

ARUNÀ CANEVASCINI (2018). *VILLA ARGENTINA*

MADRID: LA FÁBRICA. ODALISCA'S ARCHETYPES. THE VILLA ARGENTINA OF ARUNÀ CANEVASCINI

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The androgynous images, which haunted painters and photographers since the second half of the nineteenth century, have accommodated distinct intersections between the two media, as Michel Foucault delineated in his comment on Jean-Auguste Dominique Ingres: *when painting re-covers the photograph, it does not admit that photography is beautiful. It does better: it produces the beautiful hermaphrodite of instantaneous photograph and painted canvas, the androgynous image* (Foucault, 1975: 1575).

Placing the female body at the centre of a visual essay on desire and privacy, in Arunà Canevascini's book *Villa Argentina* this androgenic assertion is extended to a wider conception concerning the representation of women's intimacy in-between Western and Eastern culture. Echoing the announced *photogenic painting* that Foucault examined in 1975, and switching between documentary and staged photography, Canevascini develops a work interested in thought-provoking conventions and, as she declares, the way *it hides a woman's identity behind a socially constructed cliché. (...) I want to provoke the viewer to reflect and question his or her own perspective on the stereotypes and clichés imposed on women by society* (Canevascini, 2019).

The photographs display an exploration of the relationship with her mother, the Iranian artist Anahita Tahery, made at their family house in the south of Switzerland. Across the book's pages, their cultural identity is revealed through the reinvention of the domestic space, defined by personal objects, paintings, and sculptures. These objects are confronted with the nudity of the artists, both indifferent to the concepts of the idealized body, and the prohibition of the body's visibility by Islamic doctrine. This theatricality of private life is, for Canevascini,





Villa Argentina, © Arunà Canevascini



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a way of creating a world parallel to what we normally deem banal and ordinary. The house is often seen as a prison for women, but in Villa Argentina it's actually a place of emancipation: for me and my mother, our home is and has always been



Villa Argentina, © Arunã Canevascini

like the stage of a theatre where we can freely express and shape our identity (Canevascini, 2019).

The evocation of *La Grande Odalisque* by Ingres, which was also chosen for the cover of the book, is now depicted as a portrait of a contemporary woman who challenges the viewer with the notion of mediation and the knowledge of being an image. This private *Odalisque*, portrayed by another woman, deals with a complex equation on exile, domesticity and the tradition of nudity in European painting, where women were commonly represented to be looked at: *in "Odalisque with Pot" my mother's face is hidden by an object typically associated with household work. Through this image I wanted to draw attention to how women have been mostly depicted in the history of art by male artists who have always represented them as idealized creatures, and how society has preconceived ideas on what role women should have, ignoring entirely their individual identities* (Canevascini, 2019).

Intentionally *offering up her femininity as the surveyed* (Berger, 1972: 55), as John Berger qualifies the *Odalisque* expression, in the picture of Canevascini this appropriation celebrates the ambiguity of private space, acknowledging the pose as a right to a perimeter of visibility and defiance that confirms the identity of these two women. Therefore, it does not serve to legitimize or recognize primordial images, but rather — admitting a system of resonances that marks the making of all images — proposes a reading on the fragmentation of the experience of the contemporary being and the perception of an omnipresent media landscape, which insists on a continuous state of alertness in relation to the image, to its codes and successive unfolding. As Berger defended in his well-known *Ways of Seeing*, *women are depicted in a quite different way from men — not because the feminine is different from the masculine — but because the ‘ideal’ spectator is always assumed to be male and the image of the woman is designed to flatter him.* (Berger, 1972: 64) When the *Guerrilla Girls* asked in 1989 *Why do women have to be naked to get into the Met. Museum?*, appropriating the same *Odalisque* picture covered with a gorilla mask, the response of the museum consisted in the very musealization of their revindication and a slight change in the statistics that at the time figured in their written statement: *less than 5% of the artists in the Modern Art Sections are women, but 85% of the nudes are female.*

In a period marked by the rise of gender-equality claims, in which, simultaneously, the tolerance for difference seems increasingly compromised and the censorship of the women’s body is trivialized, *Odalisque with Pot* attempts to break through prejudice in homogenous public narratives, sustaining the validation of women’s emancipation and claiming the power to reveal or conceal intimacy as a personal political manifesto. For both artists, the viewer witnesses a relationship, also as a voyeur, becoming aware of the place s/he doesn’t belong to, and realizing what s/he is able and unable to see.