

Gabriele Basilico (1944-2013)

He was not a photographer of people, yet as some French philosophers would say, the absence becomes the greatest indication of presence. Gabriele Basilico observed the most rapidly changing sites and cities with a willfully slow method. He would set up his 4 by 5 camera on its tripod, cover himself with its drape, and like a fisherman wait patiently for the right moment. How did he hollow out the built world into such an uncanny metaphysical vision? Where were the people, the movements, the signs of life? Did he arrive after the detonation of a neutron bomb? "Sunday morning," he replied. This was his privileged time to work in Milan and elsewhere. When everyone else took their day of rest, he would set up his silent shots of the most complex urban environments.

Although he was prized as a photographer of architecture, working for all of the greatest magazines and collaborating on dozens of books on the subject, the more he looked at the world the less he thought the subject was architecture. It was something else, something in between buildings and their settings. De Chirico called it "The Enigma of Arrival" and Basilico had a similar intimation. The shadows, the gaps, the empty spaces, the repetitious details with all of their banality became the unlikely protagonists of his compositions.

He organized his life into campaigns, almost like a military man, and the few times we worked together we had to carefully examine his schedule to block out times between such commitments as the sessions with Siza's buildings in Portugal or the special fellowship to work in Berlin. While he constantly moved around in cars, trains, and airplanes, and never stopped talking, genuinely excited by discovering new places and meeting friends and new people, once he set to work, the talking stopped and he knew exactly the sort of time, the slow time, he needed to settle and obtain the right images. He would block out squares on his calendar like a cross-word puzzle, filling in between time and timeless.

While he was aware of the aesthetic function of his work, his attitude remained that of a craftsman in the workshop. When I convinced him to come to the Valdarno to photograph the effects of sprawl, his approach to this very unremarkable landscape was really no different than if he had been taken to a new building by a famous architect. He looked at it all as a sort of geological sediment. When we exhibited the photographs, people could hardly recognize his images of the everyday settings of their lives because he had actually taken the time to look at them. Working exclusively in crisp black and white, often his best photographs were of the common vernaculars of sprawl: warehouses, gas stations, drain pipes. He commuted a shocking dignity to environments that most people perceived as trash. The moral that emerged from his work did not inspire one toward guilt or dread, nor did it condone waste and alienation, but in a sublime way asked respect for what exists so that one can make sense of an ever more placeless world.

Richard Ingersoll, 14-II-2013