

It's All True /

Fictions and Documents (1987–2020)

Jorge Ribalta (Barcelona, 1963) is an anomaly in the Spanish and international art world, as someone who has cultivated criticism, curating, cultural management, research and book editing with the same exacting standards he applies to his personal photographic work. These multiple facets have tended to situate him in an unclassifiable position, often to the detriment of his visibility as an artist.

Ribalta's career began in the late 1980s and experienced a radical mutation in 2005, dividing it into two divergent periods. During the first, his work focused on poetically exploring the constructed naturalism of photography, whereas in the second his projects took a turn towards reinventing documentary.

This retrospective unites, for the first time, over three decades of his photographic activity, exploring the breaks and continuities in a highly original artistic biography capable of reconciling antithetical traditions.

The show's chronological itinerary unfolds in eleven rooms on the ground and lower floors, as illustrated in the diagram at each of the three entrances.

Arctic /

In 1987 Jorge Ribalta created his first staged studio photographs with miniatures, a method he would continue to use for the next fifteen years. He made his debut with an exhibition at the Metrònom gallery in Barcelona, Estampas apócrifas, during the 1988 Primavera Fotográfica (Photographic Spring) festival. Critics for The New York Times and Le Monde agreed that Ribalta's work was the greatest revelation of the festival.

The first decade of Ribalta's career was marked by several stints in the United States. In 1994, he had his first solo show at the Zabriskie Gallery in New York and participated in New Photography 10, the influential annual showcase of up- and-coming international artists organised by the Museum of Modern Art.

In keeping with the "staged" photography that flourished in the 1980s, and influenced by the critique of representation discourses of that era, Ribalta strove to dismantle the naturalism and transparency of photography. His work was defined by the conviction that the photograph is not a pre-existing image but the result of a process, a fabricated or manufactured product. One might describe his oeuvre as an essay on the act of manufacturing the photographic effect.

In these early years, his work was an unusual combination of critical anti-naturalism and radical lyricism. There was no pre-defined programme, only poetic impulse. His series initially had no titles, and his work appealed to a strictly visual logic that resonated with the echoes of things seen and experienced as well as reminders of the history of photography. In the 1990s, Ribalta's larger photographic canvases tended to focus on faces, although landscapes also put in an appearance. The [Arctic] (1991–1996) series is a studio recreation of an expedition to that polar region, comprising some fifty small-format canvases. For the first time, he introduced a serial logic.

Untitled (Polaroids) /

The use of an adapted monorail camera allowed him to get as close as possible and give his images the necessary effect of plausibility, eliminating all signs of staging and scale and ensuring that the nature of the portrayed subject remained oddly and unsettlingly ambiguous. Ribalta soon began using matt and texturised papers to accentuate his game of concealment and add coherence by covering up shadows and certain parts of the image. Later he started to use stretcher-mounted emulsion canvas. The “neo-pictorialist” echoes were not an intentional effect but a medium and a consequence. The problem of the fabrication of the image went hand in hand with the problem of the photograph as an art object and its use and effect in the exhibition space. The formalisation addressed one of the central questions of the 1980s: how can photography occupy the historical spaces of painting?.

The White Dahlia /

In 1999, while curating Joan Colom's first exhibition, Ribalta began to create miniature staged scenes of certain parts of Barcelona's Barrio Chino or red-light district. Those studio reconstructions were based on his strolls with Colom through the areas where the latter had taken his photographs of prostitutes around 1960. They also reconstructed places that were doomed to disappear with the creation of the wide avenue known as Rambla de Raval, an urban development project then at its peak which would forever alter the physiognomy of the old red-light district. Ribalta wanted to insert "documentary" details or references to current events in his staged images. This gave rise to his series *La Dalia Blanca* [The White Dahlia] (1999–2002), a title taken from the name of a flower shop in the neighbourhood that also references *The Black Dahlia* by James Ellroy, whose L.A. Quartet he had discovered in Mike Davis's *City of Quartz*. The noir genre was linked to a critique of urban history and a "desire for documents".

His last staged series was *Antlitz der Zeit* (2002–2004), a nod to the seminal book by August Sander (1929), which consisted in various "anti-portraits" of celebrities and mass media personalities made with miniature figurines. Ribalta presented this series as a modern parody of Sander's attempt to create a portrait of his time. However, rather than mocking or satirising the principles and utopian ideals of photographic realism in modernity, it expressed a sincere, albeit frustrated, desire to represent an era. His works convey dissatisfaction with the irony implicit in the fabricated image and with a purely elegiac understanding of modernism and of the promises of photographic realism.

Ribalta had therefore internalised the critique of representation as well as the Deleuze-Guattarian theories of subjectivity as an ideological construct and of the body as an interpenetration of biology and technology, as a "machine". These "subjects without subjectivity" were also products of his reading of Donna Haraway and Judith Butler's theses on post-humanism and post-feminism.

Projections /

The cinematographic model or unconscious underlay the illusionistic and serial logic of Ribalta's work and also tied in with the question of the nature of the photographic form. In 1997, he began to photograph his staged scenes with 35mm colour slides and filmed them using a Super 8mm camera fitted with a crossfade mechanism. This allowed him to create the effect of movement and passing time in still images. At his 1998 exhibition Habitaciones y proyecciones he showed Super 8 projections, short continuous loops filmed in colour or black and white.

Anonymous Labour /

A turning point came in the year 2005. At that time, Ribalta began to take informal photographs of places in Barcelona that were being transformed, such as the Forum 2004 area, the Poblenou industrial neighbourhood or Plaza de la Garduña in the historic Raval quarter. The critical representation of Barcelona's situation in the wake of the 2004 Universal Forum of Cultures has been a cornerstone of his work ever since.

Trabajo anónimo [Anonymous Labour] (2005) marked the beginning of this photographic observation of the city. It featured close-ups of machinery and tools and was created at the last surviving metallurgical plant at the Can Ricart factory, in the Poblenou district, when local residents were campaigning to save the factory shortly before its closure.

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In the Sur l'herbe (2005–2008) series, he observed concert goers at the Sónar music festival, a paradigm of the new cultural policies. Futurismo [Futurism], begun in 2005 and still in progress, presented the landscapes of the new economy in Barcelona's 22@ technological district and the new urban spaces that emerged from the 2004 Forum as a counterpoint to propagandistic municipal iconography.

Futurism /

Since 2005, one of the cornerstones of Ribalta's work has been the critical representation of Barcelona's situation in the wake of the 2004 Universal Forum of Cultures, an event he sees as the symbolic end of an era in the city's urban history that began with the Cerdá Plan of 1860. That century and a half of urban growth was financially based on the organisation of major international events (from the 1888 World's Fair to the 1992 Olympic Games) as a strategic means of stimulating economic development and amassing necessary resources. Over the course of the 20th century, that logic generated a public-private (and media-economic) model that was paradigmatic of the evolution towards a post-industrial or "post-modern" urban economy which resulted in the renowned "Barcelona model" in the 1990s.

For Ribalta, the failure of the 2004 Forum indicated that the Cerdá Plan had outlived its usefulness and ceased to be the guiding principle of Barcelona's urban evolution. The great recession that began in 2007 seemed to confirm that end-of-an-era feeling. The city appeared to be entering a new and uncertain phase, which the artist attempted to capture in his series, in the manner of case studies. Studying the urban history of Barcelona became his way of bearing witness to the age. He saw the local as the specific materialisation of historic global trends, far removed from any identitarian or localist notions.

Scrambling /

In 2007 Ribalta was invited to photograph the historic legacy of Tarragona, a UNESCO World Heritage City. The result was a series titled *Petit Grand Tour*, in which he observed the various processes, from museums to tourism, that converge in the production of discourses about the past, arguing that history is a fabrication. A new concept of the relationships between images and between text and image and the use of the exhibition space, typically flooded with photographs, came to the fore. This marked the beginning of his work on the culture industry and its interpenetration with ideologies implicit in cultural policies. Ribalta began making original use of documentary tradition to analyse or critique art institutions and the cultural field in a series of projects which the artist has grouped under the generic heading of “fieldwork”.

One of those fieldwork projects was *Laocoonte salvaje* [Wild Laocoon] (2010–2011), in which he observed the cultural system of flamenco in Spain. He portrayed it not only as a popular art form but also as a culture industry involving multiple actors: festivals, associations or clubs, record labels, schools, government agencies, monuments, bars, tablaos, neighbourhoods, etc. At the same time, the series was a critique of the neo-realist, “folksifying” rhetoric that dominated representations of this art. Ribalta described his method as shifting the camera from the figure (or the artist’s body) to the ground. What that camera shift revealed was a cultural system, and that system is precisely what constitutes the art of flamenco. The title is a line from “Prickly Pear”, published in Federico García Lorca’s *Poem of the Deep Song*, and alludes to the convergence of avant-garde and popular culture as well as to the artistic problem of representing movement. Photography’s ability to freeze motion is precisely what made it possible for modernity to embrace it as a means of representing history and understanding social complexity.

Another of Ribalta’s fieldwork initiatives was *Scrambling* (2011), shot at the Alhambra in Granada. Taking as its starting point an image by Charles Clifford that Roland Barthes used in his famous book *Camera Lucida*, the series attempted to represent the production mechanisms of the monument, viewed as if it were a factory: its security, restoration, maintenance, gardening and irrigation, marketing and sales processes. Organised as a series of “documentary poems” about each of these processes, *Scrambling* was made when the restoration work on the hydraulic system in the Court of the Lions was nearing completion, with the raised floor of the courtyard recalling an autopsy table.

Empire Renaissance Faute d'argent /

Ribalta's work over the last decade appears to be partly characterised by his internalisation of curatorial methods. Historical research has become paramount, and archival work seems to have given the artist a new appreciation for the singularity of photography in modern art. His creations are rife with historical allusions. Perhaps this is most radically apparent in his trilogy of historical fictions about the final years of Emperor Charles V, in which the artist describes his method as "documentary tragicomedy".

As a symbol, Charles V is questionable from the perspective of the history of the Spanish nation and that of the financial-imperial logic of capitalism installed in early modern Europe. The contemporary relevance of this research seems to be confirmed by Spain's recent institutional crisis with the abdication of King Juan Carlos I in 2014, as well as by the systemic crisis that began with the great recession in 2007. The first of these series was Imperio (o K.D.) [Empire (or K.D.)] (2013–2014), about the abdication of Charles V and his retirement at Yuste. The second is Renacimiento. Escenas de reconversión industrial en la cuenca minera de Nord-Pas-de-Calais [Renaissance: Scenes of Industrial Reconversion in the Nord-Pas-de-Calais Coalfield] (2014), created at the invitation of the Centre Régional de la Photographie Nord-Pas-de-Calais (CRP/) in Douchy-les-Mines, in the French region of Hauts-de-France. This series, which studies industrial heritage in the context of a paradigm shift in cultural policies towards the exploitation of the past and memory, opens with an episode about the period when this region was part of the Habsburg Empire in the 16th century.

The third and final series is Faute d'argent (2016–2020), presented here for the first time. It offers a reflection on Charles V's relationship with the Fuggers, a prominent German family of bankers, and has three geographical bases: Augsburg, Seville and Mexico. The series examines the silver economy in the colonisation of the Americas, thereby completing the symbolic geography of the empire outlined in the previous two series (Spain and Europe, respectively). Faute d'argent revolves around a dichotomy, seasoned with humour, between the trade routes of silver and cacao beans, which were used as currency in the pre-Columbian era.