

## DRAWINGS OF THE GAZE

Milton Hatoum

The mere observer, that is, the layperson who knows little or nothing about photographic technique, reacts to the images of Luiz Braga with surprise. This surprise, this impact before the strong and vibrant colours reminiscent of pictures drawn by the gaze, is part of the grandeur of the photographer's art.

Colours - or shades of blue, red, green - like those that can be seen in the images of fish-shaped balloons, a house-front, the interior of a bar, a flowery parasol or through a window overlooking the Guamá River. The effects of the photos are not exhausted in the aesthetic of a pictorial construction, nor in the rigor of the framing and the play of light and shade. There is something that goes beyond the beauty of the image itself and touches us deeply: something suggestive, insinuating and mysterious that attracts us to this miniature world that somehow expands and transcends the limits of the photo itself.

As the critic Paulo Herkenhoff so aptly pointed out in the catalogue for the exhibition at the Vale do Rio Doce museum, "in the work of Luiz Braga the battle for the emergence of language is sometimes fought through the anthropological seduction of the documental registering of culture and geography, and sometimes through the distension of the Amazonian reference". The sublime, the critic continues, comes from the "refinement of the light".

From a refined, thought-out, constructed light, not natural light in its brute state: the raw and naked luminosity of the equator.

As with all great photographers, Braga's light-painting draws bodies, objects and landscapes, not in order to document them, but to transform them into pictures, into moments captured by the sensitive eye. The landscape is not just an element of Amazonian nature, and the people photographed - *Promesseiro* (Promise-payer), *Rosa no arraial* (Rosa in the Village), *Açougueiro* (Butcher), *Garçonete do Ver-o-Peso* (Waitress at the Ver-o-Peso) - are examples that "indicate their subjects by their form, postures and degrees of dignity". Indeed, many of these photos reinvent fragments of the humble daily life of Amazônia, in which popular tradition, so deeply rooted in the north of Brazil, abides in the images of the feast day of Saint Benedict, in the portrait of a promise-payer or of the Ver-o-Peso market. On this intimate journey into the culture of the place, one notable synthesis is the photo *Peixe na parede laranja* (Fish on the orange wall), so Amazonian for its human figures, atmosphere and for the panel painted by some local artist. It is as if the photographer, in evoking a cyclopic, superlative region, has cut off a fragment of this vast world and penetrated its essence in order to reveal what is most hidden and mysterious within it.

Many of Luiz Braga's photos are invitations to spin yarns or to draw upon the images to invent a narrative. I noticed this the first time I saw *Babá Patchouli* (Nanny Patchouli). The stillness and silence of the image provide food for thought. The woman and the boy, together, do not seem to be looking in the same direction, but the shadows of their bodies, blended one into the other, stretch across the unreal, green-tinted sand, as if the green of the forest has been displaced to some such unlikely setting. The wind rustles through the leaves below a cloudy sky tinged with purple light at

its edges. The contemplative posture of the two figures is a way of capturing another, slower time, one with its own pace, without the urgency and anxiety of that spoken time that rules over us and dictates the rhythm of life. The sea reminds us of the river-sea or Sweet Sea, as the first Spanish voyagers liked to call the Amazon River. With their backs to the viewer, the woman and boy contemplate the horizon in a scene that may allude to the Amazon, but which could be some place else: any one of those countless places in the imagination of whoever sees the photograph.

The source for Luiz Braga's work is indeed the Amazon; but the pictures themselves, possessed of a rare beauty, radiate a wealth of human and cultural values of a far wider reach. That is why Paulo Herkenhoff did not hesitate to affirm that "the only promise the work of Luiz Braga makes is to remain a concrete poetic presence".

[MILTON HATOUM lectured in literature at the Universidade Federal do Amazonas and University of California, He is the author of the novels *Relato de um certo Oriente* (Tale of a Certain Orient), *Dois irmãos* (The Brothers) and *Cinzas do Norte* (Northern Ashes)]

**LUIZ BRAGA** was born in Belém, Pará in 1956. He took up photography at the age of 11. In 1975 he set up his first studio producing portraits, advertising and architectural photography. He graduated in architecture in 1983.

In 1987 he was awarded the Marc Ferrez prize for the photo essay *A margem do olhar* (The edge of the gaze), shot in black and white, in which he produced a portrait of the Caboclo Amazon. Braga has made this region his central theme, particularly his hometown, which is the setting for most of the pictures that have featured in his more than 70 collective and individual exhibitions in Brazil and abroad.

His images, which emerge from the photographic act already full of surreal colours, have, in recent years, given the alteration of the colour standard used in film, begun to receive some light tampering with image treatment programs in order to re-establish the distortions so characteristic of the artist's work.

In 1991 he received the prestigious Leopold Godowsky Color Photography Award, from Boston University, precisely for the originality and control with which he captures the clash between the natural light and the artificial light of bars, parks and riverboats, always using the distortion of the colour temperature readings of *day light* balanced film to craft his poetic.