

In the Garden of Forms

Sergio Larrain: London

by Sergio Larrain
Aperture, 2021
\$40.00 (cloth)

Sergio Larrain: Valparaiso

by Sergio Larrain
Aperture, 2017
\$44.00 (cloth)



Reflecting on a collaboration with the photographer Sergio Larrain, the poet Pablo Neruda expressed some perplexity at this “complicated boy who was more interested in gathering conch shells and seaweed than taking photos” during their time together. But Larrain was hardly oblivious to this aspect of his character, this gift for entrancement—nor would he have seen it as separate from his art. During an earlier project, journeying through the south of Chile, Larrain wrote in a letter of his constant impulse to “put my cameras down and concentrate

on looking.” He added, “when I see an image, I point the lens at the clouds for a second, then put it down again and spend more time looking.” It’s an account that, even in full, notably omits the clicking of the shutter; whether or not a picture is made becomes almost immaterial.

Larrain’s mode of searching was always about more than the mere accumulation of images. After little more than a decade of photographing in earnest, he all but put his camera down for good, retreating to the remote village of Tulahuén with his young son to pursue a life centered on yoga and meditation. If to experience the elusive beauty of Larrain’s pictures is to lament the brevity of his somewhat truncated career, it is also to take his further searches seriously, however eccentric they can seem—for such is the extraordinary authority of these photographs, their transporting calm, the depth with which they recapture the child’s “first discovery of reality,” as Larrain put it once; such is the soul these images everywhere quietly imply.



A son of privilege, moved by the specter of suffering and severe in his sense of society's practiced evasions, renounces his inheritance, casting himself among the poor: it is a story we know well. Except that Larrain, whose father was a prominent architect, could not bring himself to renounce things of beauty altogether. And so as a forestry student in Berkeley he squared away money while working as a dishwasher to purchase two things—a flute, a Leica camera—not because he knew how to use them but simply because they seemed, he wrote, like the most beautiful objects that existed.



That camera would lead to the first project of his artistic maturity: a study of the orphaned children of Santiago, condemned to their lot in life, Larrain writes, “through poverty and, worse than that, lack of love.” Something tells these children to look on Larrain, who began photographing them in his early twenties, as nothing other than kin, the images manifesting the kind of intimacy possible only among individuals seen close, when seeing is a kind of holding. The pictures undertake a quiet work of compassion even as they resist the reflexive excesses of pity. So the child who looks up from his sleep outdoors, one eye still squinting awake, is

returning the affection of an expected presence, some gentle familiar; Larrain, who must be crouching down, is right there. In another picture, the photographer counts on one child's slightly hunched shoulder, the downcast tilt of his head, to tell us all we need to know of the pain that must fall to him as he walks Santiago's streets, a few paces behind his peers, well ensconced in a space of solitude. Another boy in the series looks at us with an easy equanimity. His hands and coat may be spotted with dirt, but Larrain's portrait has a way of departing from these details, for all the weight they carry. This child is wearing his sorrow lightly, a muted glint in his eye.

Larrain would recall his parents' incomprehension as he turned toward those solaces and provocations that saw him through his own youthful alienation: Dostoevsky and Unamuno; photography, God. When he was twenty, his younger brother died in a riding accident. The family sought refuge in a trip through Europe and the Middle East, staying in a succession of hotels along the way. But whatever their hopes of drawing nearer, Larrain would repair to an adjacent guesthouse whenever he could, his place apart growing ever plainer. It was as some such gently alienated soul that he went to London a few years later, on a grant from the British Council, in every sense the curious visitor. These pictures, taken over a few months in 1959, are collected in a gorgeous reprint of Larrain's work recently out from Aperture. Before his searching eye, even the commonplaces of London life return to us with a hallucinatory gravity—the Tower Bridge standing out in the fog, in Larrain's rendering, as if it had just been sketched into being. For the two deckhands looking out toward that landmark, their backs turned to us, nothing must be more ordinary than the slow approach their tugboat makes on the Thames, and still something in their poses suggests an unsentimental measure of wonder, appreciation at finding this perfect given yet again in its place. Other moods, other shades, enter into Larrain's dream-vision of London. His picture of the long escalators leading down into the Underground is

redolent of Eliot and Dante—a version of hell, or of purgatory—culminating as it does in a daringly close portrait of one downcast passenger at the foot of the escalator, his eyes turned irrevocably away. Again Larrain has lent the pedestrian an unaccustomed intensity. Only rarely does the city return his glance or offer up a sense of intimate connection—as at a dance-hall, say, where we’re drawn fragmentedly, and so that much more deeply, into a couple’s embrace. The animating spirit of this London might be the man in a coat and bowler hat, a decidedly impersonal mystery, stand-in for the unknowable soul. Almost always, he is looking or striding away.



In 1952, several years before his short stint in London, Larrain had begun to make regular trips to a very different port city, that of Valparaiso, a place more intimately human in scale and no less profound in its entrancements. It was here that he made the images for which he is now best known, later arranging them with accompanying text-fragments in a facsimile, one Aperture printed several years ago. Something about this “city suspended in the hills,” its slow time and sharp geometry—all narrow streets and rising stairways—made it the ideal stage for the “pure photography” Larrain was seeking after, images that might leave subjectivity behind and do the impossible thing of reflecting only “reality perceived as it is.” Not that his pictures look past the hard facts of a declining port city, the straits many of its inhabitants find themselves in. This too was part of the reality—social as much as metaphysical—that spoke to him. He described Valparaiso in a letter to Henri Cartier-Bresson, who had taken him on at the Magnum photographers’ collaborative, as “poor, wretched, and yet beautiful...a rather sordid yet romantic city.” It was a place where, Larrain felt from the first, a kind of transfiguring “magic” entered into his photos. Of his most celebrated picture, he wrote, “It’s only in Valparaiso that such things can happen.” A girl is beginning to descend one of the city’s outdoor stairways; mid-stride, she nonetheless seems very tall and still. A few paces behind her, another girl has entered the picture, like a living shadow, her dress and hairstyle uncannily similar. “I was in a state of absolute calm,” Larrain remembered of taking the picture. “The other girl appeared out of nowhere.” And there she is, seeming to draw back at the sight of her second self just ahead. Repetition, then, with a difference: it’s as if we’ve been given a vision of consciousness standing outside time, outside the body, in perfect contemplation of its own strangeness.



Again and again, Larrain's pictures of Valparaiso carry this sense of visitation, chance encounters with surpassing calm, casual feats of crystalline vision. "NO HURRY," runs his neat script beside a picture of raindrops accruing on the underside of a railing, the image wagering that to see the world so minutely—as with deserted cobblestone streets or the shadows cast by a balustrade—is to behold a kind of eternity. No creature is too humble to be drawn into Larrain's vision of reality: even the pigeons he studies have a strange solemnity about them (as in photographing the children of Santiago, he has come down to their level, subtly conferring these

creatures' new stature upon them). Many of his human subjects, meanwhile, seem as brilliantly withholding as those bowler-hatted men of London, standing at striking angles from one another, studies in the spirit's reserves and impassable distances, their expressions suggesting just how far individuals might be from one another, even at close quarters—this sailor and elderly man, say, feet apart and turned entirely toward their own lives, two solitudes that nonetheless seem to imply and play off against one another, possessed by the same modicum of calm.

For all these enigmas of presence, a lovely intimacy enters into Larrain's photos of Valparaiso, pictures of ordinary humanity received as gratefully as any other vision, undiminishably and simply itself. He may be at his most sensitive when he takes in the goings-on at a brothel called the Seven Mirrors, its myriad dramas of boredom and affection and yearning all shadowed by poverty and yet endeared, as he writes, by a kind of "innocence"; or when he captures a schoolboy strolling along in a pose quietly beyond his years, all contemplative hopefulness—hands in his pockets, looking up to the skies; or when he meets a woman at a fish-market who proves more than equal to the occasion of his glance, rotund and standing her ground with a sense of amused command, not content to let any mystery come between them. *Connection is as simple as this*, her look says, *and why let the enigmas of art obscure it?* The commonplace and the visionary come together especially beautifully in one of Larrain's most memorable pictures: a few paces from the water, a boy carries a friend on his back, this latter facing out and brilliantly lit by the sun, given a turn—his look says—at a kind of heaven, the ecstasy of the infinite present. Or, as Larrain would say, "the eternal moment which is reality."



Though he would continue to make inspired pictures for some years—the last entries in an earlier Aperture survey of his work date from the late 1970's—Larrain's artistic output came more and more fleetingly. Up until he died in 2012, he turned ever more singlemindedly to other ways of realizing his vision: yoga and meditation, first under the guru Oscar Ichazo's Arica School and then on his own; and to a host of enigmatic writings, short lyrics on mankind's threatened and threatening place in the cosmos, on the specter of worldwide destruction and our fragile prospects for peace (“our challenge today,” as he put it in one representative letter, “is to climb to the level of no contradiction.”) When he did turn to making images, these were largely what he called “simple satori,” adapting Buddhist tradition: photos or sketches meant to convey moments of sudden awakening. By the time Agnès Sire, then a director at Magnum, happened upon contact sheets of Larrain's work in the 1980's, he had already retreated into legend. Writing to him, Sire found a ready interlocutor, only one who moved in his own time. Their correspondence would last some thirty years, with each letter from Larrain typically taking a month to reach her. “I had to fight against his recurring desire to destroy everything,” she remarks. When journalists discovered the road to his remote outpost in Tulahuén after his work was shown in Spain, Larrain asked that no further exhibits follow.

In the face of such severity, it's a marvel to survey his oeuvre and see just how much the “complicated boy” described by Neruda accomplished before putting his camera down and focusing simply on looking. And then not only in Santiago or Valparaiso or London, but in Latin America and Europe more broadly, where, early on, he was often on assignment for Magnum. Everywhere Larrain's work has a way of immersing us in the endlessly reiterated mystery of what it is to be in time and place, and this as both a body and a consciousness. But for all their philosophic air, these pictures come from an individual who gazes, not simply a mind that

abstracts, and there is always the promise that one of Larrain's subjects might look back at us knowingly, in a sudden clarity we can only share. Reflecting on his beginnings, Larrain wrote with all the solemn plainness of the seeker, "I was so confused that I decided to search for truth." One of the fragments that accompany his Valparaiso pictures puts it a bit more elliptically, as though on the becalmed other side of so much early confusion: "Wandering around... In your hands, the magic box": the camera held at the ready, or carried as a sort of talisman, or simply set down. For Larrain, as for those now drawn on and on into his work, no image was ever the end. The end of his serene transports being this: "You walk in peace; aware, in the garden of forms."

