

FRANÇOIS HALARD



The many readers of *An Adventure*, Charlotte Anne Moberly and Eleanor Jourdain's extraordinary account of seeing the phantom figures of Marie Antoinette, her servants and friends in the gardens of the Petit Trianon one summer's evening at the beginning of the last century, can only be riveted – whether sceptics or not – by the utter conviction of these two academically-minded, sober ladies that what they had witnessed was real. Their account is strangely persuasive.

A few years ago the photographer François Halard, auteur of this collection of his astonishingly beautiful and significant work, was commissioned to make a comparably poignant book: a complete visual record of those very gardens, at all times of day and night. To accomplish this he was given the keys to the Trianon grounds, and sometimes, especially at sundown, he told me he experienced a vague frisson of several unseen presences, akin he felt, to those described in *An Adventure*. After the last visit, he handed back the keys to the guardian. 'And do you ever see them?' he enquired. 'Ah, oui, Monsieur, all the time,' came the reply.

So Halard knows about ghosts. He knows that rooms, houses, flowers, landscapes, clothes, faces and people all possess an immortality that his discernment will uniquely capture. The soul of whatever he photographs, which his lens sees with the eye of a painter or an architect, be it romantic or contemporary, writhes off the page to envelop the viewer in the aura Halard had understood immediately as the essence of the place, the face or object. He does not endeavour to put his own interpretation on what he photographs, but instead he unleashes the whispers, the glances, the shadows, the hues – and yes, the ghosts – of time and place.

That is not to say, however, that this book is merely opulent or nostalgic. While the viewer is irresistibly drawn into the luxurious salons and studios (luxurious, but never ostentatious: it is anathema to Halard), he also longs to kiss under the haphazard bouquet of mistletoe, to fiddle with the porcelain flowers in Sèvres cache pots, to lovingly pat the painted pets or to meander amazed through marble halls on stuccoed staircases or among statuary in

precious, pillared libraries. There is a counterpart: the cleanest simplest lines of the most linear buildings, the pots of vibrant paints littering artists' floors, the curves of a racing car, the contour of a profiled cheek, a pointilliste pool of rain-wet leaves. In each image, Halard portrays the essence, the spirit, the fleeting phantom reality.

The words Halard has chosen to unite these diverse images into a whole are not descriptions, or even explanations, but succinct – almost staccato – associations with each. A kind of tender chain-letter to people, places and situations that he has discovered, loved and admired, much as one might write an aide-mémoire in a diary. They make one pause to lapse into a tangential reverie as Halard expands our thoughts far wider than the boundaries of the images on these pages. An integral intellectualism, both visual and cerebral, is at the core of Halard's persona; and being both generous as well as a genius he provides his audience with anything but humdrum information, encouraging us to explore the marvellous realms of 'less is more'.

The conjecture that ghosts are not purely figures in a sunset garden but possess an innate, if indiscernible, presence seems to permeate François Halard's imagination and art. So much so, that the photographs he has assembled in this, his newest collection, are imbued with a transcendental timelessness.

Nicky Haslam is an interior designer and the founder of the London-based interior design firm NH Design.

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Written by François Halard.
Text by Isabelle Dupuy Chavanat.
Preface by Pierre Bergé.
Introduction by Mayer Rus.
Rizzoli, \$75.00