

Stylistic Composition by Delphine Roche

Ralph Gibson practices the nude like a musician tirelessly rehearsing his scales. Now the unclassifiable photographer has gathered together the fruits of more than forty years of work in a lyrical, poetic and highly collectable book.

For more than forty years Ralph Gibson has observed the bodies of nude women. So much so that today he has published a veritable oeuvre on the subject, a beautiful, imposing book which he hopes we'll leave lying open on an image chosen by chance and which we'll live with for a day or two, immersing ourselves in it, before turning the page. For this is how he himself behaves with the books that inspire him, which he 'exhibits' for his own viewing in his New York studio.

Over time his unposed shots of friends have replaced the carefully chosen models, lengthily staged. Sometimes he shows skin like vast open spaces in which the gaze drowns, pale expanses cut with deep black, sharp shadows with no relief. He seizes the fullness revealed by an infinitely soft and velvety light. He delivers pure erotica, dark suspenders on delicate and diaphanous thighs. Yet the man who declared in 2006 in his book, *Refraction – Aesthetics of Photography*, that a certain degree of abstraction was only possible in black and white and that "the nude in colour is a challenge in itself", has himself succumbed to the risk. The result oscillates between coffee-tinted flesh tones and transparent, fragile alabaster skin marbled with green and magenta, with glimpses of cyan veins. In some of the tighter, almost anxiety provoking compositions, the faceless breasts, voluptuous and offered up, have an aggressive power that reminds us of Newton – "I met Helmut in 1974 and we instantly became friends. Even though he has died, I still consider him one of my best friends", confides Gibson, emotionally. Further on in the book bright yellow bananas have strange pride of place on a bust whose arms are plunged into deep obscurity. Close to a still life the image astounds and arrests the gaze. "When I photograph nudes I feel completely free," comments their author, "During a

course I was running in Moscow, someone came in with these bananas and I immediately thought of the surrealist principle of juxtaposition. So I placed the bananas on the breasts of the model and there was the picture! It's quite surprising; the visual impact is very strong. I'm happy to be publishing this book because nudes represent about 20% of my output. But I had to inject a conceptual distance to avoid the monotony. In the final version I wanted every image to be very different from the one that precedes it and the one that follows it."

Critics have sometimes reproached Ralph Gibson's stylistic diversity, accusing it of being formalism devoid of sensitivity. Yet beneath the changing surface there is a constant preoccupation that runs through the ensemble of the American photographer's oeuvre: how to endlessly renew the act of looking. "The nude has always reflected my concerns at that moment in time, whether it is through surrealism, minimalism or architecture, that's why my style is in a state of permanent evolution. The possibilities are infinite when you photograph the human form, but ultimately the only subject of my work is the visual perception itself, I'm always asking myself what it is to see." While for the last ten years Ralph Gibson has worked as a photojournalist, he continues to be surprised when viewing some of his clichés. "I realised that my camera had isolated a dream-like reality. I thought that in the same way there are television and radio waves in the atmosphere, there could be alternative realities and that photography could access this other world," he later wrote. This discovery took him to a radical turning point and gave birth to the book, *The Somnambulist*, for which he created his own publishers, Lustrum Press. From this primitive scene, the artist takes great care to track down



the "abstract dimension" of real things – and not, he likes to specify, take abstract photographs. He observes and regularly shoots the female body, "in the same way a musician practices his scales". Always equipped with the tools of a documentary maker or investigator (a Leica and 50mm lens to avoid all distortion), he tirelessly pursues, "the form whose existence we ignore, the one that was hidden in the silhouette". He watches out for this precious moment when photography, "always ahead of the photographer," creeps up on him.

Ralph Gibson, *Nude*, (ed. Taschen), collector's edition limited to 1000 numbered and signed copies worldwide.

"Art Edition" limited to 200 copies worldwide accompanied by the choice of two photographic prints signed by the artist.