

MURCIA THROUGH PHOTOGRAPHIC LOOK OF MARIA MAZANERA

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From the beginning of the Spanish photography in 1839, Murcia has been depicted by several photographers. It is evident the significance of works developed by native photographers such as César Baroja, Juan Almagro, José Casaú and Cristóbal Belda, whose contributions have priceless value to the common heritage of this land. An important name in our history was the Murcian Luis Federico Guirao Girada, who held among other political offices as official deputy. He researched the photography advancements, becoming then a great specialist in stereoscopic copies. Thanks to this amateur photographer, there are some excellent graphic documents about farming areas and customs from Murcia. In this sense, other distinguished names of photojournalists also supplement this list, due to the fact that they captured the daily routine, so often unforgettable, of the old city for decades. As opposed to the city's depiction since in the middle of 19th century up to the present, María Manzanera Molina - Niñirola (Murcia, 1946) photographs it with a personal point of view. The artist avoids depicting popular panoramic sights and academic representation of monuments, with the purpose of knowing its history, streets and unnoticed details. The photographer seeks a rapprochement with the environment in order to capture beauty that is hidden in the contemplated scenes.

Manzanera is one of the few female photographers that have made notable contributions to photography in Spain from the 1970s until now. Having grown in a family of artists, she developed an interest in photography from an early age. When she was sixteen years old, she saved some money to buy a nineteenth-century-daguerreotype camera in an antiques shop. From this moment, she decided found out photography was her passion and she would work as a photographer, a researcher and a collector. In 1978, she was awarded a in her degree in Art History in the University of Murcia and subsequently, she was conferred an honorary doctorate. Furthermore, she studied photography and she specialised in cinematography. After this, she has been considered the first person that has investigated, and still does, early photography in Murcia.

Concerning her work experienced, she has worked for more than twenty years as a professor of photography in several universities. In addition, she has been the manager of the Audiovisual Resources Centre at the University of Murcia for two decades. As a rest-

less person, Manzanera has written several books about ancient photography on Murcia, her production and cinema; she has been giving photography courses and has displayed her works in various exhibitions. In the 1980s, the author was benefited from several grants in order to research on Royal Palace and Photographic Spanish Society in Madrid and in the photography archive of Murcia. Moreover, she was awarded with various First Prizes in the 80s y 90s.

The photographic work of María Manzanera is characterized by a broad and heterogeneous production since she has dozens of projects on a variety of topics: portraits, macro photography, nudes, flamenco dance, street photography and nature. The vast majority of her production belongs to street photography, which is a genre that features subjects in candid situations within public places. She enjoys capturing spontaneous scenes such as the masters Eugène Atget and Henri Cartier-Bresson. In these photographs, she offers ironic and appealing images that are taken at a decisive moment as a form of social documentary. Notable series on street photography from foreign countries are *Siempre nos Queda París*, *De Nueva York a Nuevo México* and *Manhattan*. In her works *Murcia Verticalia*, *Murcia Huertana* and *Murcia, día y noche*, she defines a city full of contrasts where its distinctive essence underlies, books that have been analysed in the present article.

Murcia Verticalia (2007) is the first photographic work on her home town since she is in essence an artist in love with the land where she was born. Her aim is to offset the lack of knowledge of the city by means of a visual game that depicts architecture, gardens and people in day-to-day work. It implies maintaining the curiosity suggested by the photographer to uncover the details that, despite having always been exposed, is suddenly revealed, new and unique. Photographs are riddles that encourage to discover Murcia and places such as its buildings and monuments. These scenes show the human being, implicit or explicitly, as responsible for urban changes. Concerning to her artistic language, María Manzanera utilizes black & white and her creative eye to photograph Murcia in upright position. A selection of images could have been taken everywhere due to the fact that the artist presents a global point of view about the city whose essence is captured by the photographer. Although this book is based on photography essentially, it has been accompanied by brief texts on Murcian customs written by certain personalities from the culture world. This work is relevant because of passing through their pages is like walking through Murcia from a different, actual and pleasant point of view.

Murcia Huertana (2014), the second work of María Manzanera about the capital, it constitutes a homage to vegetable garden. Its aim is to let people know the garden of Murcia since the artist wishes to preserve, protect and disseminate knowledge of this place as a part of our identity. Garden is an important theme for the photographer as her maternal and paternal grandparents were garden-dwellers. This book is composed of a number of photographs of orange and lemon trees, terraces filled with leafy vegetables, irrigation channels, palm trees, birds, flowers, trenches and dykes of fertile lime. She captures, with her meticulous eye, a loveliness and authentic essence that exists by means of photographs with fine, clean and clear technique. In accordance with José Belmonte “María Manzanera, a well-known artist, a sensitive, lively lady, (...) launches with her images, her straight, lyrical aesthetic time, an optimistic message on the future

of our Garden” (Belmonte, 2014a). Those images are accompanied by brief commentaries and clarifications on this matter as research findings by Manzanera. *Murcia Huertana* let us discover this vegetable garden as a unique land that it is our responsibility to look after. The artist immortalizes with her camera, without adding decoration, showing respect to this incomparable garden and its sublime intrinsic beauty. Such as Belmonte concludes, “María’s photos have the magic singularity of activating all of our senses, as well as sight itself, in a captivating, singular synaesthesia” (Belmonte, 2014b).

Murcia, día y noche(2017) is the most recent work of María Manzanera. Just like this author affirms, “this book is about the city of Murcia but the images you see in it are like a deck of cards spread out randomly on a table” (Manzanera, 2017a). Her purpose is to work out visual memory and strive to situate the scenes that they are looking at. In this project there are monuments, streets, natural spaces and traditional customs that identify Murcia. *Murcia, día y noche* offers us a completely different and vibrant overview of Murcia, since the photographer shows two looks of the city: one which is lighted up by warm sunny light and another which got dark under the stunning light of the moon. In order to do a little exercise in recognition memory, Manzanera suggests three key questions to make easier identification of the photographs: “where is it?”, “who designed this building?” and “what time period was it built?” (Manzanera, 2017b). After answering them, it is possible to corroborate the information to a small text on the other side of the page, a way of learning or remembering about Murcia. Concerning to photographic language of Manzanera, the writer Antonio Botías confirms her “fabulous technique, a great knowledge of the city” (Botías, 2017a). The artist catches a complete vision of Murcia and then magnifies it through her camera lens, turning this place into “another reality, much more wonderful and magical, than the one we live every day” (Botías, 2017b).

To conclude, her photographic series *Murcia Verticalia*, *Murcia Huertana* and *Murcia, día y noche*, reflect significant processes of contemplation and critical thought. Moreover, María Manzanera offers a unique viewpoint of the capital never offered until now since the authors focused on teaching us about Murcia. The photographer uses her art in order to sublimate and dignify Murcia, raising awareness of its value and beauty. These works on street photography are inspired by her passion for History of Art that she has implemented in her full dedication to photography. The artist offers us a completely different and vibrant overview of her beloved Murcia. As Botías stated, “Manzanera has the talent of finding in every corner what the rest of mortals only sense, taste and even smell, but we are not able to articulate this, to say the least on paper” (Botías, 2017c). Indeed, she has developed another vision of Murcia in the face of artistic conception, which is related to intimate and critical reflection of the world. In a particular way, María Manzanera contributes to promote photography from Murcia and Spain throughout her texts, works, exhibitions and art lessons. On the one hand, it is interesting her unique expressive language and her way to face photography that make the difference. On the other hand, it is remarkable the preciseness of her theoretical writings is remarkable owing to her high qualification and arduous documentation process. Additionally, she has made a vital recovery of visual memory not only from Murcia, but also from photographic Spanish heritage by means of her ancient photography collection. As Botías

said “we are lucky enough to get to know her and to have the possibility of learning from her how to stare at the city with the soul eyes” (Botías, 2017d) and her works have been contemplated in this article so as to award the recognition that they deserve.