscape which was for long time was subjected to the colonization of the tourist industry. His images reflect on the use (and abuse) of

the views of Naples, placing an inner geography against the conventions of *Vedutismo*. Jodice frames beaches and coasts, bays and piers tracing and retracing the outline of an ever provisional map.

Landscape is a theme that runs throughout Italian contemporary photography. For the past three decades Mario Giacomelli has committed himself to research on it. The Italian photographer succeeded in renewing and reviving this theme with a great inventiveness. His landscapes almost never reproduce images of panoramas and views seen according to a classical perspective model with a vanishing point situated on the horizon. On the contrary they place the horizon line high up, to make it coincide with the edge of the frame, anchoring our gaze to the territory and to the landmarks it is made up of. Giacomelli's landscapes present nature as construction, illustrating how trees, tillage and furrows are arranged over the land, portraying nature, mother earth.

A considerable group of images included in this collection belongs to a section which is devoted to the studies on landscape, and especially on the research on the topography of panorama which runs through Italian photography beginning from the early seventies on.

It is precisely during these years that many Italian photographers start reflecting on the nature of Italian contemporary landscape, to meditate on the specific quality of this space between nature and culture and on the physiognomy and phenomenology of its places. These meditations on landscape often make reference to architecture and urban studies and also to the film image, to re-think a whole geography of *topoi* which unquestionably belong to the Italian tradition.

Guido Guidi's early photographic production submits a re-vision of popular architecture in the Romagna province. Guidi reproduces the topography of basic architectural models found in the hinterland of his region, taken almost always straight in front, outlining their simple form and telling of its precariousness.

A similar reflection on the provisional and the sensation of imminent loss comes through in the photographs of the series on *Marghera*, the industrial site of ghost industries, a surreal place where the panorama is made up of the skyline of devastated buildings looming over a lifeless landscape.

Luigi Ghirri was the promoter of research on the Italian landscape. The photographs by him included in the collection belong to the end of the seventies and present "portraits" of cities re-viewed by the author. In these photographs Ghirri narrates the surprise of finding oneself in a place, of the irrepeatable experience of encountering a place. His images describe by abstraction, embodying the memory of a detail or of a sudden passage of light or an unexpected architectural form.

To Gabriele Basilico contemporary landscape is a fundamentally industrial landscape. With his series of photographs entitled *Milan. Portraits of Factories*, Basilico founds a true visual grammar within which every subject finds its own place and its own necessity. The imposing structure of the factories which is at times austere at times familiar is illuminated by the photograph which registers the various parts, the proportions and details, turning the factory into a monument, an inescapable place in our memories. In the era of post-modern society and post-modern culture, Basilico commits himself to an accurate transcription of the topography of the industrial landscape which, since the beginning of this century, has represented a culture an ideology and the very identity of his home-town Milan.

The first research on landscape by Vincenzo Castella date back to the beginning of the eighties. They provide us a personal itinerary of interiors and places of affection. They are images of un-lived-in homes in which the photographer's gaze stops dwells wonderingly on objects and things of daily use.

In his images of the late eighties Castella's gaze has become more inquisitive. He focuses on the representation and exploration not so much of industrial areas but of zones on the edges of factories and industries, of outlines of border lines identifying and illuminating through photography those poignant spots which light up with meaning.

Some Italian photography of the late eighties grew up parallel to research on the nature of landscape, in favor of a more intimate and personal reflection on the contemporary world.

Giorgio Avigdor is an author who prefers an intimate vision of reality. His recent photographs reproduce a series of interiors where the complex decor frames the furnishing and the everyday objects which appear to fall voluntarily into groups of still-lives.

The most recent photographic production of Nanda Lanfranco includes the series *Arcani*, tarot cards represented and thought as photographic images. They strike us by the subtle play they set up between visibility and invisibility. On the black background which dominates in every image, figures and signs emerge from a quasi-obscurity and seem to take shape before our eyes, thin and intangible as though they were breathed onto the photographic paper, they emerge on the surface of the image to evaporate like rings of smoke, evanescent and tantalizing.

The section of the collection devoted to emerging authors provides examples from some of the most coherent research on our contemporary photography.

Untitled (Portraits) by Luisa Lambri belongs to a series of works which reproduce anonymous environments, hallways and passways. Lambri stops to frame details which seem to make these impersonal and unliveable places recognizable and identifiable.

William Guerrieri is engaged in a similar reflection on the anonymity of public places. His latest works present a study of offices, health service centres, gyms, all those places which belong to us only and always temporarily, which we only use temporarily. Guerrieri highlights those details which seem to signify the very impersonality which occupies those spaces uncontested.

Alici, chiodi (Anchovies, nails), are the first of Raffaella Mariniello's series entitled *Moltitudini (Moltitudes)* and reproduce unexpected juxtapositions between those materials and forms which, although of different texture, form and nature, suggest similarities rather than differences.

The series *Stretta (Grip)* by Turi Rapisarda is an investigation on the condition of constraint of the subject taken photographically. The photographer reflects on the coercion implicit in the photographic act, isolating objects of common use "forced" to pose in the centre of the image. To Rapisarda to portray means putting a subject or a scene into a pose which somehow equals to exposing the violence and the vacuity of the photographic act.

Every collection is by its very nature incomplete, always a work in progress, open and is the expression of manifold points of view and meanings. It can never be finished as a book can be but looks more like an encyclopedia made up of many volumes and entries which have to be periodically reviewed and amplified.

Thus this collection is taking on the shape of an open text which will record step by step, through the work of our photographers, the future events in the history of contemporary Italian photography.

The Archipelago of Italian Photography Collecting

LUISELLA D'ALESSANDRO: According to Susan Sontag any collection involves editing a condensation of history. How do you see your work as a collector of photographs?

PATRIZIA SANDRETTO RE REBAUDENGO: Since I first started collecting works of contemporary art, choosing and buying them piece by piece, with the encouragement of my husband Agostino, I became totally absorbed in it, considering it as a full-time job. I began traveling, going to art exhibitions, attending cultural events, taking part in round tables and symposia. My aim was to understand and explore the world of contemporary art and culture; I was never content with just buying art works; I set out to be an active and purposeful collector.

There is no doubt that collecting photographs is different from art collecting; I see it not so much as editing work but as a search for pieces to make up a great mosaic (or many mosaics) through which one can reconstruct at least a partial periodization of the history of photography. There is of course a considerable difference between art collecting and collecting photographs. Within the Re Rebaudengo Sandretto collection the photography collection which I am building up together with Antonella Russo, curator of this section, aims at identifying the key moments in Italian photography to understand and possibly to reconstruct its history, which deserves the attention of museums and cultural institutions.

For the photography collection we are looking, not so much and not only for unknown and rare images but we are also trying to identify and select key images to construct possible routes to understand the history of Italian photography. From this point of view the Re Rebaudengo Sandretto collection is intended to fulfil a public function rather than to set up a private, *caveau* collection. Its aim is to measure itself against other collectors and collections as well as with art critics, curators and with institutions, to get ideas moving, to stimulate debate and possibly arouse curiosity and interest in Italian photography.

L.D'A.: Which are the categories that make up the Re Rebaudengo Sandretto collection of contemporary Italian photography?

P.S.R.R.: Unlike the International photography section, the section of the collection devoted to Italian Contemporary photography is made up mostly of fine prints, partly vintage prints which try to exemplify the *œuvre* of each photographer included in the collection and reconstruct a short solo exhibition for each author.

For the international photography section we selected photographic works which illustrate what was happening in the eighties. So we have works by James Casebere, Louise Lawler, Sherrie Levine, Richard Prince, Cindy Sherman and then on to more contemporary authors such as Esko Mannikko, Catherine Opie, Shirin Neshat, Giorgia Starr, Beat Streuli, Wolfgang Tillmans among others.

The Italian photography collection starts from the forties with some works by Giuseppe Cavalli which represent the junction between post World War II Italian photography and more contemporary Italian photography. We could not leave out Mario Giacomelli, a pupil of Cavalli's, whose works from the fifties on shaped the themes of the "made in Italy" image.

The collection includes works by renowned Italian photographers who are also acknowledged as masters by an international public. I am thinking of Mimmo Jodice, Gabriele Basilico, Guido Guidi and of course Ugo Mulas. I was struck forcibly by the abstract photographs by Pasquale de Antonis and Antonio Migliori which show that photography can be not only narrative but can be the medium most suited to explore the language of images.

I am proud to have included works by Nanda Lanfranco which I found impressive and works by Giorgio Avigdor a Turinese artist also known abroad. Branching off from this historical section there is another one which is devoted to the works by authors who are achieving more and more notice and attention from art critics. It includes works by Luisa Lambri, William Guerrieri, Raffaella Mariniello, Turi Rapisarda. Like the historical section of the collection, this section will be enlarged to include the work of the younger generation of photographers, so as to give them new openings.

The collection aims at reconstructing as far as possible many areas of related images, like the islands of an archipelago. The task I have set myself is to explore its outlines and map it out.

Another way of putting it is to say that the methodology which informs the building of this collection is that of research, a seeking out of the home of Italian photography, and follows its course during the last fifty years.

L.D'A.: How and to what extent has the virtual absence of collecting of photographs in Italian museums effected the planning of the acquisitions and the overall growth of the Re Rebaudengo Sandretto collection?

P.S.R.R.: First of all I must say that my interest in Italian photography was not fortuitous; it sprang from my meeting with Antonella Russo for an interview on my International collection of photographs. A series of conversations with her on photography then led to my decision to found a collection of contemporary Italian photography. We are showing here only a very small part of the collection, which is growing continuously and will go on growing to include still more images which I hope will contribute to reflections on the ups and downs of the history of our photography in the last fifty years.

Since I got interested in Italian photography I have tried to find out not only about its history and I also searched for Italian photography in museums and galleries both in Italy and abroad. I discovered that photography is often considered as a minor art and this attitude did not encourage its growth. I believe that collecting photographs is still like a great sweep of unexplored land.

This collection grew out of a series of visits Antonella Russo paid to the studios of photographers who in most cases have not yet been represented by gallerists, or by the heirs of photographic archives.

To recapitulate, this photography collection is the kernel of works we want to start from to meditate on the features which unmistakably characterize our photography.

L.D'A.: What do you think are the major difficulties in collecting especially contemporary photographs in our country?

P.S.R.R.: Certainly the fact that institutions, museums and galleries, both public and private have shown little interest or care in handling the wealth of Italian photographic historical funds has not helped photography collecting in this country.

Except for a few private galleries which, especially in these last few years, have begun exhibiting the work of young authors, Italian art photography has been poorly appreciated and is still largely unknown to the wider public. I am sure that the fact of its being easily reproducible has not helped. It is often unacceptable to the Italian collector to acquire a work that, in theory, can be reproduced in an endless number of copies and this way of thinking has not helped the development of photography collecting in this country.

In other countries collectors are more used to dealing with photographs printed in large editions and are less worried about the selection of photographic works.

Another hurdle is that the history of photography is not widely known. There are few courses on the history of photography in our Universities, Fine Art Schools and technical institutes and consequently there are also few general introductions to the history of photography and few scholarly works to turn to for information.

During the past few years, thanks to the work that you, Luisella, have done through the Fondazione Italiana per la Fotografia and also to a change in attitude to the visual arts, I think that people are becoming less suspicious of photography. I read more and more often about photography in art magazines and journals and even about art market quotations for the work of some Italian photographers, some of the younger generation.

These tentative efforts lead us to hope that within the next few years all prejudice against photography will be dropped and that it will be recognized as art and judged as painting and sculpture.

I think that I can claim that, especially in the past two years, photography has gained more approval in Italy and has won a little more attention.

The Re Rebaudengo Sandretto Collection has been moving in this direction for several years now. We present these works to testify that this old prejudice against photography has been overcome. I would like to point out that the Fondazione Sandretto Re Rebaudengo per l'Arte has not only promoted photography exhibitions but in the case of the exhibition entitled "Passaggi" has commissioned and produced works of seven photographers of the younger generation.

In an unsettled situation, yet to be defined, some committed institutions work constantly and offer their resources and energies to promote contemporary Italian photography.

L.D'A.: What are the perceptions and emotions which guide you in the reading of a photographic image?

P.S.R.R.: This is a very subtle question because even if we do not realize it immediately, there are many sensations which attract and guide us in the choice of a work of art.

Of course with painting and sculpture we are more accustomed to pausing to evaluate and appreciate all of "events" which are registered on the surface of a canvas or on a piece of sculpture. It is as though we were establishing a relationship, fascinated by the traces of the texture left by the brush strokes or by the material a sculpture is made of.

Photography, on the contrary has apparently no texture and thus almost seems to negate every sensual effect aroused by the materials used to record purely visual facts. Actually, it is this very a-material quality of photography that fascinates and attracts me more and more and leads to the discovery of new photographers who are able to shape and make the silence of photographic surfaces vibrate.

Another aspect I find important is the "livable quality" of photography. Unlike contemporary painting and sculpture, which need vast, often outdoor spaces, photography is basically an indoor medium all the more enjoyable just because we can live with it: it becomes part of our everyday lives.

Actually more and more often I find myself searching for some of the images I keep at home, spending time looking at them again and again and maybe discovering, years after I bought them, some new detail that I had never noticed before and that is exciting.