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NELL DORR
with her lens, searching the meaning of life

around Nell Dorr's "The Bare Feet" by A. H. S. Craeybecks

Eminent poets art critics scientists and photographers have made about Nell Dorr's books the most flattering statements that one can make about a photographer.

Strangely with the exception of an article in Photorama, I don't remember having seen a single reproduction of her work in the leading (European) photographic magazines. How can one explain such negligence? Let us say at once that the pictures of Nell Dorr are not "modern". She does not experiment except in her films. Her technique is a gift she received from the hands of her father and it does not occur to her to change in it anything essential. What interests and attracts her is Man in relation to his world and, moreover, the simple man living an all intuitive life. Obviously landscapes as such do not arouse her interest; on the other hand it is the humanized landscape, the landscape taken as co-actor, as participant to human actions, that plays an important role in her work. Her preference is for mothers and children, animals and plants. The "sentimental" touch is completely absent from her work. One would not say - ever - of her photos a: "they are nice, pleasant or pleasing."Her sense of life gets the depth of things. The world she evokes through her images and her biblical context - Nell Dorr is also a gifted writer with a rare power of expression - gets to our deepest emotions and conceptions.

Maybe this is the reason why her work was blessed from the beginning with such success by poets or by "minds" oriented toward philosophical reflections.

I believe however that it would diminish both photographers and "amateur" photographers to think that they could be insensitive to the simple beauty of Nell Dorr's work.

Let us try to characterize with more precision. Her photographs speak a direct language, sober, but in them, one senses an impression which is difficult to translate into words: an intimacy and a tranquility that one only finds in the paintings of the primitives. Although she shows us things, man, animals, plants, ordinary objects as we can see them everyday, they appear different, familiar, but yet at the same time strange and mysterious, as if liberated in an atmosphere of peace - timeless - in a world where days come and go in the midst of silence, a world confined to the peace of the stars.

This explains how one does not consider things from the same point of view after having meditated on Nell Dorr's photographs. Like all true artists, she is able to pierce the veil of appearances and to discover what is hidden. Everything in her work is pure and simple, without riddle and clothed in silence. One does

not find a trace of anxiety in her work - nothing feverish either, nor equivocal. She accepts with a childlike love everything which exists as a part of the universe to which she, too, belongs. The essence of her work is deeply religious, in the sense of an intimate communion with everything which exists.

As one can hear the voice of an ocean by holding a shell to one's ear, she evokes, with everyone of her pictures, the world, the entire world.

I have said it already: Nell Dorr feels drawn to the simple man who lives an intuitive existence. This one finds again - and probably even to a greater extent than before - in her last work "The Bare Feet".

Quite accidentally, during a trip to Mexico she got to penetrate a small community still living in a natural state - weavers, shepherds. It was a village, Teotilan, hidden in the peaceful valley of Oaxaca. Charming and unsophisticated as she is, she didn't find it difficult to be accepted among the villagers. She lived there barefoot as they did, dressed as they did, nothing of an American tourist, and she returned twice more.

On her first trip, she succeeded in taking pictures with a Polaroid camera, of the family with whom she lived. And when she handed them the prints a few moments later, it was for them as if she had performed a miracle: they put the pictures on their small primitive altar and everyone came to wonder and exclaim.

When she had run completely out of her Polaroid film, she explained to them that she too had an altar for which she would like to take pictures of them and so was able to move freely among them and to take pictures to her heart's content. "This book is my altar," she says in her text, "and these are the pictures that were made for it."

"My altar:" there is in fact something sacred about the book. The first pages show us the archaic divinities, mysterious, draped in eternity. And all throughout the book we meet scenes of a religious nature. As with most primitive people, everything is subject to consecration: fruit, seedlings, flocks... beautiful frescoes powerful in rhythm show us the life of the people of Teotilan, women working or at the market, men at their looms, children taking care of flocks, the little ones playing -- their serious eyes questioning. Everywhere throughout that community -- a matriarchy -- it is the picturesof the mothers, the grandmothers, the great-grandmothers that predominate. "The Bare Feet" is a book full of grandeur, full of interests also, so one never gets tired of contemplating it, because it evokes in us so much more than it shows directly.

I asked Nell Dorr what she had gained from her visit to Teotilan; she answered; "It cured me from the disease of civilization." Does this mean that she does not

like civilization? I did not ask her the question. But I know that she has dedicated a film of hers to the good of science and contemporary technic. "I have pictured the life of the people of Teotlan as it was a few years ago," she said, "but maybe the small street is already being paved, and noisy jukeboxes are raising their voices..." We must recognize that civilization does not present itself always as sympathetically as UNESCO wishes it...

As a whole, the work of Neil Dorr unveils, without showing it, the tearing apart of man in relation to the growing chaos in which he lives. In the meantime, it is also a pathetic "profession de foi" toward "man" himself.

What Neil Dorr teaches us is first of all that photography is able to express the most fugitive and the deepest movements of the human spirit or the human heart; then, that for the photographer as for the painter, sculptor or poet, the first thing which counts is to have something to say. Our work is only and can only be the image of the world that lives within us and no virtuosity -- whether abstract or concrete, figurative or non-figurative -- can create the illusion of what does not exist. Nothing valuable could spring out of a kingdom based on vulgar thought or vulgar feelings. That is why the first task of a creator is to live, live intensely, and to participate with all his being in the lives of his fellowmen.