

BOOK REVIEW

by William Dowell



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BEFORE WINTER: One woman's photographic vision, late at night on the streets of Zagreb & Dubrovnik

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The current trend in photography favors larger and larger digital sensors combined with advanced electronics and lenses engineered to produce a sharpness rarely experienced in the past. Olga Karlovac has taken the opposite approach. Working with an old, RICOH GR and RICOH GR II cameras, the model preferred by many street photographers, she prefers to distort and occasionally to obscure the light that comes through the lens. "I love shooting from behind window glass and the plastic stickers that I find on the glass," she explains. "I do a lot in slow motion, while driving, and I prefer some hand movement with a slow shutter speed."

As a result, rather than attempting to faithfully record the material reality in front of the camera, Karlovac's images focus on capturing the emotional reactions that a specific scene creates in her inner emotional life. What we have is a photographic image of the effect that the scene has had on the interior of Karlovac's personality. In effect, we are witnessing a fusion of memories, sensations and experiences from the perspective of a specific moment in time. The senses dominate, Karlovac explains that when she looks at earlier images she has taken, it is often the aroma of the scene that first comes to mind.

Karlovac, who lives in Croatia and was born in Dubrovnik, is equally gifted as a poet and when not engaged in photography she is drawn close to nature. In a brief preface to her latest book, *Before Winter*, she describes the sensation of frozen drops of rain and the darkness before dawn that merges into muddy fields. The waning night is pierced by the sounds of chirping of birds and wind rustling in the treetops. "I kept collecting cracked leaves, and piling them next to a bench," she recalls. "One by one the leaves burned in the bluish flame of the lighter that sparked in the dark. On that third night in a row, on the bench, in mittens and a velvet colored hat, after burning 94 leaves and counting 24 birds in the glare of a lamp next to a chestnut tree, I finally fell asleep."

Karlovac says that she had the idea for *Before Winter* when she was walking along a road in late October. As a rule, she is not particularly attracted by the hot glare of sunlight during long, overheated summers. The time she prefers the most is the slightly somber period in late Autumn just before winter takes hold. That is when leaves begin to fall and the nights are characterized by misty fogs, occasional storm clouds and rain that glistens under street lamps. On just such a night, Karlovac had the sudden idea of putting together a collection of photographs to capture the sensations of that special time of year. As she explains, "I was about to tell a story made of photographs that began in a nightmare during a cold and rainy night, which somehow turned into a melancholic fantasy of memories, and ended with 'coming home,' whatever that may be." She began photographing in December.

The images in Karlovac's book belong as much to the world of fine art, as they do to photography. They recall boldly drawn sketches in charcoal on rough, granular paper. Her subjects appear as detached forms, shapes that nearly verge on abstract expressionism. The figures often appear to be hurrying towards destinations that are assumed to be routine, but which are equally detached from any meaningful reality. Many of these photographs were taken late at night, often in the rain. Rather than the people, we are drawn to the emotional sensations that they spark in Karlovac, a woman, alone on the city's streets late at night. The images are purposely expressed in black and white. Karlovac feels that color is a distraction. She prefers prints on paper and relishes the tactile sensation created by paper. She loves the aroma of print. A book for her, is a catalyst that gives coherence to a moment in time.

For the most part, these photographs suggest rather than describe. We see the silhouette of a woman standing in front of a brightly lit hallway composed of vertical flashes of light, with the hint of an anonymous crowd in the distance. A man moves late at night, partially obscured in the shadows, the street lit by a succession of street lamps, that have become enormous, barely defined, globes of pure light. They resemble tall metallic flowers. A double-page spread shows the windows of a bus at night, silhouetted against a brightly-lit interior, anonymous, barely recognizable shapes of commuters seated inside, each caught in his or her own reverie. A single passenger, her features barely discernible, looks out at the darkness at the

invisible, watching photographer. Another two-page spread, shows the profile of what could be a hooded man or woman, lost in the shadows of a street scene, the grain intentionally enhanced so that each suggestion of light creates its own texture. None of this is accidental or done on the spur of the moment. Karlovac says that she repeatedly returned to some of the sites she photographed, night after night, until she had the precise moment and feeling.

My own discovery of Olga Karlovac's work was thanks to one of the photography magazines that I prefer, the Philadelphia-based monthly *Inspired Eye*, which is published by Don Springer, an eminent street photographer in his own right. Olivier Duong, currently based in Hanoi, Vietnam, handles the magazine's graphics and layout. Don Springer, who wrote the introduction to *Before Winter*, notes, in reference to Olga Karlovac's photography, "...we are presented with a beauty in the mundane, and see it transformed into a beauty from inside the photographer."

Before Winter is Karlovac's second photographic book. An earlier work, *Fragments*, was published in March 2017. Karlovac says that she believes strongly in the energy and in the invisible power that exists in certain places and certain intersections. She was drawn to return to some of these locations over and over until she felt drained and finally empty. The result is a book of unusual photographs filled with emotional revelations and visual insights. It is a significant achievement.

William Dowell

email: wtdowell@gmail.com

personal contact info: <http://williamdowell.com>