

Andrea Valdés

Xavier Ribas, 2761 A.V.C. (2008)

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In his early work, photographer Xavier Ribas showed us families resting in a clearing, beside a highway or under a bridge. Thus, he seemed to suggest that freedom could only be found in residual spaces, where leisure is not an economic activity with set a schedule and series of restrictions, places where nature is manifest in all its wildness amidst cigarette butts and other forms of waste. Residue, as well as the signs and traces we leave behind, are present throughout Ribas's work.

In the triptych *2761 A.V.C.*, these remains are the archeological ruins kept in the underground parking lot of a shopping mall in Tarragona. But here, the ruin in and of itself is of no interest. What is its use. Once the landscape has been devastated, the mall industry that has capitalized leisure while producing the demand for marginal spaces has become aware of its own aggressiveness and wishes to be kinder. Here, the paradox is facile because making the parking lot of a shopping mall into an archeological site entails rendering a place of transit with no symbolic importance whatsoever into a historic place — with its signs and visiting hours —. One almost inevitably sees in this gesture an attempt to exceed what Marc Augé calls 'non-places': parking lots, like supermarkets, airports and hotel rooms, are interchangeable locations with which it is difficult to identify. Interaction inside them is minimal, just signals geared towards regulating transit. Here, the panels signaling the exit or prohibiting a left turn and indicating that we should swerve right contrast with another indication, which asks us to do just the opposite: stop amidst ramps and curves to bear witness to what is permanent and stable, to what does not move and of which we form part. Clearly, without that indication we would go right by; in a garage, a place where everything is signals, that is particularly clear.

As he says in one of his texts, the photographic aesthetic that Ribas uses in this work is ugliness, featuring glaring artificial green and yellow lights and the lines left by car headlights as they go by. With this 'bad practice', he evidence that rather than dramatizing the ruin, he wants to heighten its irony. And that's how it must be, especially if we bear in mind a final, and extremely significant, detail: here, to keep from interrupting traffic, preserving the ruins meant moving them some twenty meters below their original site. And when they are reduced to a decorative element, the ruins lose credibility. They are just a display case. It remains to be seen if, by altering the notion of historical patrimony, we are not placing it in its proper site. After all, revalorizing a terrain is making it into a parking lot, but also declaring its interest as patrimony. Ruins have been so mistreated. Rilke said, in speaking of Rome, "No, there is not more beauty here than in other places, and all these objects, which have been mended and restored by the hands of workmen mean nothing, are nothing, and have no heart and no value." Indeed, if it weren't for the staging, one would have the feeling that these stones could easily be the rubble of a construction site, one of the many that has changed our environment, appropriating it so savagely and now attempting to legitimize it with a little makeup. It's as if this 'non-place' needed to be filled.

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