

Raúl Flores *Instantáneas*

The Last Copy

By Alejandra Aguado

When Raúl Flores decided to appropriate photography as a medium—back in the mid-90s, after a period of producing objects and installations in which the edible and the everyday were given the status of ornament or object of study—it provided him with the possibility of unraveling the nature of what surrounded him in a new way. Photography allowed him to stop thinking about the forms of these things that he adored, even if only by habit, and to stop looking for some way to make the grotesque endearing by way of clinical order. From then on, the rectangular plane and photographic series would suffice as schemes of order, allowing what was exhibited to recover its messy, casual nature. Where his earliest works were the result of separating and arranging cookies, candy, plates, silverware or roses in modules that enabled him to scrutinize and share in equal parts the things that are usually given to us in assortments—along with constructing geometries, motifs, patterns and rations that way—all this sugary charm, this tender, tacky world that accompanies us as we go about dealing with the day to day went on to be a testimony to the reality that, in fact, none of it is ever effectively subjected to that degree of order. Need arises along the way, and the limits of what is actually possible appear; deterioration occurs without warning, and we give in to desire, carelessness, anxiety and emotion. One after the other, the series by Flores gradually delineate a particular history of habit, one that uncovers not so much the form that order or beauty adopt, so much as the fact that it is the intention of order and beauty that dominates us; and that what we accomplish meanwhile is the result of a vital equation between need, care and faith, and that more than technique—even in disorder—what brings us relief and keeps up company is a little bit of system.

Between 1997 and 2020 and with greater or lesser degrees of exhaustiveness, Flores produced series that recorded everyday life, urban history and personal movements. Between intimate diaries and sociological studies, they made the ways in which continuity accompanies chaos, or rationalization accompanies poverty, visible. They recovered traits of personality in a world of standards, and uncovered the empathy that can be

found in excess; how grace inhabits the absurd, or dedication, or the act of begging, and they demonstrated the manner in which the repetition of gestures allows the generation of a social language. In *Ración* (Ration), 1997, over two hundred Polaroid photos record the same quantity of empty plates that resulted from the lunches that Flores afforded himself every day with the same limited amount of money. From 2006, *Paredes de aire* (Walls of Air) portrays our tendency to organize even when there is no context, and the inevitability of inhabiting a place with whatever is at hand. *En tránsito* (In Transit), 2007, is a batch of photographs that exhibit the things that wind up hidden or forgotten under the bed, indecently accosted by the use of flash. The photos in the *Heladeras* (Refrigerators) series, 1997, which record the contents of these artifacts in the homes of several people that Flores knows, not only portray their owners in accordance with their consumption, but also have the density of an anti-supermarket catalog. Bathed in the cold light of the conservation apparatus, they also seem to be anticipatory x-rays of a digestion process. In every one of these series, there is the sensation that we are observing remains, a world that is used, worn out and trodden; efforts made in the midst of fatigue or scarcity. Nevertheless, true to his sense of humor, Flores found sympathy in every one of these shots. Although using a systematic approach to the extent that it was justified and necessary, his photos are far from any desire for technical perfection; they are a curious, complicit record, the testimony of a gaze that is affectionate and interested, with an understanding of what is implied in going on with the show of living.

Flores made the most of the call for introspection brought on by 2020, accelerating a different task: that of organizing his own archive, revising the work already produced and delving into another mode of self-knowledge. With neither streets to roam nor meetings to attend—without all the social life that had, until then, entered his work by way of his lens—and true to the inclination toward a systematic approach, he undertook a process of surveying and establishing order. And just as he had done as a tourist walking along the Rambla in Barcelona, or in amusement parks in Argentina, he went about leveling his meticulous gaze on what the course of his own history has to tell today. The repercussions of a process as intimate, as long and as retrospective as this one are probably impossible to predict in such a short time frame. Without

weighing what degree of analysis can be brought to this by any external set of eyes, there is, nevertheless, an effect that we can already witness today, and it has enabled Raúl Flores to exit the instance of evaluation and go back to tackling production. This is where *Instantáneas* (Snapshots) emerges, his first show at W Galería: a series of drawings interrupted by his photographs—which he copies—simultaneously implying repetition and renovation, closure and aperture.

If for Flores photography is, as historian and curator Marcelo Pachecho has described, a “practical medium”—something that signified the possibility of having an idea and instantly setting out to materialize it—then drawing now appears as an almost theoretical medium, one that is useful for an artist who instead of immediacy, is now seeking reflection and study, who instead of capturing images as he walks, now calmly sits at a table ruminating them, who is no less in tune with the lightness of everyday routine, yet goes through an almost ritual act. Anxiousness does appear, however, in the need to organize himself, to present himself and return to producing series, to rapidly find a way to catalog—now in standardized paper size and the consistency offered by the monochrome of graphite—a labor that that his very stroke provided, though he may not have realized it at times. He celebrates and plays the part of both ally and adversary to photography, a medium of multiples: as a gesture of thanks, he gives the gift of a copy to those pieces that the market pressured him to maintain as unique, reproducing editions that could be considered already concluded one more time, outwitting his own system with the definitive, unrepeatable, nature of drawing. In this act of debut and farewell, where this extravagant reduction, so *à la* Flores, mixing art and life, is contained in the apparent seriousness of drawing on paper, I imagine Raúl beside himself with laughter, compulsively observing his own art, happy to have found, yet again, a way of “seeing [his] life like a collection of butterflies”¹.

1 Raúl Flores in an interview with the author, May 2024.

