



ANDRÉ CEPEDA
RASGO

OPENING 12 JAN. 10 pm
12 JANUARY - 08 MARCH 2017

Nosing around Brooklyn: about André Cepeda's exhibition RASGO

After his time at the RU – Residency Unlimited, New York, in the spring of 2016 (in partnership with Atelier-Museu Júlio Pomar / EGEAC), and with his show at the MNAC still fresh in our memories, *RASGO* opens a new phase in the work of André Cepeda. Confronted with the documentary aim of the show in Chiado, the images now being presented at Cristina Guerra Contemporary Art are more abstract and less narrative. Cepeda dedicated three years of his life to *Depois*, a project with the intention of offering a personal perspective of his own city, Porto. On the contrary, this new project *RASGO* has no predefined intention. It is a freer project. Cepeda's lack of familiarity with New York made it possible to prioritize the processes of image construction and composition. He quickly understood that his mission in New York was not to explore the city's iconic and refined image, but rather to elaborate his own experience, like a wild animal prowling and nosing around the city, furtively exploring the streets as he passes by.

In the beginning, his work process was rather focused in walking the streets and visiting museums. Cepeda was in no hurry to use his camera. He just explored her, the city of Manhattan, along with other peripheral neighborhoods in Brooklyn and Queens – not very far from the Residency and his apartment – such as Red Hook, Bushwick, and Ridgewood. Red Hook is a harbor area that knew better days after the great war. The other ones are industrial areas, a bit further north that, despite their rampant gentrification, still manage to preserve a certain popular and working class environment, aspect which immediately caught the artist's attention.

Cepeda found what he was looking for in avenues like Metropolitan or Grant, radically different from the souvenir image of 5th Avenue. First, he stumbled over trash, potholes, obstacles, warehouses, dirt and debris – typical of an area where trucks drive through constantly, transporting millions of tons of goods and merchandise produced, consumed, and distributed in New York. Here Cepeda discovered materials, shapes, colours and a special light; all these elements being very similar to the ones he found in the works of the most important American artists – the abstract expressionists, the minimalists, and the conceptual artists – in his visits to museums and art galleries. This coincidence should not be surprising; after all, the art historian T. J. Clark wrote that North-American art has the capacity to become more intense and interesting when it explores the vulgar, the prosaic, and the quotidian.

This awareness of US art roots determined Cepeda's direction into an abstract approach. Instead of telling stories or documenting social realities, he understood that his mission was to capture, from a very basic level, almost instinctive, fragments of a way of life, very different from his own. He had to break through from what he already knew, opening a new phase in his investigation of the medium of photography: how is an image constructed? What can I photograph? The residency was definitely the ideal context to have a deep reflection about his work: a space to think about what he had already done and what he wanted to do next.

In New York City, Cepeda was fascinated by the roughness of his surroundings. From this exhibition, a good example of this quality is one of the photographs of a white laminated wood panel whose surface has cracked and is starting to peel off. The details on each piece that make up the laminate panel remind us of brushstrokes, like in an abstract painting; perhaps one of Robert Ryman's famous monochromes. As in most Cepeda's photographs, in this specific one the light is warm and full; typical of spring and summer solstice. Actually, usually this kind of light that reflects and bounces from buildings has softer and duller colours, like browns and grays.

One key aspect of André Cepeda's new body of work is its dominant verticality, allusive to New York City. There is no horizon, no landscape, no nature: only objects and abstraction. New York is an «abstract», intellectual city. Driven by capital, finance, and technology, rationally planned, yet overwhelmed by chaos, desire and ambition. When Cepeda describes his shooting experience he refers to his perception of the city as "lines and compositional equilibrium", formal elements we can find in minimalist painting and sculpture. Seeing these photographs one cannot help but to think of Manhattan's streets orthogonality, broken diagonally with Broadway, an element of disequilibrium and dynamism, of life and surprise.

Another aspect of an abstract approach to photography is a result in seriality: pieces are generally comprised in sequences, with a cinematic character that helps understanding a "natural" facet of the city as a condition of a living organism, transient and in constant transformation. The sequence of photographs installed at a lower level on the first room's gallery wall, can be seen as a subtle parody of the imposing office towers on the island, alluding to the dialectic between verticality and horizontality, gaze and body, culture and nature.

Repetition plays an important role in this monumental series dedicated to an insignificant crack in the road. Through this road we can guess the presence of soil under the asphalt. The three series presented (six large-scale images; three large-scale images and eight small-scale images), are composed by singular and unique photos, limited to a basic shot – such as the outleft smallscale image of a steel cylinder. This strong relation with the ground and gravity in this new body of work, can be explained as an act of "de-sublimation", in which the artist renounces an idea of conventional and normative beauty.

Therefore, we must discuss the materiality of these photographs. For instances, in the series of three large-scale abstract photographs where we can perceive large swatches of yellow colour dulled by too much sun, Cepeda printed them on a particularly light Japanese paper, emphasizing its immateriality and weightlessness, the effect created by too much exposure to summer light. Paradoxically, these yellow swatches represented in these images are, in reality, large and heavy steel road plates, found at many intersections in New York, rumbling loudly whenever a cab passes over them at full speed.

Even though *Depois* and *RASGO* are different projects, they share a common element: the representation of an abstract perspective of the city, instead of an obvious one; the latter project being André Cepeda's subjective vision of NYC. Cepeda believes that photography is invariably about showing "how the artist sees, how he frames reality". In *RASGO*, we are offered a low point of view and a perspective of the city like the one of a street dog or coyote. In this sense, one can understand a certain performative intention in this photographic experience: an attempt to dialectically influence the reality that is being represented. With no human figures, it is the presence of the photographer and his peculiar interaction with the space that "humanizes" the latter. Or should we say, that "animalizes" it? The title, *RASGO*, suggests a violent and aggressive action (tear, rip), confirming this impression.

Finally, this exhibition is another step in André Cepeda's career: an investigation on "installed" photography and its possibilities. He started testing it in June, in his show at Fridman Gallery, in New York, repeating the experiment for this new project at Cristina Guerra Contemporary Art. Like a small and brilliant skyscraper, the enigmatic paper cylinder redefines the space of the first room. This 'photographic sculpture' is a fundamental piece in the show as it tells us about the relationship between the image and its corporeality and materiality. Essentially, this is the subject that unifies all these images and, ultimately André Cepeda's experience in New York: a search for the "real," for a human scale, in a context of artifice, simulation and spectacle, as it was described by Jean Baudrillard in his book *America* (1986).

Pedro de Llano, 2017