

Raffaella Mariniello

Cardiff 2005

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Few photographers have avoided experimenting with nighttime photography. Perhaps it is the desire to defy one of the greatest technical concerns in making any photograph – getting enough light onto the emulsion to get a correctly exposed image – or maybe it is a romantic notion of the lone photographer stalking the streets after dark for an intimate encounter with an environment at rest, whilst its human inhabitants sleep and leave it in peace. It also brings photography full circle, by demanding the long exposures which were for the founders of photography so frustrating and inhibiting. Italian photographer Raffaella Mariniello has made nighttime photography her master craft and visits potential locations in daylight without a camera and returns after dark. She is concerned mostly with industrial spaces – predominantly docks and ports – although she is not drawn to industrial motifs in the style of the Becher school of landscape photography: Many of her images are abstract and the locations indistinct.

This, Mariniello's first solo UK exhibition, contains work made around the Cardiff area recently commissioned by Ffotogallery for the centenary celebrations of Cardiff's city status. Alongside these works are other images from her portfolio taken around the world, in countries such as Italy, Tunisia and Lebanon. This exhibition is not of one particular project, but is more a prelude to her work, brought together by the recent commission, and hence has the rather understated title *Cardiff 2005*.

One of the projects from which images have been selected is *Napoli veduta immaginaria* (*Naples through the imagination*), which was published in 2001. The introduction by Diego Mormorio provides an invaluable introduction to Mariniello's practice. She describes her passion for what she calls the fatal moment: the time of day when the Sun disappears and Man suffers a subconscious

apprehension that it will never rise again. Particularly in an age when we are enlightened and can be certain of so many things, Mariniello exploits and celebrates this primeval fear of the dark, and perhaps seeks to conquer it. She talks of the sense of victory she feels after a night's work, having returned to her hotel room after evading the rats and human vermin of the cities and ports she documents.

There is of course a technical advantage to photographing at night, which is the potential to use a subtle combination of ambient light, street lighting and portable flash. The benefit of making monochrome images is that chromatic aberrations and cross-casts are not a concern, and so it is often difficult to tell what Mariniello has chosen especially to light, what is lit naturally, and also what she may have been trying to conceal. (As Mariniello points out, "flash is also a weapon to hide other things".) One image of Cardiff marina illustrates this method perfectly: The foliage in the foreground appears to be illuminated from above, as if the light were coming from the adjacent streetlamp, yet there is a peculiar patch of light on the wall which one would also expect to be coming from the streetlamp. Meanwhile the boats in the background appear relatively dark and flat, almost as if they were painted, reminiscent of Hollywood backdrops painted in perspective.

This use of highly crafted lighting also has the effect of detaching the viewer from the scene depicted. All photographs serve to some extent to invite the audience into the place photographed. Perhaps due to the very tonal and often abstract visual quality of these images that are devoid of people, the experience of the viewer is similar to that of looking down upon a theatre set waiting for it to be animated, rather than being absorbed and interacting with the space depicted.

Mariniello usually remains true to Rosario Assunto's concept of landscape, which is defined as a place where an infinite space and a finite space converge. This is exemplified by Nietzsche's observation of Turin (also published in Diego Mormorio's introduction): "From the centre of the city you can see the snow on the Alps! The streets seem to take you directly to them..." In Mariniello's work the sea, even when not prominently figured, serves as the infinite element. There is also a constant mixture of organic and man-made forms. Mariniello's understanding of landscape recalls that of the New Topographics: "a space in which nature and culture are continually melting together and producing new forms." An image

which defines these concepts is a panorama taken on the outskirts of Cardiff: there is a tiny hint of the sea to the far right and a hill in the background with a few houses lined along it. The image is dominated by the foreground which is crammed with brand new houses. It is a fairly depressing sight, and almost seems artificial. This image was one of a few which were not actually (or certainly do not seem to have been) taken after dusk, and has a clarity beyond that of the others, yet Mariniello has reduced the buildings to toy houses which seem to have been tipped out of a bucket and look horrendously claustrophobic and epitomizes Mariniello's interpretation of a finite space.

It is a little frustrating that we do not see the images of Cardiff as a set, independent of the other works (especially given the title of the exhibition). It will be interesting to see them and others in the forthcoming monograph to be published by Ffotogallery.