

Marco Delogu, director of *FotoGrafia*, the international photographic festival in Roma, puts three questions to Xavier Ribas (April 2007).

1. How do you contextualize your work on Lazio within the "history" of your works?

Recently, I have been doing some work around notions related to archaeology. Last year I was in an ancient Maya archaeological site in Guatemala and I was fascinated by its invisible history and by how archaeologists interpret the surface of the forest to have an idea of what may be buried there. I guess this is very photographic, since with pictures we also look at surfaces but try always to go beyond them in order to reach levels of significance. In Vulci, I found myself thinking in similar terms. Most of the city remains buried, unexcavated. Archaeological excavations, present and past, work towards finding significant symbolic structures and elite residential quarters. The rest of the city tends to remain unexcavated. This invites you to speculate on the 'margins' of archaeology and of history, on the significance of these decisions, on idea of the 'historical document' and so on... In a place like this you look at the landscape as a container of history; sometimes this container reveals itself, most of the time it doesn't. In a certain way we are looking at a void, an empty field, a forest, a river...

2. What did it mean to you to have an assignment that allowed you to be free to photograph whatever and however you want, and how did it influence your search for an angle, a basic idea, stemming from the places where you were going to take pictures?

It is always complicated to tackle an assignment like this because in one way it is about your interpretation of the place and about your thoughts and your interests. On the other hand, I suppose, it has to make sense to the institution that commissions it. It is an open artistic commission, but at the same time there is a certain level of expectation of some kind of representation. In my case, I am not interested in ruins, or in the reconstructed spaces of archaeology. My interest in this site lies more in the notion of the buried and the invisible. The work is more a reflection on this than a representation of a specific place. However, the work is always a response to a place and, hopefully, the images reveal something about it. In the context of my own work, the pictures I have made in Vulci can represent a development of previous ideas or thoughts, or can be an exploration of new ones.

3. How do you define your documentary approach in a project like this which focuses on a particular region/landscape/community/people?

My approach to the documentary in photography is quite straight forward: it tries to represent a place through a set of preconceived ideas, almost like testing them. The place becomes like the embodiment of those ideas. I am interested in storytelling, and how before you start you have a reasonably clear idea of what you are going to tell and what you are going to leave untold, where you are going to look and where you are going to turn around and look away. Storytelling can emerge from looking and observing a space, for example, but also from inhabiting it. The reference to Walter Benjamin here is inevitable, but this is also something I have observed in my son who sometimes accompanies me on these trips. While I make the pictures, he is there with me, and I observe him getting involved with the place: he gets his hands dirty, so to speak, picks up things, looks closely at them, makes pictures of them, builds things and digs for treasures, he fills up his pockets with them. It feels to me that while I am looking away into the landscape, he is there in it, being part of it. It is a closer involvement, somehow. I am looking more abstractly, away, onto the space and what it represents, while he is actually playing, observing, touching the place where we are, where we stand, the point where I am photographing from. I quite like it. I wish I could incorporate this into the pictures, this element of physical involvement with the place. I suppose this would bring to the work a certain amount of ambiguity, a different narrative than that which could stem from a straight gaze, it would bring into the work an element of unpredictability, almost as if there was a loss of purpose, a distraction, like a conversation that, losing its thread, meanders into the peripheries of things, or that suddenly stops and moves into a different thing, like just going out for a walk...