

## **Prison of Dreams / José Antonio Rodríguez**

This surge toward an agonizingly dramatic intimism was unexpected; or rather, it's something rarely seen. Vida Yovanovich has been an emerging photography curator with several missteps and some successes. Using works of clearly outdated feminist tendencies, her curatorial work includes shows such as *Paint the Sun: Nine Women Photographers* (1989) and *Women By Women: Twenty-Two Female Photographers* (1989), an acceptable show presenting a retrospective vision that included current photography by artists such as Laura González or Eugenia Vargas alongside Katy Horna's fantastic compositions. Not to mention the inexplicable chaos that was *On the Cutting Edge of Time* (1992): it had no thematic framework, but out of nowhere there appeared the tutelary shadow of Tina Modotti alongside contemporary photographers (the show turned out to be a postmodern homage to Modotti).

As a photographer, Yovanovich had demonstrated a sometimes documentary approach with a tendency to proletarianism, and other work that took on a delicate approach to female universes (what she showed at *Women by Women*). She had also exhibited and published her work from time to time (in *Paint the Sun* and *On the Cutting Edge of Time*, or in the uneven book, *One Day in the Great City of Mexico*). There were images that together formed a complete narrative, but when they appeared alongside other creators, they lost their force and their raw expressionist sense. Images with a loving treatment of the elderly subject that were only a prelude to an intense record of anguish and loneliness.

Now we know. These photographs pertain to a heartbreaking visual essay that Yovanovich photographed in a hospice for the elderly, aptly titled , *Prison of Dreams*: a series of difficult images that never lose their aesthetic eloquence, instead harnessing it to show provocative personal stories of decline and decay that accept their inevitable oblivion. A narrative series that again demonstrates that old age, as Beauvoir would say, is not only a biological but also a cultural fact. This is the oppressive setting entered by spectators so that it might be stamped upon their memories: a movement in crescendo that goes from good-humored tenderness to nightmarish moments of the final abode. Thus, there are elderly women whose only alternative for company is to coexist with the pigeons in the hospice, a far cry from the manorial pleasures seen in Cartier-Bresson's 1922 portrait of Henri Matisse, where the pigeons are witnesses to his placid dotage. Or the old woman sleeping next to her memories, an old photo that shows her long-past beauty. Or the woman who in her declining years keeps a reproduction of the *Mona Lisa* above her bed, in a precise ironic balance between the impassive gaze and pain. Or the excruciating decrepitude of the old women, nude, being helped to bathe amid cries of despair (one of these is a masterpiece of an image out of cruel fantasy: a nude woman seen in silhouette sitting in a doorway, with a brightly lit background and a tiled wall next to her).

Vida Yovanovich documents this micro-universe with a gaze that accepts decrepitude and describes it precisely as it is (the modest everyday atmosphere of the equally decayed hospice). Thus, old age is a feared refuge where death seems to be the better option.

*Prison of Dreams* is on display at the San Ángel Cultural Center until June 13.

**RODRÍGUEZ, José Antonio, “La cárcel de los sueños,” *El Financiero*.**