

THE MIRROR BETWEEN US / O ESPELHO ENTRE NÓS

Sherry Wiggins and Luís Branco



Essay by Cydney M. Payton



Two Chairs, at Herdade da Marmeleira, 2015, 50 x 75 cm



Two Sherrys at Herdade da Marmeleira, 2015, 50 x 75 cm

MIRROR IMAGE

“The camera is the ideal arm of consciousness.” —Susan Sontag

Mere scattered light and atoms make photographs. A photograph multiplies the self into another dimension, a rotation in the vector of two objects to create a mirror image of the other. As Susan Sontag wrote in *On Photography*, the camera allows one to lay claim to another reality. Sherry Wiggins and Luís Branco’s collaborative project *The Mirror Between Us / O Espelho Entre Nós* presents us with questions about female agency in such reality creation.

Today, the general nature of self-representation has become complicated by the full-throttle world of image manufacturing and collection—Twitter, Instagram, Facebook, news cycles. We are overburdened with sorting not only pictures but their implied histories and meanings. It is clear that making artistic work is far from the immediacy of a snapshot. So, when we look at the Wiggins/Branco photographs what are we to look for? The subject, easily identified as the artist Wiggins, is a woman of a certain age. Yet, it is in the broader subjects of landscape and nature that the narrative splits from that preconception. Amid lush fields and ancient cork trees, an artisanal past comes forward in idyllic even aggressive presentations of womanhood in nature.

The collaboration between Wiggins and photographer Luís Filipe Branco began in 2015 when Wiggins entered a residency at the rural OBRAS Foundation near Evoramonte in Portugal. Arriving from her home in Boulder, Colorado, Wiggins was already committed to a long-term investigation that she termed *Searching Selves*, a conceptual process whereby she would delve into the artistic practices of other artists. The aim was to challenge her studio practice by studying then traveling to locations where the artists lived to make work that conceptually spoke about her art and its relationship to those she was excavating. For Wiggins, intellectually and artistically embodying other artist’s work has become a unique methodology to confront ideas about female (re)presentation. At OBRAS, she’d chosen to investigate the late Portuguese artist Helena Almeida who, like Wiggins, had a history of making performative photographs.

Initially, Branco came to OBRAS to document Wiggins’ Almeida-adjacent performances. For this work—performance, photographs, drawings—Wiggins entered into an Almeida-like emotional space. Where Almeida sought to arrange the body as a performance of painting, Wiggins would arrange the body against a material structure. Branco’s first photographs of Wiggins show a woman almost dancing on an overblown abstracted red flower designed with fabric. Branco, known as a photojournalist but trained as a fine artist, wanted the chance to make his images using Wiggins in a classical sense as an artist’s model. However, once their work began things quickly changed; the making of images became more of an exchange between the two artists, a mirroring, as seen in *Two Chairs, at Herdade da Marmeleira*, 2015 and *Two Sherrys at Herdade da Marmeleira*, 2015. Over the following four years, Wiggins/Branco would create five projects with Wiggins in the roles of creative agitator, model, and director and Branco as producer and image-maker. *The Mirror Between Us* represents work from four of those collaborations all produced in Portugal. The most recent project, inspired by the French artist Claude Cahun (1894-1954), began in the Netherlands in 2019 and is planned for production in 2021.

By creating a process of collaboration built on sites and ideas—some of which followed Wiggins continued *Searching Selves* investigation and others which evolved from their mutual interest in

the landscape—Wiggins/Branco have generated several bodies of work largely gripped by issues of feminist presentation. By this I mean, that we cannot look at these photographs without impressing upon them the various histories of how women have been, and are, looked at. To some viewers, the largest consideration might be Wiggins' age. By examining it, weighing it against notions of youth and beauty, we can see the agency that an older female body can have when captured by the lens against the landscape.

As we know, the notion of landscape is a modern invention. Historically, it was a word that came to represent the way gentry borrowed views thus cultivating and often stealing both image and land. In this regard, landscape implies acts of aggression, theft of property. The term arose in isolation from a true understanding that woodlands, hills, plains can never be truly owned. Landscape provided the means for nature to be lawfully bartered, traded, occupied. Borrowing a view might seem noble but it also suggests gendered exploitation of boundaries as property rights were for generations the domain of men. We can easily imagine that *Seat at Evoramonte*, 2019, suggests a kind of occupation by an unwanted figure on someone else's land or expulsion of the woman in the frame from inside a home to the wilds outside. We see the body in this image precariously situated on a chair that tilts against the horizon with a single, almost skeletal tree, her hair echoing its loosely structural form. Branco has given the image weight by pushing the dynamic between the two objects—body and tree—with a sparseness that relates his work to Portuguese photographer Paulo Nozolino known for high-contrast black and white images with raw yet poetical graphic power.

In the series *Outside Woman I & II*, 2019, there is a reversal of this historic reading of the feminine body and nature. Until the nineteenth century most women, those without wealth and status, were held captive by domestic roles that led them to be rarely seen unaccompanied outside. Even peering from a window was seen as dangerous; the female body uncontained and being *of nature* posed a threat



Outside Woman I, 2019 80 x 120 cm

to male sexuality and power. In the photographs *Outside Woman I & II*, the woman is not only literally outside the window but she is draped in sheer flesh-colored fabric seemingly autoerotically possessed, drawing us into a conversation about statuary and ancient goddesses. Aphrodite comes forward but it is pre-Hellenic goddess Astarte in her aspect as the “Queen of the Evening Star,” a goddess of love, who resides in Wiggins’ provocation.

A more contemporary view suggests that the female form in *Outside Woman I & II*, being released from the bondage of domesticity, finds its natural footing unbound in nature while the camera with its implied maleness—to aim and shoot—remains trapped inside. Still, it has to be acknowledged that there is an edge of voyeurism to the images, a tilt of the power toward the lens and its operator. However, the woman appears unaware of the presence of being viewed—being shot—deferring the position of power to an external body of viewership such as us.

The coupling of these two artists—female and male, artist and cameraman—court criticality. Issues of power and sexuality are entwined with any reading of the work. These are issues in this era not to be overlooked. The bargain that is being struck between informed audiences and the image makers is that the work holds value in the presentation of the very ideas and concepts that might be objectionable in feminism; that we can gauge the power that is being brought into question, seeing it lob back and forth between the two artists.

Ultimately, the structure of this collaboration is directed by Wiggins’ incisive pursuit of self through reflection. It becomes evident in the repetitive figuration and performative practice that is being worked. However, Branco’s role is more than one of an absorptive responder, it requires attunement and mediation of technical and ephemeral factors. From Sontag, we also learn, “*Photographs don’t seem deeply beholden to the intentions of an artist. Rather, they owe their existence to a loose cooperation (quasi-magical, quasi-accidental) between photographer and subject.*” If this holds, then the images from



Outside Woman II, 2019, 80 x 120 cm



Seat at Evoramonte, 2019, 80 x 120 cm

the Wiggins/Branco collaboration move beyond a gendered platform into a more open conversation about dialogue in artistic practice, something that is often overlooked by a continued interest in the preciousness of production as largely an individualistic form to be codified as genius, even today, and especially in photography. Regardless, the photographs are not moralistic, but more representative of the oft-overlooked subjects—women and age.

This mirroring between the artists lends complexity to the Wiggins/Branco photographs as they are seen against the contemporary gloss of pictures created and consumed today. In *Mirror at Santa Susanna*, 2017, a woman holds an oval mirror refracting a blot of sunlight. It blinds the viewer from seeing the reflection of the camera lens, the photographer, and the artist in the mirror. This blast of light directs us to look in more detail at the background where arches of an ancient aqueduct run alongside a lake, now almost emptied by severe drought.

Civilizations' first mirrors were pools of water—ponds, lakes, streams, oceans. Searching for a reflection of self in the surface of water, metal or glass is as ancient as the Egyptians, Greeks, and Romans. Yet, even to this day, mirrors like cameras, are seen by some as instruments that trap the soul negating individualism and soulfulness. It is as if the artists have chosen Santa Susanna as a site for their project to speak about its lost abilities as a soul-catcher since a lake without a watery surface is a lake abandoned by its phantasmagorical language. Wiggins/Branco's *Mirror at Santa Susanna* bids us examine the connections between Santa Susanna and her lost art of reflection.

Reflection by definition throws back a body or surface of light without absorbing it. What makes us want to see ourselves in such a transitory dimension? Philosopher Jacques Lacan posited that “mirroring” is necessary to the primacy of development. Lacan's concept of the mirror stage theorized that our earliest recognition of selfhood through reflection creates a way for the individual to define self against the spatial objectness of all that is around us. With the title, *The Mirror Between Us*, Wiggins/



Mirror at Santa Susana, 2017, 80 x 120 cm

Branco have suggested that a mirror need not be directly situated for self-image. That it is in the middle space, between two objects, two reflections, that we are bound to what is timelessly feminine, axial and a vector, for the self and others.

The last word from Sontag on what appeals to us about looking at such images as those in this grouping and questioning what gives them artistic grounding. “*Through photographs we follow in the most intimate, troubling way the reality of how people age.*” She continues by stating, that to look back at a photograph of oneself or of anyone, famed or ordinary, artist or not, “*is to feel, first of all, how much younger (she, he) was then.*” No matter how long ago the image was made it still sits in the past. This is the experience, putting a gage on mortality, that attracts us to photography in general but it is also what attracts us to *The Mirror Between Us*, as we are witnessing a historic event, a past encounter, some kind of documentary evidence of the subject’s age made ageless by its photographic transcription.

—Cydney M. Payton
February, 2020

NOTES

1. Susan Sontag, *On Photography*, (New York, New York, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1971). iii-lxx
2. A listing of Wiggins’ project *Searching Selves* to date, by order of production, includes Russian-American avant-garde filmmaker Maya Deren; Indian minimalist Nasreen Mohamedi; Portuguese conceptualist Helena Almeida; Brazilian multimedia artist Mira Schendel; and French writer and photographer Claude Cahun.



Dying Waters at Santa Susana, 2017, 80 x 120 cm

This publication occasions the exhibition *The Mirror Between Us/ O Espelho Entre Nós* at the Igreja de São Vicente in Évora, Portugal. The exhibition is now scheduled for 2021. It will feature twenty-two performative photographs created over a four-year period by Sherry Wiggins and Luís Branco.

Other projects by Wiggins/Branco include *Meeting Her Again / Reencontrando-a* for the Palácio dos Marqueses de Praia e Monforte, Estremoz, Portugal and Michael Warren Contemporary, Denver, Colorado (2017-18), and *Selected Works* for The Month of Photography, Redline Contemporary Art Center, Denver (2019).

SHERRY WIGGINS, an interdisciplinary artist, focuses on art as a specifically feminine/ feminist relational process and enactment. Her intensive international research and art practice is documented on her blog. Wiggins has exhibited extensively in the US and internationally in museums and art spaces in Brazil, India, Palestine, and Portugal, to name a few. Wiggins is represented by Michael Warren Contemporary. She lives in Boulder, Colorado. <http://sherrywiggins.com/>
<https://sherrywigginsblog.com/>

LUÍS FILIPE BRANCO began his career as a photojournalist at the Jornal Público in Lisbon. Since then, Branco's career has focused on freelance photography and photojournalism. More recently, he has worked as filmmaker and producer with GMT, a company dedicated to the production of documentary films on culture and on institutions. Branco has also collaborated with numerous musicians, poets and visual artists on fine art photography projects. He lives in Lisbon, Portugal. <https://www.facebook.com/lfilipebranco>

CYDNEY M. PAYTON is an independent exhibition maker and writer. She lives in Monterey, California. <http://www.cydneypayton.com/>

The artists wish to extend their gratitude to Carolien van der Laan and Ludger van der Eerden, founders of the OBRAS Foundation, Evoramonte, Portugal <http://www.obras-art.org/>; the Municipality of Évora; Margarida Branco; and Joseph Logan, designer of the brochure.

Cover: *Woman at the Bridge*, 2017, 80 x 120 cm



Encarnado, 2017, 120 x 80 cm