Visual Thresholds

An award-winning series by Stefano Bernardoni, introduced by Zachary Shtogren

ITALIAN PHOTOGRAPHER Stefano Bernardoni finds his stimuli to photograph when his life's narrative coalesces with his visual world. The moments are often fleeting visual cues: a figure walking across an empty room or a bird flying by a cathedral's arch [see back cover]. When Bernardoni notices such details, they are something far more than the everyday world's shapes and shadows. For him, they are moments of déjà vu or meditations on his present or future. They become pregnant with autobiographical meaning as he incorporates them into his artistic process, and the result is a rare and stunningly crafted collection of images.

Bernardoni first became interested in photography as a teenager. His parents tasked him with capturing images of their family holidays around Italy, and he soon began to experiment with black and white printing. He cites several photographers, including Sarah Moon, Francesca Woodman, and Michael Ackerman, as being influential, but it was with Mario Giacomelli that he established personal contact, seeking out the Italian master in the summer of 1995 in his village, Senigallia. They had coffee, and he was struck by the man's humble spirit and dedication to traditional printing. (Though he directs a successful photography school near Milan, Bottega Imagine, Bernardoni remains lukewarm to digital processes.) Giacomelli's images, ranging from gritty photo-realism to still lifes, were pivotal for Bernardoni. They demonstrated that something more could lie beyond the mere subject. Observed closely and digested gradually, even simple compositions could reveal greater meanings. He also mentions Minor White as a key figure, and it is with White's philosophy that Bernardoni's work will resonate for many.

The American photographer stressed the importance of fine art photographs as "equivalents" for larger emotional experiences. A well-executed image, White said, should transcend the simple act of seeing it and take the viewer further, out of the gallery and into memory-rich internal territory. It should double as a portal uniting the photographer's emotional call with the viewer's emotional response. Bernardoni excels at this interplay. "Through my photos … people can see their world," he remarks. But, nevertheless, he can't say for sure if he intentionally appeals to the viewer's emotions.

"It is an instinctive process. I don't project anything. I often have my camera with me, and, when I meet a place or a person that sparks my memory and subconscious, I begin to work. But I don't know rationally what I am doing in those moments. Maybe after the print I understand, I rationalise, but not always."

If working only by instinct, those instincts are finely tuned. In his latest series, *Visual Thresholds*, featured here and which won him 1st place at last year's International Festival of

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Photography in Solighetto, he leads the viewer through luxuriant dreamscapes that trace his childhood, present life, and future. We see a child standing by the sea, but he or she appears in a blurred semi-abstraction, like a barely remembered day in … what year was it? In other images, we get even less context. Three pairs of legs walk away from a seated pigeon; a figure evanesces into a room's toneless middle distance. Above all, the 35 images that comprise *Visual Thresholds* communicate a powerful sense of solitude. Scenes are characteristically uninhabited: vacant lanes, childless playground equipment, an empty piazza. In the instances where we have humans, we never have a clear face; rather, we have silhouettes, shadow figures, a foot or a head. What is human is often on the margins of the frame, exiting our experience just as we catch a first glimpse. The images lead us to wonder if the simple act of remembering engenders a state of isolation. As we fail to conjure up some memory, we think: So much time is inaccessible, and it's only going to grow more fleeting, more melancholy, and more forgotten.

Bernardoni shoots with several cameras, but his tool of choice is a medium format Pentacon Six. To achieve his characteristic blurriness, he will often add lens-deforming elements, such as his spectacles, while shooting. The effect is not so much a funhouse distortion of what the eye would see, as it is like seeing a composition through a sheaf of old gauze. In the darkroom, he tones with sepia and selenium which some might consider a bit kitsch, but he applies them moderately, ageing the images without turning them into antiques. Still, for the black and white purist, the approach may not work.

In the second half of *Visual Thresholds*, the 18 images representing his present life onward, we see an aesthetic continuity. The images are no less blurred and dream-like than those of his early years. Candles hover above a chapel's marble floor; a chair sits abandoned in a room. But these images represent the present and the not too distant future. Wouldn't this sequence of his narrative be represented more lucidly than the distant past? Not quite. In *Visual Thresholds*, the photographic narrative is a way for Bernardoni, and us, to self-inquire, but one that yields no easy answers, no 'life's little instruction book'. What the series gives us are thresholds, but it is up to us to cross them vis-à-vis our own memories and experience to out what lies beyond.

Bernardoni's work opens a conversation on how we process our time on earth. His images beg the question: Do we keep memories as they were at that time or in that place, or do we edit and tweak them to our liking? Yes, he might answer. We have two records: one of how we know things were and a parallel – and, in this case, photographic – record of how ultimately we remember them. When it comes to our life histories, our tendency toward image-making performs an important emotional function. It can shield us from the misfortunes or disappointments that may have come; whatever we didn't like then, we can remember through a different lens now. The same applies to what lies ahead: if the future looks inauspicious or too ponderous, we can craft a more lyrical storehouse of images instead. In this way, over time both our memories and our predictions begin to resemble dreams.

Zachary Shtogren

This spring, the Italian house Punto Arte will release a monograph of ***Visual Thresholds****. The whole series can be seen and images purchased at the artist's website –* ***www.myworks.it****.*

All images from the **Visual Thresholds** series © **Stefano Bernardoni**. The full series can be seen at **www.myworks.it**.