

Revelations of the Invisible

by

Maria Giovanna Musso

The constant risk in the work of a photographer, and of all those who work with images, is to produce *beautiful images* which are no more than just that. Other photographers – especially those dealing with social photography whose objective is denunciation - seek *strong*, scandalous and violent images, to give a radical view of the cruelty and brutality existing in the world. In addition, the development of today's digital technology has created a proliferation of images that are released from their original context, and undermine the "truth" factor present in a photograph. In the *image society*, the image itself loses its grip on reality and its capacity to act as testimony. It becomes a facsimile used to feed a parallel dimension of passive, self-referential and superfluous instincts disconnected from the essence of life. Sheila McKinnon's photography is not in this category. Her images are beautiful and strong, they not only testify, but they maintain a truth factor and a connection to life; they are exactly the opposite of superfluous, passive or self-referential.

She is not striving for a faithful imitation nor a journalistic documentation of reality. What emerges is neither a simple reproduction nor a straightforward accusation. Her images are retrieved from obscurity, are part of a design to joyfully embrace all that may become possible; a narration not only of that which exists but of that which could eventually exist; redemption from darkness through the intention of the heart.

The image exalts the aura of beings and of things, takes on new colours, mingles with the unlikely, and solicits a new becoming, devoid of sentimentalism or rhetoric. They are re-velations of the invisible.

The artist photographs to re-veal what is not visible to the naked eye. McKinnon does this in various ways: not only because she photographs those who are *Born Invisible* – young women from developing countries who are generally excluded from the political and economic agenda of the planet's power brokers - and not only because she studies so many faces within the surprising richness of the female universe. Hers is a form of re-velation because she penetrates the darkness and mystery with a photographic eye while pursuing the unseen. Her vision seeks the grace in beings, and meets them over and above the anguish of rhetoric, over and above indelible abuse and injustice: she sees them in their *being*, and celebrates them as gifts to life and to joy, despite the hardships, the needs, the violence, the pain.

In this sense, she not only reveals, she re-veils, dresses anew, revitalizes, giving the images a new resonance, a new sparkle that shines in a new light. The composition, the bright colours and the movement of the images are not aesthetic implements but tools used to extract peculiar possibilities, to stimulate dreams, expand space and the incidence of colour, to subtract the linearity of time and concentrate the sense of being on the possibility of becoming.

Here as never before, "photography has something to do with the resurrection." (*Roland Barthes, La chambre claire, 1980*).

These faces and these situations, had they been captured in their factual reality, would have been turned into a maze of despair, need and misery. Instead they are somehow *resurrected*, liberated through the photographic vision that brings them back to a state of desire, a dreaming and a yearning for a new destiny.

Adolescence is this “unfulfilled phase of eternal chaos.” It is the kingdom of all possibilities, the moment in which the path of future existence is traced, a period during which the right to accomplish life projects should be guaranteed to everyone. We know this right is denied from the start and in many ways to those who were born invisible. Nevertheless it is possible to depict what is beautiful in these humble lives and to find in their aspiration to be, the colours most in harmony with existence. Sheila McKinnon seizes life and identity in their movement rather than in inertia. She lingers on untold or withheld possibilities instead of groping in well-known scandals and violence. These images redeem the project, the possibility and the dream, the variety of unique persons who were *Born Invisible*, girls and young women who foster great strength within their invisibility: the strength of those who can laugh swallowing their tears, of those who can cook a meal without flour, of those who have the might to nurture love and humanity in the midst of war and adversity.

In this sense, the image carries its own truth, a non-evident therefore deeper, genuine truth which is more powerful, acute and stimulating. Reality is made of truth but also of promises. Life is full of critical situations, which are not only everyday tragedies but can also be dreamlike, poetic and quixotic. The real is more vast than actual reality and it includes the invisible that only a certain vision can unveil: a vision showing another time, another way in which instants are joined, in which contrasts become shining, where reality meets fantasy.

These images tell us that even in the most desperate situations, perception always grasps an undertone, a vibration of light, an explosion of colour that may change the way of things. They tell us that the world is in the *life* and in

the *flesh* of those who inhabit it. They also tell us that the world is in the eyes of those who seize it, in desire, in the possibilities of being, in the bare minimum glow of a gesture, in a smile, in the shine of someone's eyes. The reality depicted in Sheila McKinnon's work has been liberated from its bonds, expertly extracted from the recesses of the realm of possibility, filtered through a regardful vision, as in the etymology of the word *regard*: re-gard, look again and again, with new eyes every time. The looking is that which creates the substance of things. The photographic vision which sometimes has a tendency to bare its subject, to grasp details fit to satisfy voyeuristic needs, in these images becomes purely an act of re-gard towards the subjects and their lives. Looking with new smiling eyes, in order to grasp the unexpected, the invisible.

The dawning vision of adolescence and Sheila McKinnon's photographic vision meet to celebrate an encounter where words are not needed but where the spirit drifts into a secular *resurrection*. This same spirit knows that women, the *invisible* creatures, are more alive, creative and reliable than the ruling tradition normally admits. It has shown that their words, their courage and their dignity can even turn around the dying economies of many Asian and African villages confronted with the rapacious and blind logic of "profit only" thinking. This is this same spirit that might one day restore to people and to the earth the lost beauty and grace of the world.

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