

Palermo

In the spring of 1860 the photographer Gustave Le Gray shut up for good his lavish studio at 35 boulevard des Capucines, Paris. Abandoning his wife and children, and pursued by creditors, he made his way to Marseilles and a rendezvous with the novelist Alexandre Dumas. They were to set out, said the writer, to see ‘places famous in history and myth ... the Greece of Homer, of Hesiod, of Aeschylus, and of Augustus; the Byzantium of the Latin Empire and the Constantinople of Muhammad.’ Le Gray’s eye was already as well attuned to historical monuments as to the ephemeral life of modern fame, to archaeology as well as news; he had made his name first by photographing the relics of ancient and medieval France for the state-sponsored *Mission Héliographique*, and then with his studio portraits of the wealthy and well known. He now found himself diverted by Dumas to view another conjunction of history and celebrity: the ferment of Italian nationalism led by Garibaldi, whom Le Gray photographed in Palermo among the barricaded, half ruined streets of the city.

The photographs that John Riddy has taken in the Sicilian capital, over the course of three years, are only obliquely inspired by the images Le Gray produced there. For sure, they essay certain formal symmetries: most obviously, a tendency to treat the street as a flat palimpsestic surface, out of which has been gouged the perpendicular, sometimes arcing trajectory of another street, filled with happenstance evidence of historical confusion. Where Riddy departs – he would have to depart, a century and a half later – from the impulse to archaeological reportage is perhaps first in the sense that none of this streetscape is quite real. Indeed, he invokes in this regard a line from Werner Herzog’s 1982 film *Fitzcarraldo*: ‘We simply cannot cure them of their idea that ordinary life is only an illusion, behind which lies the reality of dreams.’ Riddy’s Palermo, like the London he photographed for his *Low Relief* series in 2009, is a city of monochrome stage flats, a series of urban prosceniums framing views of uncertain historical provenance.

Take for example his photograph of *Via Fiametta* (2012). As often with Riddy, the image seems at first to sunder itself into discrete picture planes: the walls facing us at the right and left extremes, the central street a vanishing ‘V’ filled with ramshackle reminders of modernity: cars, phone and power lines, sundry street furniture. But the flatness or platitude soon reveals itself as a complex and scatted surface, historically as well as spatially. (The rough wall and barred window at left might be straight out of Eugène Atget’s studies of decaying Paris.) Or consider the *Piazza San Francesco Saverio* (2012), seen from inside the square and square-paned window of a marquee or temporary market awning; the street facade opposite looks as though it might be quite as flimsy as

the fabric or plastic that frames it. And again, Riddy's deep perspective on the *Via Maggiore* (2012): a typically dilapidated street at whose limit a shrine with a picture of Jesus is flanked by flowers and bristles with electrical lights and vegetal cables. Here is the teeming reverse of Riddy's city's unpeopled theatrical surface, because beneath the greyscale skin of Palermo is a stratum that's alive with energy, almost organic.

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