

The Old Age of Women / Raquel Tibol

Vida Yovanovich's collection of forty photographs entitled *Prison of Dreams* closes at the San Ángel Cultural Center on Sunday, June 13. This is a powerful monographic essay on elderly women living at a private nursing home in Mexico City. The title, with its poetic intention, marches along one side and the images, with their raw dramatism, march along the other. If the series were to be named, say, *The Old Age of Women*, the photographer would be thrusting the spectator into the heart of a dual theme of an unfettered universality: the theme of womankind and as part of it, that of extreme old age, when hell on earth starts opening its doors, one after the other.

Théophile Gautier once wrote: "Of all the ruins in the world the ruin of a man is assuredly the saddest to contemplate." When the beautiful Vida Yovanovich (born in Cuba of Yugoslav parents, and residing in Mexico since 1956, with studies in photography in the United States) reached the critical age of forty in 1989, she began meditating on old age, and became obsessed with those features that Shakespeare had summarized in *As You Like It*: "Second childishness and mere oblivion; Sans teeth, sans eyes, sans taste, sans everything." Her speculations on the subject became so persistent that she found it necessary to seek therapy—either through a psychoanalyst or through her camera. The camera became her sharp eye, magnifying glass and dissection blade.

Vida Yovanovich had heard about a nursing home near the Basilica of Guadalupe and there she managed to win the trust of doctors and nurses who allowed her to spend many days over the course of five years in the sad world of institutionalized old age, confined to a painful prison formed not out of bars but of physical impediments. Her forty photographs represent the synthesis of a long work process and have the great virtue of not repeating situations: the elderly woman being bathed while sitting in a chair; another one, undressed, waiting her turn; the one with a large portrait of Álvaro Obregón next to her; the one who has carefully spruced herself up to listen to the radio she keeps on a nightstand next to her narrow bed; the one who has covered her face with a veil made from a gauze dressing; the one who breathes with difficulty next to a copy of the Mona Lisa; the one chasing away a pigeon with her cane; the one feeding her memory with snapshots of young people, one of whom may be herself; the one who shares her lack of appetite with the ever-vigilant voracity of pigeons; the ones who seek

comfort in crucifixes, Christ-figures, dolls, virgins; those who can still carry on a conversation; those who share a common space of permanent isolation...

The exhibition comments book contains the opinions of several visitors. Mr. Arellano wrote, "Cruel, depressing to violate the intimacy of these elderly women who most likely never gave their permission. Good photography."

Violeta Nuño was of the opinion that "As the application of learned techniques it is excellent. But at times one gets the sense that the photographer has a kind of morbid appreciation for a certain reality."

For Guillermo Pruneda, "Old women have their modesty and vanity too. They are sexual beings. Perhaps they would censure their public image. This is not entirely fair."

Vida Yovanovich is aware that she has committed an abduction of the image. But if this is what she has done here—if she did indeed steal the visible aspect of acute decay—she did so with the utmost respect. In realism, art does not have the luxury of evading sometimes very harsh truths; it has no choice but to be extremist. Vida Yovanovich's photographic documentation is artistic, and it is such precisely because of the overpowering intensity with which she compels us to meditate on the decrepitude of women. A painful and terrible period if there ever was one, one which literature has long confronted without palliatives, while there has been a predominant tendency in photography to present a gentler version of these solitudes, these humiliations, these sorrows, these most miserable of miseries.

The opinions expressed in the comments book open up the old debate on whether limits should be placed on the photographer's right to capture reality. And Vida Yovanovich herself provided a point for debate when she stated that "To steal these images I had to become transparent."

Raquel Tirol, "Vejez de mujeres."

Translated by Michelle Suderman.