Photographing bodies and souls

Interview with Etienne Renzo

par Pascal PIQUE - Le Musée de l'Invisible

Pascal Pique: Etienne Renzo, your career in photography and your life is both atypical and varied. It's that of someone who has a very fine and sensitive artistic and poetic approach to images and the world, but who hasn't exhibited much. Have you finally decided to come out of the woodwork?

Etienne Renzo: I've had several jobs, including photographer, farmer, pilot, aircraft mechanic and company director. So I haven't been able to devote myself exclusively to photography. But it's been with me since childhood. Up until now, I've done photography mainly for myself, and indeed, today I'm going to try to present what I do. I want to know if I can show something, if my gaze meets with an echo. My images have always had a strong connection with the human envelope, nudity and skin. Even more so today than before. But it's increasingly difficult to show images in which the nude is present. There's a fatal, almost causal relationship between the nude and controversy. Today, the risk of critical reactions to nude photographs has increased considerably. This reveals the danger of trying to interpret works by projecting onto the creator the mental schemas of the photographs' observers. By the way, there are nude photography festivals quite distinct from those of «Art Majeur»... And in general, they only show the outrageous absence of clothing.

PP: It's true that with the new religious and cultural impregnations, the field of freedoms is considerably restricted. Particularly for images and photography. And not just nude photography. How do you explain and deal with this?

ER : The problem is that these new prohibitions tend to be validated by a kind of zeitgeist and soft consensus maintained by certain cultural players who, in effect, flirt with petty commerce. Everything ends up looking the same, for a satisfaction levelled by the generally correct. Some postulate that they only want to show photos from a particular community, caste or genre, in order to claim the right to show these works. In the same way, they don't hesitate to create festivals of images of war or suffering! When will we see trophies for images of voluptuousness? Are we so misguided as not to realize that a man's foot is more worthy than his shoe? That's why I've shown so little to date...

PP: One of your first images shows two figures lost in the immensity of a minimal landscape, with a woman with a squared-off shopping bag as a target. How did this image come about?

ER: I got my first camera in 1970 at the age of 14. And I started developing it myself in my parents' bathroom. This image is one of the very first I made when I had just got that camera. I kept it because it's the only one with my grandmother and uncle together. They always took me for a walk after Sunday lunch, at the foot of the Valensole plateau in the Alpes de Haute-Provence. It's winter, because there's snow deep in the mountains.
We see my grandmother looking at her hands. She often walked with her hands outstretched,

palm down, to feel the earth. My uncle, who was a saddler, was also a bit of a dowser and felt things. He's further back in the picture. He remained a bachelor all his life in the small village of Oraison. We're probably standing on the banks of the Durance river in the middle of the fields.

PP: I see this image as a key to what you're going to develop next. What do you see as the seeds of this image?

ER : There's a lot to be said for this photo. If anything, it's the fact that it's inhabited. Cat I'm more attracted to people than landscapes. My main subject turned out to be Homo sapiens, with all its excesses. Otherwise, there's not much sky. I don't really like skies in pictures because I don't really know what to do with that space. I prefer more enclosed spaces where you can see things. And then there's the grass.

PP: It may seem strange to say, but you make a hairy photograph. A photograph with a form of hairiness. Not only in the nudes, but also with landscapes and your renderings of nature. Grass, for example, becomes hair. We also notice the hair on your models.

ER : I do like grass a lot. I don't know why exactly. They're both the hairs of the earth and a forest for insects. That's also why most of my models have hair. Men or women, even under the arms. Perhaps so that the image can breathe or perspire. Grasses are the underarm moisture regulators in my photos.

PP: You brought back some magnificent images from your trip to China in 1975, which I don't think have been seen very often. They come from another world and another era. And yet, seeing them again today, they're both timeless and very topical. Like the family portrait. Why is that?

ER : These images have never been shown. At the time, I was a Maoist sympathizer, and as a photographer I accompanied a group of doctors on a trip to study acupuncture anesthesia. I took a lot of photos in Chinese hospitals, but many of them were badly processed.
The one of the family was taken in Beijing. We were always accompanied by a guide who kept an eye on our every move. For this picture, I had asked to see how families lived in their environment. The guide took us into a building and asked a family to receive me. There's a portrait of Mao on the wall. There's also a calendar with a Russian fighter plane. I also remember the crowd following me down the street because I had red hair. To look at the foreigner. There is indeed a timeless dimension to this image, which is very close to the one of my neighbor Marguerite taken in 1997, 25 years later. What amazed me in China was that there was no great differentiation between men and women in terms of activities and professions. Everyone was in the same boat.

PP: You've also done press and show photography, as well as professional aerial photography for archaeology. You also made more «aesthetic» images long before your time.

ER : I got into aerial photography when I had a repair shop on the aerodrome I'd set up. At the time, I lived next to a village with buried Roman ruins that I used to fly over. At certain times of

the year, you could see traces of them, which I would photograph. The site was excavated shortly afterwards. Aerial photography is a very specific kind of work. The artistic dimension came later during a trip to Morocco, where I had set up an aircraft repair workshop near Casablanca. These aerial images are more graphic and abstract.

PP: How did flying and the aerial dimension come into your life? And what has it brought you?

ER: Flying came after a first flight when I was a farmer-breeder. I was really impressed and wanted to learn to fly. I gradually got involved in aircraft maintenance. This enabled me to fly quite often. This led me to convert my farmland into an airfield at a time when farming was becoming financially problematic. Strangely enough, things went very smoothly. Something that would be impossible today. Flying has given me a sense of height, while renewing my relationship with the land. Especially in the foothills of the Alps, where I used to do mountain flying by jumping off and on, or pulling gliders. You don't fly very high because you stay very close to the ground. This allowed me to discover the relief, the geological formations and a dimension of the earth that we don't see. I also became aware of the human impact, which I didn't photograph. Instead, I chose pure nature.

PP: With the exception of aerial photos, the human and/or animal figure is predominant in your images. You've done a lot of portraits. Portraiture is an art form in its own right. How do you approach it?

ER : I've always done portraits, and I like them, even if I don't always manage to capture the aura of the person. There are people with whom it just doesn't work. I like doing portraits, perhaps because they're more lively and you can tell yourself more things in the image. When I come across someone where there's something going on, I ask them to pose. They may be friends, acquaintances or strangers. I feel they have things to say through their faces, their eyes, their bodies. Maybe also because their souls are shining and smiling at me. And I feel like holding them close to me so I can look at them from time to time. And let their own vibrations look back at me. Perhaps I feel the external magnetism of these people reactivating in my memory with the images. Although I don't consider photography to be an act of memory.

PP: What is your relationship with photography as an act of memory?

ER : I don't take photographs to keep the memory of things or people. I prefer real memories to images. It's what you've experienced that remains engraved in your brain and body. Even if it's less precise than an image. But it's in the memory that we retain an impression that's more faithful than an image would be.

PP: Do you think that the magnetism of the people you feel can not only pass through, but be active through photography and images?

ER: It would seem that memory is not only stored in our brains, but also externally in a kind of magnetic field. An acquaintance of mine, the

psychiatrist Jean-Bruno Meric, wrote an astonishing book entitled «Du principe anthropique de l'homme» based on this idea. His theory, which he has experienced in his practice, states that our memory is held around us in an electro-magnetic field. He goes further, saying that this phenomenon is intimately linked to the earth's magnetic field, of which it is an emanation. He even speaks of a «geocentric fractal psychiatry» that could explain memory loss or Alzheimer's problems. Which would mean that when people disappear, their memories remain and enrich a kind of global magnetic field. I also like the idea that our memories and images are our pollen. For where do our thoughts go? Perhaps that's not too far from the question of angels. But I remain very down-to-earth.

PP: Speaking of vibration and magnetism, you raise the question of the relationship between photography and the energetics of places, people and other dimensions. More generally, photography's invisibility is often associated with forms of esotericism. But are you sensitive to these dimensions?

ER : The world has made us in its image, and the fundamental parameters on which our universe depends must be such as to allow observers to be born within it. If we observe our universe as it is, it's because it's the only one that can lead to our appearance. But our observation of the universe is truncated by the sum of our non-knowledge and our beliefs, because we can't see what we don't know, and we make no effort to recall ancestral knowledge, the knowledge of certain ancient civilizations who had suspected the existence of a host of other fundamental parameters. Fortunately, there are always mediums among us, people with unexplained powers, to preserve a modicum of this memory that may enable us to pass it on once again. We've forgotten everything, despite the examples of animals, trees and all the life around us whose workings we don't know. It's human propensity to call this «the invisible», out of softness and ignorance of what we no longer know how to see, whereas a lot of evidence is beginning to emerge, such as trees communicating, etc...

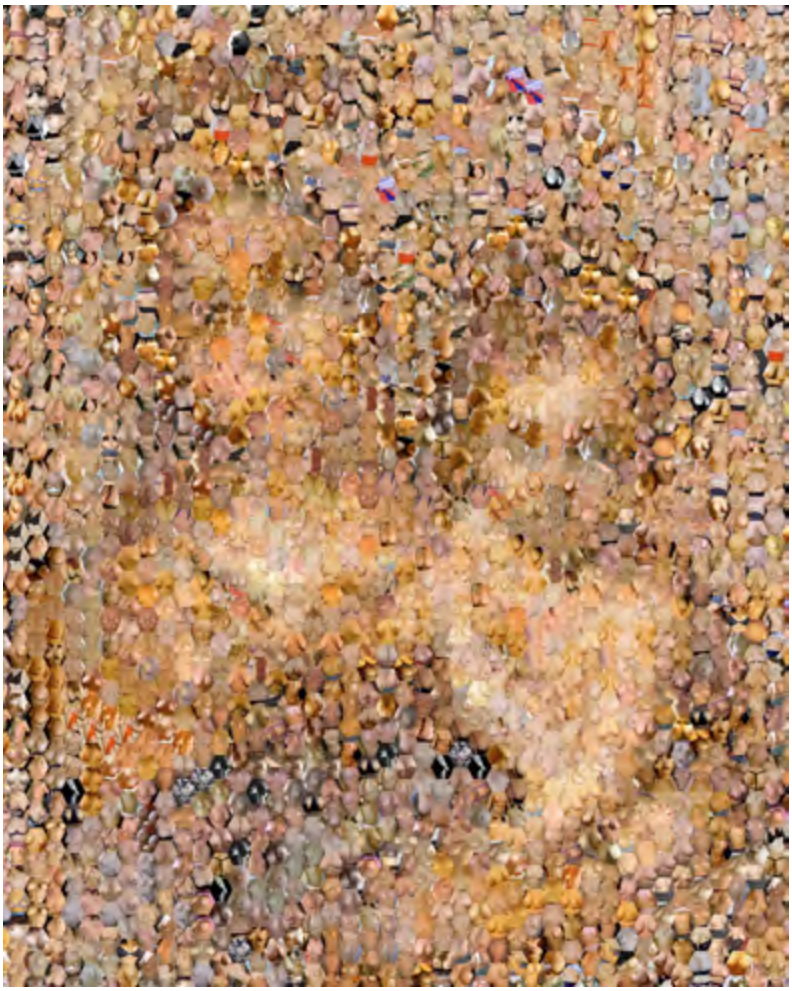
PP: The history of photography, from its very beginnings in the 19th century, is intimately linked to the questioning of the invisible, with so-called spiritual photography. That of auras, orbs and ectoplasmic manifestations. Have you ever been confronted with these phenomena in photography?

ER : I approached these questions with a photographer friend who experimented with our respective digital cameras. This friend can hardly take a photo without seeing auras, vapors or orbs. Naturally, these photos were taken without artificial light, in broad daylight, with the sun shining from behind, without any frontal light rays or flying insects - all precautions taken to avoid optical phenomena - and with different cameras. When I took the camera back to the same spot, and moved it a few meters away, the photo returned to «normal». That is, it shows what most people expect: what they saw and aimed at through the lens. When we swap cameras again a few seconds later, my photos are free of any «invisible» elements, but his are once again «populated», invariably depending on the location: old villages, freeway stations, the countryside...
For my friend, normality means making visible what we can't see. Proof of this is also to be

found in the fact that my brand-new digital camera from Japan, which doesn't give a damn about our old-fashioned beliefs, does indeed see the invisible differently for each observer. Being a pure Cartesian who is aware of his infinitesimal knowledge, but thirsty for explanations, irrational or otherwise, eager for my presentiments, I'm always on the lookout for the invisible in the human souls I photograph.

PP: Your photography can be very painterly. Whether in portraits, landscapes or genre scenes. It's as if the history of painting is still fresh in your mind. And of course photography too. Did you have an education in images?

ER : I didn't have any education or training in images. I didn't go to art or photography school, but I did go to a foundry school. Where you learn metallurgy, how to make molds and melt metal to make parts as diverse as mechanics, bells or sculpture. I'm not much of a painter, although I do have a few pictures at home, such as reproductions by Foujita or Egon Schiele. I also have some art brut that I really like.



PP: How do you view art in general and painting in particular?

ER : I like certain paintings. For example, the bare breasts of the Cinquecento Madonnas with Child, but also the fauns of the 19th century. But I wouldn't put that in my home. Having said that, I made a photograph of a Madonna and Child from a compilation of a thousand images of breasts that I took from the Internet. I took the photograph of an old painting of the Virgin and Child as a base and recomposed it in the form of a mosaic with tiny little close-up images of breasts. There's also an overt provocation of religious puritanism here.

PP: You used to be a professional photographer, but gave it up to become a farmer and return to the fields. Was gleaning the world's images no longer enough for you?

ER : I was a professional photographer both in the lab and on location in Marseille. In the beginning, I almost preferred the technical side to the final image. I loved making baths for ektas. I've always had an attraction for technique and mechanics, which has carried over into photography. That's why I have a certain relationship with quality. I didn't really glean. Even though I was shooting, it was technique that prevailed at the time. But I quickly ran out of air in Marseille. I didn't like the sea or city life. So I ended up in the Southern Alps, where I felt at home, where I felt I belonged. But what could I do up there? I started living in a community with horses. Then I rented a farm with cows and set up as a cattle farmer. I also raised pigs.

PP: So your approach to images is more intuitive than scholarly, even if your photographs are fully part of an image culture. Is this something you've cultivated?

ER: It seems to me that I've developed a very personal artistic and imaginative approach ever since I was a child. It's an intuitive creative

process, where ideas emerge autonomously in response to my will and demands. I tend to lose myself in ideas and things, in a state of trance or inner poetic gaze. An essential part of my work explores the emotions and astonishments of my childhood and adolescence. These key moments played a founding role in my construction, but unfortunately social rules condition and laminate this afterwards.
It's a form of associative system, where different thoughts, images and sensations come together to form a global vision. It's often in these moments of introspection and free flow of thought that my creative and inspiring ideas emerge.

PP: Technically, would you prefer digital or film?

ER : I've learned to do both. By working in professional photography, I actually acquired a certain technicality and precision with film. Nowadays, I take my photos with a digital camera, and I find that I work closer to the ideas that wander through my mind, or with more instant intuition than before. Digital can be an interesting way of freeing yourself from a certain weight of technique and convention.

PP: Some of your images have a cold, almost metallic, incisive quality. A bit like Helmut Newton, an artist you're particularly fond of. What is it about Newton's work that appeals to you?

ER: It's true that for me in Newton there's a distancing from his models. His female figures are too good to be true. With this magazine cover aesthetic, they almost look like robots. In fact, it was this distance that first hooked me. That's why a model and photographer friend and I decided to do Newton again, just for fun. But I'm not interested in the distant side of things, even though it's easy enough to reproduce. On the contrary, I want to get closer to the human element. I've learned to work very cleanly in photography, with images that are sharp and too clean. As a result, I find it extremely difficult to take blurred, blurred photos, whereas I'd like to be able to take images that move. I've tried video, but I haven't mastered it enough to get the final result I want.

PP: Who are the photographers who have most inspired you and how do you see photography evolving?

ER: Among the photographers who have inspired me, there are many nudes, such as Nobuyoshi Araki, Robert Mapplethorpe, Nan Goldin, Bettina Rheims, Ansel Adams, Hans Bellmer, Pierre Molinier and Annie Leibowitz. But in my Pantheon there's also Jeanloup Sief, Arno Rafael Minkkinen Guy Bourdin, Sophie Calle or Chenz, the photographer of the late Hara Kiri magazine, who also made a very good book on technique. Those who have interested me at different times have been sources of inspiration, whether in terms of technique, choice of models or subjects.
As for the evolution of photography, I'm a little puzzled, particularly by the trend towards commodification. For example, many people feel that the Rencontres d'Arles have become a kind of exclusive showcase for curators, critics and corporate sponsors.

PP: You belong to the generation that liberated consciences and morals. Your work has an erotic and even libidinal dimension that is far from anecdotal. Where does this come from?

ER : My generation was born in the seventies, a time of sexual liberation. A time when sexuality was much simpler than it is now. Having lost my parents at the age of 17, I had to deal with everyday life, so I became a slightly too serious adult

much faster than some people. It also cut me off from other people, even though I was quite shy and secretive. I gradually began to relax during my farming days, and now I have no complexes whatsoever. But that's due to the era of liberation of conscience and morals, when feelings weren't mixed up with sexuality for leisure or pleasure. Now it's not the same thing at all. The same goes for nudity. I realized this a little later after a shoot where the model spent more time undressed than dressed. Between fittings and shoots, I asked myself about the place of the nude, its meaning, its poetic and artistic significance. This echoed social and moral questions.

PP: You witnessed the beginnings of female and feminist emancipation. How did you experience this cultural revolution?

ER: I grew up in the midst of the liberation movements that began in the 70s. In particular, the feminist movement, with which I had very close friends. Among other things, we were emancipating ourselves from the weight of a certain morality, including the obligation to consider the family purpose of the sexual act through procreation. These years of sexual liberation were those of a kind of reappropriation of bodies and the need to make them exist. The feminist transition, which I hadn't questioned until then, was a driving force behind this new impetus for freedom, and I simply let myself be carried along by it. But during the shooting session I mentioned, the question of the subject/object relationship came to the fore. This period also saw the emergence of photographers who gave the nude its rightful place, without the need for detours into allegory or mythology.

PP: You yourself speak of a «libidinal ecology», while claiming a feminist stance. What do you mean by this? And how can the image contribute to this?

ER : The idea of libidinal ecology comes from the psychoanalyst Wilhelm Reich, who proposed liberating humans from the repression of their own energies, including sexual energy. Reich considered, as did we at the time, that sexual repression was a source of violence and therefore a breeding ground for fascism. The notion of libido is linked to that of vital psychic energy, which has its source in sexuality in the broadest sense, i.e. including genitality and love in general: love of self, others, objects and ideas. I believe that images can contribute to a libidinal ecology. But how can I express this in photographs? That's what I'd like to be able to do, especially with the nudes in nature, because I think we need to start again from this basis.

PP: You have a secret garden of images that you've been slow to show me. These are quite strong photographs, in which sexuality is clearly represented and practiced. But I wouldn't call them pornographic. What exactly are they?

ER : For these never-before-seen images, I'd prefer to call them images of voluptuousness. But how do you tell the story of voluptuousness as a silent state of enjoyment? How to tell the story in silence? Skin as limit. Visually and orally. Love, joy or play; if these sensations are sought and desired by most of us, their expressions are often considered shameful, inappropriate, even taboo... I cast a questioning eye on the search for these feelings, on their expressions and the limits of these.

One of the first collections of images I made was entitled «The Taste of Skin», because I felt that my photos of voluptuousness couldn't convey what was missing from the photos.
It's something we should be able to show without blushing, because sex and pleasure have forged the world around us.
Can you get a hard-on just from smelling someone? I can spend hours under a girl's armpit. These smells of sex, cock and ass aren't dirty. Why does intimacy have to be odorless, sanitized? Can we put words to these smells that are far too volatile and ephemeral to imprison in language? Sex must also be explored in sound. It's this elusiveness and at the same time this presence that captivates and transports us.

PP: There's also something very committed about these images, no pun intended. Even political.

ER : The sexual act shows just how profoundly good or evil human beings can be. It exposes human nature. Corresponding to what society

proposes as a model knocks me out. Sex is either associated with the brain or the body, whereas I think it's important to use both.
We need to take control of our sexual imagery, of our meaty wholeness. We need to produce and share these images. It's a form of subversion, so it's definitely political.
Time, place and religion give skin its limit. But this limit no longer exists when we can talk about, show without shame or taboo, war, murder, live attacks.
Talking sincerely about couples, about love and its pleasures, about enjoying bodies, about life in fact, is much less natural, much more awkward. The feminist writer and activist Benoîte Groult expressed this very well: «It's the last straw: you can't write 'vagina' without shocking people, and we don't even write it anymore, even though all humanity comes out of it!»

PP: You work a lot in series. One of the most recent is a series of nude shepherdesses with their animals, which plays on a number of themes, including the bucolic, the mythical and the erotic. How did this project develop?

ER : I work a lot in series, as this corresponds to my whims and desires. I've never established a program or themes a priori. The subjects I choose correspond to the need to produce certain images at a given moment. Images perhaps born of my dreams of Eden. These are instinctive images from which I can draw out a certain invisible reality. Particularly through nudity, which has to do with the invisible. The shepherdess series, in particular, is an extension of the nudes in nature with water or earth. This time, the aim is to capture the human and the animal in their context and their «natural» complementarity. These shepherdesses are also to be seen as muses and intermediaries with the invisible of mythological space, through their closeness to their animals.

PP: There's also the levitation series, which is more aerial. You'll be showing them alongside the bergères in a forthcoming exhibition in Arles during the Rencontres. How do they complement each other?

ER : This series was inspired by films like Wim Wenders' «Wings of Desire». With the story of the angel Damiel who loses his invisible immortal condition to experience love and desire with humans. The juxtaposition of the invisible, desire and love in our lives is also the theme of Éliséo Subiela's marvellous Argentinian film «La prochaine fois que tu meurs, dis-moi où tu vas» («The next time you die, tell me where you're going»). That's why the two series complement each other.
Photographing angels means recapturing as much as possible of the magic of everyday life and the wonder of life, so that it doesn't fall into oblivion. In this way, my photographs fulfill the task of the angels. Unveiling these images is my profane and imperfect solution to a traditionally divine task. In this sense, the use of black and white for angels, as if they only saw the essentials of things, is inescapable. The angels speak to me, but they're not the angels of religion. My angels don't fly as high as Wenders'. They're more like real, earthly angels, barely lifted off the ground. They are beautiful people, ordinary angels.
But each photograph is also about life and death. Each image has an aura that illuminates the imprint of the photograph itself. The image is therefore not real in the sense that it is also of the order of the invisible, the intangible and the impossible to quantify.

PP: In your work, we sense a powerful dual relationship with the earth and the air. It's as if your art sought to bridge the earthly and the celestial. Does this speak to you?

ER : Yes, very much so. It sums up and corresponds to the different stages and dimensions I've experienced: the earthly with agriculture and the celestial with aerial flight. Bringing together the earth and the sky means re-establishing a natural and cultural continuity, whereas we are in a state of discontinuity. That's why I'm interested in bringing shepherd muses or levitating angels back to earthly reality.
It's also true that rising above routine is a form of therapy. Not least to escape meaningless lives that resemble emotional deserts. I forget who said that if a tribesman could no longer climb the highest tree in the jungle to observe things from above, his survival was in jeopardy. The ability

to see the big picture, to detach oneself from gravity, to rise above the ground, is an essential condition for human existence, a necessity rooted in our anthropo-biological nature. It is this ability that enables man to live and continue his journey on the ground.

PP: Some of your images evoke metaphysics and transcendence. To the point of having animist resonances of fusion with nature, even if you reject any form of belief or mysticism. Yet you photograph angels, and there seems to be room for the invisible in your visible work. What is your relationship with the invisible and mystery?

ER : My angels answer that question. They are real people trying to rise. But it's also the photographer who elevates them or transmutes them into semi-divine beings. Which is a way of making them sacred. It's the photographer's decision alone, without any religious or spiritual dogmatism. This is also why the animist dimension is so important. It hints at the metaphysical continuity that needs to be re-established between humans, animals and non-humans, at a time when our cosmology is showing us nothing but discontinuity. The images that emerge are a kind of «pollen» - as in Pierre Barouh's song - that I scatter between earth and sky to restore this junction. But mystery is only so mysterious because we've forgotten what we know. Where do our wandering thoughts go? They add up to those of the earth, the immemorial receptacle of all nature's beings.
Photography cannot escape reality. For it passes through the eye of the author and his emotional heritage, transforming reality. Whereas, for example, angels remain invisible, photography makes them visible. Consequently, capturing the corporeal aspect of what appears in my images by rendering the invisible means succeeding in conveying the idea of the invisible.
This, I believe, is what expresses my relationship with nature, in the broader sense of all that exists and is unknown to us. All the interactions of living things, which don't just include humans, and which we've forgotten since the dawn of time.

PP: You also have an eye and an ear for philosophy and current debates on the relationship with

nature, the feminine and ecology. What makes you particularly aware of current debates?

ER: My images are a questioning of the mysterious links between transitions of gender and state, and of how to deconstruct and connect the binary oppositions that often separate rather than bring together: masculine and feminine, visible and invisible, dream and awakening, human and non-human.
They also suggest that this is a quest to understand what transforms and transcends, weaving together different worlds to imagine a movement to abolish borders, binarities and assignments. It must also be a careful observation of the fluidity of identities and conventional categories, which should call into question the limits and barriers we tend to impose and to impose on ourselves. That's why I think it's important to invite us to imagine a world where the boundaries between the earthly and the celestial are blurred, where categories are not fixed, and where individuals can be free to define themselves and explore beyond pre-established conventions for a more fluid vision of the world.

PP: It's been said that humans have lost their connection with nature and the cosmos. And

that current environmental and societal problems are largely due to this phenomenon. So we need to rediscover and restore these connections. Do you think images and photography can help?

ER : I do believe that our contemporary civilization has lost its connection with the invisible, the distant, the non-human, the cosmos. Technological advances and the evolution of societies have created a world of borders and divisions, with economic and political systems that often favor sclerosis and domination, a capitalist world, under generalized surveillance, where opacity, mystery and secrecy have disappeared.
But there are still opportunities to discover and explore other paths, to transcend the limits imposed by this system. We need to cultivate an alternative perspective by questioning the social and cultural norms that define what is considered «normal» or «acceptable». This means exploring and questioning established boundaries and categories, reinventing our relationship with the non-human, and rebuilding our relationship with this world by reconnecting with it.

PP: But in fact, how do the images come to you? Are there any images that can't be photographed?

ER: Most of my ideas are initially vague or symbolic; it's a complex process. And it can be difficult to make immediate sense of all the images and symbols that present themselves to me. Time, reflection and exploration of these ideas help me to decipher their meaning. Some might liken this to shamanism, which is often associated with altered states of consciousness, connection with spiritual forces and exploration of inner worlds. But this is only a personal exploration of my edens. Maintaining an organic bond with nature is a compelling inclination in my photos. In this sense, they are to be seen as a study in doubts, and invite readers to inhabit the gaps and fill in the omissions. For example, what makes a body? I don't know. I don't see things through my viewfinder when I photograph. I simply feel them. Sometimes, everything I photograph is the fruit of my imagination, and in those moments, the physical world is nothing but chimeras dressed up to look solid.

PP: Have you ever considered restoring nature for its own sake, and exploring what we now call the non-human, whether living or non-living?

ER: My desire before pressing the shutter release is for my images to remove the skin and reveal for a moment what nudity used to conceal, which for me is the organic palpitation of the living in its original sense. To explore reality, living or otherwise, you have to disregard your own experience, which is very difficult. And I can never be sure whether I understand it or not. It's because I manage to grasp certain aspects of life, that I never give up on the idea that I might grasp others and get to the bottom of the story!

PP: Davi Kopenawa, shaman spokesman for the Yanomami of Amazonia, who wrote «The Sky Falls», also talks about skin and image. But he says that through the «skins of images», i.e. the photographs and information media we constantly look at, modern white man «scrutinizes only his own thoughts and knows only what is inside himself». In other words, he is no longer able to see spirits or welcome visions. The visionary phenomenon has, in a way, been

replaced by that of photography. Does this concern you?

ER: I wasn't familiar with these writings by Davi Kopenawa. In my opinion, all types of photography have the right to be different, and photography is useful for many things, as a testimony, as a memory aid, or simply as an aesthetic object that's pleasant to look at. Indeed, I try to reproduce my mental visions, and that's what's been driving me for some time now. I can't define myself as a visionary; that's for the readers of my images to judge! Perhaps that's what the work of a «creator» is all about, sensing the unseen and blazing trails in the jungle.

PP: What images would you like to make in the future? And what does making work and being an artist mean to you today?

ER: I don't yet know what I'm going to feel, and therefore perhaps photograph, tomorrow. Nor do I know whether it will give me the absolute need to try to capture my perception of it through the lens. Now it's very often a matter of impulse. I'd say that my strong images are always fortuitous, even when they are adorned with the best intentions.

For me, art and beauty are not the result of some kind of teaching, but of an individual aesthetic shock, of a charismatic relationship with works of art. It's the gaze that makes the work, and it's not a solitary act. I like what Raoul Vaneigem says in his Traité de savoir vivre à l'usage des jeunes générations: «Creation is less important than the process that generates the work, than the act of creating. The state of creativity makes the artist, not the museum. Unfortunately, artists rarely recognize themselves as creators. Most of the time, he's posing in front of an audience, showing off...»