**Francesco Arese Visconti. Rendering the Invisible Visible: Photographs of Italian Cultural Identity in 21st-Century Switzerland. Webster University Geneva**

An exhibition at the Cedar Café, Webster University

Curated by Julianna Sandholm-Bark

How can an image capture as complex, ineffable, and *unrepresentable* a notion as cultural identity? Furthermore, how can an image represent the cultural identity of a group of people whose lives have been irrevocably altered by the experience of physically moving away from their homeland and resettling in a *terra incognita*?

Francesco Arese Visconti’s photographs are an attempt to *render visible* the complex notion of migratory identity, of identity in flux. The six photographs you see exhibited on the windows of this building portray six Italians –four women, two men – in Switzerland, their adoptive country. At the most obvious level, this exhibition is an attempt to “make visible” migrants’ stories, which often go unnoticed and untold. Italian migrants can be labeled an “invisible" group of people in the Swiss context because, by and large, they've become culturally well-integrated into the social fabric. Their “invisibility” also implies that their experiences, at the individual level, are usually – and unfairly – ignored, because their stories are not perceived as worth telling.

The message of this exhibition is that, in fact, there is value to telling these stories. The experience of migration is never easy. In a series of interviews conducted by Arese Visconti, all six sitters agreed that migration has both a bright side and a dark side, representing opportunity, on the one hand, and challenge, on the other. Their new Swiss life – their Swiss dream – has given them the opportunity to start life afresh in a new place. About the advantages brought by Switzerland, Paola mentions “a sort of quiet life, organized life, good opportunities for kids to be exposed to multicultural environments, learning one, two, three other languages.” Their coming to Switzerland had much to do with embracing the promise of “a balanced life [which seemed preferable to] traveling and changing residence every 4 years” (Paola). At the same time, there is the palpable sense of nostalgia for what they’ve left behind, the notion that no country could replace Italy. For Alessandro, Switzerland will always come second, while Italy “will always be…home [to] my roots, my culture, my emotions.” Olga nostalgically evokes “the warmth of the people, the loudness, the creativity, and last but not least… the food!” For Paola, Italy is the “country where eventually I would like to go back”, its culture and people serving as a major draw.

Windows – rather than walls – were chosen for the display of this series of photographs, as the transparency of glass is a fitting metaphor for the idea that migrants are often understood as being on the *threshold* of social integration, on the *brink* of the mainstream, of being both *insiders* and *outsiders* at the same time. Glass also evokes the biblical verse from Corinthians 13:12 (“For now we see through a glass, darkly; but then face to face: now I know in part; but then shall I know even as also I am known.”) and invites viewers to see themselves “through” the experience of migration and become more cognizant of what this experience implies for people.

All the sitters are portrayed wearing everyday clothing on a seemingly neutral backdrop. And yet, all of them possess a quiet, dignified power, an impression which also comes from the rigorous principles of design to which each image is subjected. One might read this rigor as a metaphor for all the inexpressible things that can never be represented through images, the traumas, both large and small, linked to living a life in exile. Everything in each photograph is deliberate, the result of a clever staging of a person whose experience of migration has been visually codified using the principles of balance and symmetry. The notion of borders/ edges/ limits is central to each image (lakeside, walking path, fence, pier, football pitch, edge of a forest) and delimits the foreground occupied by the sitter from the rest of the image. Each sitter stands squarely in the center of the composition, directly confronting the viewer with an unflinching gaze and neutral expression. Limbs don’t play a big role, as the sitters have crossed arms, hands crossed in front, hands in pockets, hands behind back. And yet there is so much going on in these portraits. There is movement, for instance, suggested by the waves captured in a diagonal line in Alessandro Vasaturo; the wind playing with the fringes of Ludovica Pacciani’s scarf, which seem to flutter, like the fingers of her left hand.

Julianna Sandholm-Bark