

João Pina's Militant Pity

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46750
by João Pina.
FotoEvidence, 2018.

SEEN FROM above on an overcast day in João Pina's indelible rendering, the famous statue of Christ the Redeemer on Corcovado mountain has lost its stone repose—it is no longer merely the icon—and taken on a more human air. It is a figure of pity, its majestic apartness now reading like a magnification of human vulnerability. The Brazilian poet Adelia Prado once wrote of “His face / touched by the brutality of things” and, for all the beauty of the surrounding Tijuca forest, Pina offers a correspondingly sensitive vision, which is to say that even here “the brutality of things,” the pain of a city, has been made visible.

The city is Rio in the rough decade between 2007 and 2016, a period marked by the outward semblance of development and its deep discontents, by a twofold turn on the world stage that went hand in hand with endemic social and political dysfunction. We can see it now as the pre-Jair Bolsonaro era, setting the stage for the ascension of a Dutertean demagogue with plainly voiced dictatorial leanings. These years were bookended by Rio's successful bid to host the 2014 World Cup and its staging of the 2016 Summer Olympics, but Pina's title looks past those games with militant economy: 46750, which American readers might initially mistake for a postal code, is instead the number of homicides in Rio over this same period. Military police, drug traffickers, citizens caught up in the midst of their violent skirmishes or, just as likely, their corrupt alliances—all are assimilated into that darkly encompassing tally. Pina finds a war raging in broad daylight and manages—here is his gift—to transcend both the taking of sides and that careful unfeeling that can come to define the “neutral” party. A tremendous dynamism enlivens his lens: he is too busy inhabiting what he sees to indulge in a self-regarding distance.

Even so, a certain remove provided this project's foundation. Being a Portuguese national in Brazil, Pina believes, helped make these photographs possible, with his “funny accent” freeing him from suspicion and allowing a kind of access that would only be afforded a trusted outsider, someone who is just enough of a foreigner. One day he trails the police on their rounds as they “pacify” Rio's favelas. The next, he comes away with intimate shots of the traffickers they are after—a young man, say, intent on his game of foosball, never mind the more sinister toy protecting his play: a gigantic assault rifle slung over his back, almost the length of a body. This is, in its way, a picture of deep tranquility, of a jarringly accented ordinary; the small children looking on at

the end of the table are entirely at ease.

In the Rio revealed by Pina's methodical and sensitive eye, such a scene might come suddenly to this: two boys lying prone under an unseen policeman's gun. Each has craned his head upward, but at a telltale angle of difference. One is straining to take in the policeman, brow furrowed in worried concentration, but the other's attention seems to reach toward another plane altogether. Something has lifted him halfway past the concrete oppressiveness of the moment, inflecting his expression with something unlikely: this forbearance, this pity. It is as if he can see the whole scene reflected; he has an eye on the photographer.

Can such humanizing contact offer the beginnings of an answer to the city's ills? In Pina's work, whatever transformative power there is in witness comes up against its obvious limits. During a raid on one favela, a policeman turns back in the photographer's direction and looks right through that unreal presence, all fearful alertness. He has heard something, maybe—a mind caught by a sound, a man trapped. Unforgettable, the decibel level of his look: you are watching a moment of trauma do its work, knowing immediately it has been one of many. And Pina, for his part, is not in the business of skipping past the plainly shocking. The adolescent boy who puts a protective hand over his younger sister's shoulder, standing off to the side as a police squad hauls the body of another “resister” past them (the children are just back from school), has come to understand this as part of the ordinary course of things—you see it in the preternatural calm of his pose, in his look half-sorrowful, half-stoic—but Pina would have those of us less versed in this dark variety of daily experience be stopped by it too. And by this: the body of a woman seven months pregnant, shot dead on the outskirts of Rio, now placed in an open container and awaiting transport, her stomach exposed, her eyes wide.

An image so stark seems to inhabit its own reality, to exist untethered from the ordinary life of the city. This is part of its force and, in another sense, part of its peril. The wish to see past runs strong: “human kind,” Eliot wrote, “cannot bear very much reality.” Even when we know the statistics, some self-protecting instinct in us moves to reject such a picture as both more and less than documentary truth, an aberration or contrivance wrested momentarily into the visual plane by the artist's own brand of force. But this is a convenient rationalization: it gives us an out. Much of the resonance of 46750 comes in the way Pina anticipates and fights this impulse. Through artfully discordant sequencing, he is concerned with making us see such images—these fates, and the acts that give rise to them—not as random gro-

tesquerie, but rather in uneasy relation with forms and rhythms of society that seem much more innocuous.

This is a Rio in which moments of rupture give way to an eerie tranquility, those two cuffed young men yielding to the calm waves of Ipanema, those waves receding as suddenly on a gruesome crime scene—a car riddled with bullets, a crowd craning to better see the casualty within. Here and there, Pina makes inventive, often subversive use of foldouts, feats of misdirection or implication. A woman whose portrait is nestled between rival camps—traffickers on the one side, agents on the other, the two rendered in distinct shots but seeming almost to face one another, armed, in a triptych—could be a bystander to either scene. Her actual context is not immediately clear; we know only that she is entirely given over to what's before her, radiating a kind of nervous hope. Only the caption we consult at the end of the book tells us that the occasion of this prayerful height of attention is none other than a soccer match.

What to make, then, of the image we find upon folding out her portrait, in a second militantly disorienting movement: one more casualty of Rio's war, hidden at the heart of things? She sees him, and doesn't. Fundamental to such a society, Pina seems to say, is the sense of suppressed recognition, of impossible discontinuities living in close proximity. A wide shot of one favela, its foreground taking in a man on horseback and a ragged soccer net, almost inevitably assimilates, in the distance, the sleeker order of Rio's financial district. The other world is never far off.

Tellingly, the largest foldout in the book shows us the Zuzu Angel tunnel, which courses beneath Rocinha, Rio's largest favela, to connect the wealthy neighborhoods of São Conrado and Gavea. Pina's case for the uneasy coexistence and subterranean connection of the two Rios has met, perhaps predictably, with resistance. “That is not my city,” one émigré Brazilian reader has protested to Pina; 46750 has not found a publisher in Brazil. But for all the hard and even aggressive truths of this collection, Pina remains sensitively attuned to moments of everyday ease, physical pleasure, undiminishable beauty; these too have their claim on us. A resonant counter-note sounds throughout the collection, if always inflected by an awareness of what lies beyond the surface. It is there in the samba dancers parading on the annual festival of *Carnaval*, there in the gorgeous absolution of a rainfall over the Atlantic Forest, there in a pickup soccer match at the Alemão favela—one barefoot dribbler caught in mid-flight—and there in the old man at his leisure in a modest bar, feet kicked up on a plastic chair in unremarkable, enviable calm.

To say that such moments capture our attention is not to say that they go unshadowed. Boys lost to the lucky peace of kite-flying, a caption reminds us, have been pushed into this idleness, their schools having been shuttered during the World Cup in a reflection of national priorities. The self-forgetting majesty of *Carnaval* culminates, per another picture, in literal tons of costumes discarded by the dancers, refuse that locals wade through each year,

looking for anything that can be hawked. And lest we lose ourselves in that pickup soccer game, an inset poem contributed by Vivianne Salles—a writer raised in one of the favelas whom Pina asked to provide lyric commentary throughout the collection, a voice from inside—doesn't shy away from calling out the beloved sport as national opiate: those who “applauded the coup” that derailed Brazilian democracy in the 1960s, she writes, “love seeing a soccer game.” Salles's poems join another non-photographic element of this conceptually rich collection, a running tally of the decade's dead—not named but faithfully numbered, all the way from 1 to 46750—that picks up on sporadic black pages, leaves off, picks up again. Such devices show us a photographer wary of his medium's ambiguous power to lull us into spells of appreciation that depend, in part, on the lack of context, a sort of narrative amnesia.

Still, the proof of the individual images' power is that we close 46750 and find that certain pictures call us back, whether it is beauty or horror they register, their tones and discoveries running beyond journalistic argument. Early on, Pina presents us with a picture of children standing by a popcorn maker in the Dendê favela. The popcorn—along with a range of basic services, medical care and the like—is arranged by a gang that stepped into a power vacuum created by the state's effective withdrawal from the area, so a complex political reality colors this moment. But another presence is at work here. Again, two of Pina's subjects have turned to take in the half-foreigner in their midst, he of the funny accent. One child is a radiantly sad set of eyes at waist-height in the foreground, cut off by being so close to Pina's lens; the other, a few feet back, reaches us as a form recessed in the darkness, vividly present and yet easy to miss on first glance. There is something unforgettably moving about the expressions of these children, so gently uncertain of themselves and of the man beside them. What is he thinking of them, there, taking their picture? And just what is his purpose here? Is he a judge of some kind, a protector? These are the questions their eyes register. They seem to accept his presence with patience, and a tentative curiosity. They too are looking carefully, and finally making—for whatever it might be worth in this city of man, which is always an open question—an intimate effort of trust. □

