

P A Z

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PAZ ERRÁZURIZ

Paz Errázuriz (born Santiago, Chile, 1944) has developed her entire career in her country of origin, focusing on the most hidden aspects of Chilean daily reality. Her images present spaces and contexts in which marginalisation and confinement prevail but where individuals are shown as they are through the artist's working method based on coexistence with the people she portrays and from the starting point of trust and mutual respect.

It is important to remember that most of Errázuriz's socially committed output was produced during the horrors of the Pinochet dictatorship (1973-1990), in the stifling atmosphere of fear and uncertainty that hovered over all sectors of society and which caused death, physical and psychological torture, and repressive violence against opponents of the regime, who were obliged to find ways to express themselves and to create, constantly walking on a kind of tightrope.

Thanks to Paz Errázuriz's resolute social involvement all these people ceased to be hidden from our gaze and from that of the society with which they coexisted. It is here that part of the importance of her work lies as it shares with us those other worlds which emphasise the vulnerability and fragility of the human condition, but also its dignity and grandeur. All have in common the fact of existing on the periphery of a world dominated by norms which homogenise human beings around the concepts of good health, middle age, heterosexuality, the white race, etc.

This exhibition presents some of Paz Errázuriz's best-known series, such as "Adam's Apple" and "Heart Attack of the Soul", along with a selection of other projects representative of her extensive body of work, from the 1970s to the present, in which different collectives present themselves to us - the elderly, children, the mentally ill, prostitutes, transvestites, Native Americans - and in which the artist constantly reveals her profound social awareness as a photographer, the exceptional importance she places on an ethical stance before the world, and a profound sense of respect and proximity towards the people portrayed and the issues that have concerned her. These images are part of the complete collection of 175 photographs by Errázuriz in the collections of Fundación MAPFRE.

Carlos Gollonet. Curator

THE SLEEPERS

1979

From her earliest photographs taken in a country of the complexity of Chile in the late 1970s, Paz Errázuriz's work has emphasised the uniqueness of people on the margins of the social system. In the difficult context of a militarised country she walked the streets with her camera, in itself a gesture of courage and affirmation during the bloodiest years of the dictatorship, showing us individuals excluded from official rhetoric in an antithesis to hegemonic discourses.

Errázuriz's earliest photographs insist on an indisputable social reality: the existence of vulnerable people who spend many hours living rough or surviving in the open, immersed in sleep or overcome by fatigue, destitute and homeless. A notable aspect of "The Sleepers" is the very presence of the photographer, as a woman, on the streets. As Nelly Richard has noted: "Being a woman, an initial transgression consists of going out onto the street: breaking out of the enclosure of the family ideology of the private by moving around in the public space in order to expose oneself to the friction of unowned passions. By going out onto the street a woman transgresses the protective boundaries of the safe home and the family-based framework of home life. Under a dictatorship, the woman who goes out onto the street also exposes herself to the risk of the lack of protection of open spaces in which the eyes of power – the tactic of looking and being looked at – keeps track of anyone who plans to depart from the pre-established path."

This section concludes with two photographs that do not belong to this series but which were taken during the same period. They show a sequence of the staggering steps of a clearly drunk man, photographs taken by Errázuriz from a car when stopped at a traffic light; and an image of the most powerful and leisured class, which similarly fascinates the photographer and which she portrays in a tone bordering on the grotesque: four women at a cocktail party with their jewellery, hairstyles and expensive clothes, all exuding complacency and ostentation.

PROTESTS

1982-1989

In the 1980s, Errázuriz reflected the tension and dynamics of resistance during the last years of the dictatorship. At this point her photography turned to recording acts of bravery on the part of broad sectors of Chilean society, which participated in strikes, demonstrations and protests against the regime. The result was images of this type, in which a series of women conceal their faces behind paper masks while another, also a participant, stands upright and dignified, protected behind her sunglasses. This was an action organised by the “Women for Life” collective. Its documentation by Errázuriz reveals how she accompanied women’s struggles during the dictatorship and her connections with feminist thinking. Her photographs highlight the different ways in which these women’s organisations took to the streets and understand politics in relation to the other social struggles that were taking place with the aim of reinstating democracy.

THE CIRCUS

1984

Before Paz Errázuriz's lens the circus becomes a further reflection on everything that is not located at the centre of society. She turned her attention to provincial, low-budget circuses that lacked even the funds for advertising, defined by nomadism and a sense of non-belonging. The result is a representation of exceptionality as a way of life and at the same time of vulnerability and volatility as characteristics inherent to all ephemeral spectacles.

In this image the protagonist is a dwarf wearing a child's dress. With an expressive and theatrically dissonant expression, he presents the mask with which he performs his act. The powerful sense of territorial disconnection associated with the circus world is completed here by a kind of multi-layered identitary rootlessness: the dwarf is a child-size adult male wearing female clothing and at the same time he is obliged to present himself as an anthropomorphic, again female animal. Nonetheless, despite the figure's distorted, grotesque nature, Errázuriz's gaze is filled with tenderness towards a way of life and work considered degrading by many.

ADAM'S APPLE

1983-1987

In the 1980s Paz Errázuriz devoted most of her time to mixing with a group of men who cross-dressed and engaged in sex work in various brothels in Santiago and Talca. During the dictatorship such individuals were frequently victims of violence, harassment and humiliation. The artist entitled the resulting series of photographs “Adam’s Apple”. The core images are photographs of the members of a large family consisting of Mercedes, her two biological transvestite children, Evelyn and Pilar, and a series of male and female friends whom Errázuriz photographed engaged in their daily lives. This is a large, heterodox family which broke the mould and was decimated by AIDS, financial precariousness and an impoverished lifestyle under the dictatorship; a family of low status, of individuals who lacked a voice, but one united by close ties of love and friendship.

The images that make up “Adam’s Apple” remind us that Paz Errázuriz’s photographs do not seek out the fleeting moment stolen from the photographic subject but are rather based on a connection and a pact with that subject. It is a process which cultivates a relationship with the person portrayed, encouraging mutual trust.

THE FIGHT WITH THE ANGEL

1987

In this series Paz Errázuriz immersed herself in a supposedly unfamiliar world which she was not supposed to enter and where she once again broke away from what we might expect, in this case in relation to boxing. After being refused entry to the Club México in Santiago, where women were not allowed, she visited the Chilean Boxing Federation on various occasions. These boxers are not successful champions but rather fragile young men with defeated gazes. They are portrayed in frontal shots, individually or in pairs, with shabby clothing and inadequate equipment that emphasises a wounded rather than a victorious body. They reveal themselves as vulnerable beings, potential losers who again live in an environment outside the normative and dominant social space.

TANGO

1988

Older people have been an ongoing focus of interest for Errázuriz and the protagonists of several series, among them “Tango”, in which we see elderly couples dancing in some of the clubs in Santiago. There is no caricature or criticism here but rather the trained eye of an extraordinary photographer capable of saying a great deal, as an anthropologist with the sensitivity of a poet, simply showing intertwined bodies enjoying the dance.

The intimacy of the bodies and the sensuality of their movements as well as the representation of minority social practices are present both in Errázuriz’s work as a whole and in these photographs. The artist emphasises the sensual nature of the dance and the communion between the couples. There is no depiction of the subjects’ faces and in some cases all that we see is a back on which the hand of the dance partner rests disturbingly, like a claw.

HEART ATTACK OF THE SOUL

1992-1994

Paz Errázuriz regularly visited the Philippe Pinel psychiatric hospital in Putaendo, two hundred kilometres from Santiago. There she photographed the patients and despite the difficult conditions in which they lived and the little care they received, Errázuriz did not so much focus on their misery but on the closeness between them, on the relationships they established and the warmth they exchanged through bodily gestures. In addition, she emphasised the individuality of each person, aware that, in the world outside the sanatorium they were reduced as a collective to the negative and reductive archetype of “madman.” In order to underline the aspect of the patients’ illness and to endow it with a new dignity, she entitled her series “Heart Attack of the Soul”.

In addition, an interest in the conditions of individuals who are imprisoned for one reason or another made particular sense in the context of a country that was emerging from one of the worst dictatorships in history, characterised by mass incarcerations and disappearances. The series was thus also an indirect commentary on Chile’s own history. Errázuriz’s images were displayed in the hospital itself, to be seen by both patients and staff . This was possibly the key factor which led to the introduction of some improvements to the hospital’s management and to the care offered to patients.

NOMADS OF THE SEA

1993-2002

The result of a lengthy project and a long period of encounters and interactions, Paz Errázuriz undertook a series devoted to the Kawésqar ethnic group, inhabitants of the coast of the archipelagos of Western Patagonia. She entered an unknown world, not only to her but also to most of Chilean society; a world that expresses itself in its own language, which she collected in the manner of oral testimonies in the photobook “Kawésqar, Children of the Sun Woman”. Errázuriz focused on the modus vivendi of this ageing indigenous community which lives from fishing and making rush baskets. After Jérwar-asáwer, a woman from the community, refused to allow herself to be photographed, Errázuriz reaffirmed the ethical commitment based on respect which distinguishes her photography by establishing a relationship of trust that would allow her to portray this community from a close-up perspective over the years.

BLINDNESS

2003-

This section brings together the photographs on the subject of blindness which Errázuriz first started to take in 2003 and which has interested her on various occasions, and others from the project “The Light that blinds Me”, which she undertook in the town of El Calvario, in the 6th Region of Chile. The latter series is devoted to a group of Chilean peasants who live in a remote place and suffer from achromatopsia, a disease that means that they can only see in black and white. In contrast to the other photographs from “Blindness”, these are taken in colour and Errázuriz conceived the series as a combination of photography, documentary video, digital video art, music and poetic writing. For those suffering from this condition, the lack of colour perception is accompanied by seriously affected vision as light sensitivity is very pronounced, leading to loss of visual acuity. Given the preeminence of the sense of sight and the different forms of visual pleasure in contemporary society, for Paz Errázuriz people with visual impairments become new inhabitants of that indeterminate territory of the great minorities.

MEMENTO MORI

2004

This series brings together images taken in cemeteries of the small altars that front the niches of anonymous individuals, with photographs of the deceased selected by their relatives alongside decorations and flowers, all intended to embellish that space of death in which the images of the buried remain unchanged over time. The title of the series is a Latin phrase meaning “Remember you will die”, a reality that makes us all equal despite the social differences that persist even in the context of funerary practices and the memory of the deceased by their families or their abandonment of them. Paz Errázuriz has spoken of these photographs: “I am very attracted to the anonymous nature of the individuals. There is a relationship between anonymity and the potential for beauty. For example, the ‘Memento Mori’ project. The cemetery has a social structure, with its different neighbourhoods, its most socially elite and its humblest sectors. And the photographs that I took are from all over, chosen at random, and producing a beautiful whole. They are photographs that move me infinitely. Maybe they were horrible people, I don’t care. You can never think that. They transmit something very lovely. All those people are incredibly beautiful.”

EXERESIS

2004

This is the only series made by Errázuriz outside of Chile, for which the artist took images of classical statues housed in museums in Europe and the United States. All have a common characteristic: they have been emasculated. The artist does not provide any details about the circumstances or historical reasons for their mutilation, simply the image of the physically perfect but castrated man. In addition, the statues lack heads as the photographic framing cuts them off at chest height. Our attention is thus focused on the genital area where we find a cavity or the remains of that removed penis. The historical, cultural and moral reasons for the disappearance of the sculpted organ were probably the consequence of obscurantist mind sets, a kind of moral iconoclasm, but the result serves Errázuriz to reflect on disfigured masculinity devoid of any heroism. An indirect link is thus established with her work on transvestism as her camera creates a new, ambiguous body without a defined gender, an inhabitant of the no man's land in which most of her subjects exist.

DOLLS

2014

At a very early date Paz Errázuriz revealed an interest in the subject of prostitution. Even before the series “Adam’s Apple” she photographed other sex workers who asked her not to print those images for fear of being identified. She later returned to the topic with the series “Brothels” between 1999 and 2002.

Some years ago Errázuriz moved to northern Chile with the intention of taking photographs in a prison but this plan led her to a seedy brothel on the border between Chile and Peru in 2014, resulting in the series “Dolls”. By this point Errázuriz was using a digital camera and only working in colour but with the same profound gaze that reveals everything thanks to the level of trust she established with both the prostitutes and their clients, who readily allowed themselves to be photographed.