

Photography was only sixteen years old – so many years had passed since its invention was announced in Paris, in 1839 – when Roger Fenton, an Englishman, landed at Balaklava port with a big cart containing five cameras and seven hundred glass plates. Fenton was already well-known for his fine architectural shots and for being the official photographer of the British Museum, but he was destined to become history as the first photographer able to give documentary evidence of a war, which in that case was the Crimea war. It was a hard, risky venture, and also a technically complicated task because Fenton used the collodion process, and therefore had to spread the plates with the gelatine and use them very soon, still moist, and develop them straight away. Among the number of shots which have reached us, one particularly caught his contemporaries' fancy and even today it is able to shock us from the very title: "The Shadow of the Death Valley". There are no human figures in it, just a great number of cannon balls spread in a hilly area crossed by a deserted road. From then on, war photography turned to a regular reportage genre, dwelt on every atrocity, showed the pain through the bodies and faces of the victims, yet that shot of the valley strewn with cannon balls was not forgotten.

In the pictures of the young Lebanese photographer Randa Mirza we recognize the same way of telling violence, effective but by no means affected. This choice originates from the personal history of the photographer, always interlaced with a war that was already there when she was born and is still endemically there today, so that picturing her country Mirza not only tries to grasp the reality, like many other photographers, but brings herself and her civilization to account. If you cannot escape war, you must know how to face it, so that war will be afraid of you, and not the contrary. Beirut was object of particular attention at the proper time: in 1991, during a short interval of peace but before the town centre was rebuilt, the photographic "mission" promoted by the Hariri Foundation brought some great photographer into contact with the town, and the outcome (the collective volume "Beyrouth" published in 1994) was extremely suggestive, thanks to the style of such authors as Gabriele Basilico, Raymond Depardon, René Burri, Josef Koudelka, Robert Frank, and the photographer-architect Fouad Elkoury, the only Lebanese of the party. Of course, the work of Randa Mirza is very far from an outcome like that: she doesn't adopt, to make an instance, the strictly architectural view, never to be satisfied, peculiar to Basilico, whose research is entirely concentrated on just a square kilometre of the town centre, taken as representative of the whole; nor she approaches to the dreamy visions of Koudelka and Frank. On the other hand, the young Lebanese photographer has intentionally withdrawn from the stylistic standard of the traditional press photography: her pictures do not help us to understand the reasons and the specific causes of the war, they don't show openly the occupation of the Syrian army, they don't document the Israeli air raids, the expropriations, the sacks. Yet those pictures attain the same result in a more effective way, because they touch the heart showing violence without looking for horror or macabre, which often are, even unintentionally, expression of another kind of violence, a visual one. At first, these pictures seem to be originated only from a feminine delicacy, but then one becomes aware that they have a tremendous strength, because they are like the fairytales told to children: the words are sweet, the characters have pet names, but to reach the happy end you have to forbear a journey full of parents forsaking their children, of wizards pursuing them, of witches terrifying them, of ogres devouring them.

Randa Mirza makes the objects speak because she approaches to deserted houses looking into them with the curiosity of a researcher and the scientific approach of an archaeologist, and uses a technique she has full mastery of: no "artistic" affectation in the details of the pictured objects that are always photographed perfectly focused in rigorous compositions, no affected aestheticism in the series of the interiors of deserted rooms. The photographer simply takes us by the hand and guides us in a journey where the soundtrack is the noise of steps onto the broken glass covering the floors and the unreal silence that takes possession of abandoned houses. But it is precisely thanks to these images that the objects can finally speak to tell us interrupted tales, as in the metaphor implied in the picture of a little girl smiling in her red dress, glued on the wall in the upper side but torn and hanging in the lower. The tapestries get torn, open up like curtains and on the scene appears the hooked beak of a tap, a red clothes-peg dancing lightly on a thread, the tangled bulk of an apron hanging from a nail. You are struck by the great number of wall-sockets: some are intact, maybe secured obliquely at the wall by two screws gone rusty, but most have become empty holes like eye-sockets from where at times pop out old winding electric wires. What we took for silence is now interrupted by odd noises: they come from pounchy taps like big-bellied men, as if they were still gurgling; from holes in the walls through which the wind passes lightly; from scraps of tapestry waving; from pieces of plaster crumbling slowly. Even on the floor there is a whole world: the blue slippers are still perfectly paired, a handbag is placed as a still life for a fashion magazine, but further on two mutilated dolls and a broken toy gun convey a slight uneasiness.

Randa Mirza now enlarges her vision and the lens catches the comprehensive view of a few rooms. Paradoxical as it may seem, these are beautiful pictures, all shoot frontally in a perspective converging towards the windows that occupy the central part of the image. Here the noise is more intense and continuous, as when you put a shell close to the ear: it is a sound made of the creaking of the falling frames, the banging of the plastic sheets that have replaced the glasses, the nearly imperceptible motion of the blankets left hanged on the walls, the slow work of the woodworm who, unmoved by anything, hides in the ceiling beams making us feel, at last, a fragment of life.