

Words, Pictures,
and the Reference Book
of the Mind
Vicki Goldberg

“When people look at my pictures I want them to feel the way they do when they want to read a line of a poem twice.” Robert Frank

Traslochi means movement, changing places, by dint of muscle or wheel or engine. It also means movements of the mind, that ceaseless engine that arranges and rearranges memories of the paths it took to knowledge, experience, rectitude, or remorse. So the word encompasses metaphorical journeys too – as in Paola Pennecchi’s “Leaving landscape / behind./ Being /a landscape. / Going / back / to play.”

Alison Harris has journeyed to many places in Italy accompanied by her camera – and her sense of metaphorical journeys. She brings with her a vivid awareness that the brain appropriates the data of vision and automatically imbues the observed world with personal meanings accumulated over the course of a life. (Which means that each of us is likely to see a place or an image differently, or at least with a different resonance, as human beings are mercifully unlike one another. Every mind is an enormous reference book more keyed in to personal matters than even Google can ever match. This means that the “meaning” of a photograph is to some degree unstable and open to individual interpretation.) Harris assumes the difficult task of instilling that awareness into the photograph itself, an approach she has followed for years.

Harris has a strong tendency toward linear near-abstractions fashioned from recognizable objects or a play of geometries against irregular and undefinable shapes. *From Paolo’s window, Milan* (2004) looks down past the awkwardly curving outlines of several definitively bare and rather brutally pruned trees to a girl in white furiously running across an imperfect white circle. *Nautical flags, Montallegro* (2011) is a wonderfully baffling image of imperfect geometric shapes hovering in the sky smack up against the front plane of the picture. Above them, bare, black, spidery trees proffer their useless branches like the remnants of an uneasy dream. Such pictures are camera discoveries – the eye might see but could not retain them – and unanswered questions: what’s going on here, and what, beyond aesthetic reward, does it signify?

Other “landscapes,” like *Port, Genoa* (2010), view the city not as a rational grid but as an evolution toward complexity and calm disorder. An extremely orderly garden in the Villa Borghese features the armless bust of a famous Italian solemnly contemplating an ivy necklace, or perhaps trying to make eye contact with another notable stone Italian just beyond a hedge. Seas beckon to curved horizons, proving the earth round yet again. Tram tracks cross each other and go rigorously in opposite directions (as life itself is wont to do), a reminder, with reference to a poem about a tram, that the journey comes from somewhere behind, goes to somewhere ahead, and is more complicated than you might suppose. Like all photographs, these are tiny excerpts from existence, and like most of Harris’s photographs they do not make pronouncements but tell unfinished tales.

“For me ,” Harris writes, “(the photographs) reflect what it means to move from one mental space to another while engaging in a physical reality... Spaces and objects are defined by light and we charge them with memories, giving them significance and making them ours. The past merges with the present, opening a way to the future. This happens in a frame that becomes part of a sequence. A narrative emerges. *Traslochi* is an open-ended narrative where photographs become vehicles to describe a state of tension and questioning when looking out at the world.”

Although she is a long-time friend of Paola Pennechi, Harris only discovered her poetry recently; she was struck by its “precision and clarity,” its starkness and intimacy. “Her language is concrete,” she says. “Nouns are used to describe sensations and an inner life.” Her description could be applied to a great range of photography, which made its initial reputation on its precision and clarity and when not describing action generally speaks a language of nouns (which sometimes do double duty as adjectives). Harris’s work in particular is frequently stark even while describing less easily defined sensations.

When Pennecchi saw *Chiaroscuro*, an earlier exhibition and book of Harris's, she was so struck by photographs of plangent light and darkness and evocative details in an historic Italian theater that she asked Harris to read her poems and collaborate with her on a book. Harris took the two tram pictures specifically for this book but, having discovered that she and Pennecchi had such similar responses to landscape, found in her archive many images that whispered the message implicit in the poetry: the interaction of mind and place, sight and memory, past and present. "The *Traslochi* photos," she writes, "are an oblique self-portrait and a response to Paola's poetry." In some elusive way, works of art must be self portraits more often than we realize, pulled up from inner worlds, mirroring emotional states that may not even be easily explained.

Traslochi, the book, is in fact a dialogue and the photographs are less illustrations than they are echoes, responses, queries, comments, parallel or tangential observations. This collaboration has produced a most unusual way to publish photography and poetry together. Not that photographic illustration of poetry is uncommon; it is not. Walker Evans first arrived on the scene as a photographer with photographs illustrating Hart Crane's book-length poem *The Bridge*, about the Brooklyn Bridge, in 1930. More recently, Thom Gunn, the Anglo/American poet (and winner of a MacArthur Fellowship), wrote a book for which his brother took the photographs, and Paul Muldoon, the poetry editor of the *New Yorker*, worked with the photographer Norman McBeath on a book of poems. But putting the words and pictures back to back, separate books joined at the hip like Siamese twins, is rare if not unique.

The experience is rather like a play read first, seen afterward and suddenly embodied for better or worse, changed, changing, commented on. It's almost like seeing a landscape and finding your childhood in it – where I find only the stirrings of a long-lost love or an absent parent... Both photography and poetry are capable of teasing the mind and tugging at it, reverberating in unexpected ways.

O give thanks – for photography, poetry, and the mind.