

THE NIAGARA OF OUR PRESENT TIME

by **Roberto Mutti**

Silent but able to evoke sounds and noises, static but able to reproduce movement, photography has struck everybody's imagination since its very beginning – even its detractors' imagination, who were actually very numerous by then – and this because photography knew how to use a really effective weapon: wonder. Initially it was obviously appreciated for its new and highly imaginative procedure, but soon the public attention focused on the results that more and more skilful authors were able to attain. If portrait still remained in that private sphere which had already characterised painting portraiture - in fact the purchasers used to link the photographer to the person portrayed - things were very different with urban or natural landscape photography. In fact, the latter aimed at capturing a wider public, that is people who already knew those places photographed and who first got to know them through the photographic prints. The absolute sharpness and precision of daguerreotypes conveyed a flavour of authenticity, while the long exposures needed transmitted to the image something indeterminate. There are plenty of examples to cite but, among them, we have chosen one which we consider particularly intriguing because it was carried out in one of those places where man stops spellbound to look at the sublime beauty of the wilderness. We are speaking of a daguerreotype shot in 1853 by Platt D. Babbitt who was given, right that year, the exclusive authorisation to portray the Niagara Falls from the north-American side. The image frames an absolutely unconventional overall sight: here the author chooses to grant the falls a portion of central space but at the same time to let the sky, the vegetation, the bank on the foreground be visible too. On the bank there are one man and four women standing who turn their back to the camera and are obviously enchanted before that stunning landscape. We know that Babbitt actually specialised in that kind of shooting: he would wait for tourists to prepare for the sitting, then would shoot without them realising, and then would propose them his photos which were inevitably purchased. We are not interested in the commercial aspect, but in the photographic composition: and it was exactly this working methodology to urge the photographer to study a shooting style particularly focused on the relationship between the grandeur of nature and the small sizes of people who, however, always cover a key role in the overall shooting context. All the protagonists of these scene seem to possess the precise awareness of being men and women of their time, both proud of the progress in science and technique and also sensitive lovers of the beauty of landscape with which they wished to have a relationship of reciprocal empathy.

What happened today to a photographer who may want to take up this subject and renew the relation linking man and nature? The technological, aesthetic and humanistic changes to be taken into account are so profound that we have to map out a completely different route. On this deep consciousness is based Franco Donaggio's work, who in his brand-new

series "Prima del giorno" (Before the Dawn) launches a riveting challenge, that is recovering the true sense of marvel which seem to have been lost due to routine, tiredness, disenchantment. After developing a really unique poetics by steering his photography into a rather surreal taste he is particularly keen on (as various works, from "Metaportraits" to "Reflections" prove), Donaggio operates with great insight inside this virtual universe created by digital imaging when it lets be guided by a project of a real expressive force. If in "Urbis" he had already investigated into the urban world and had transfigured it into a view where you could hear the architectural echoes of Constructivism and Rationalism, in "Before the Dawn" he goes a further step forward until creating his own structures of an urban landscape which seems to spring from fantasy or desire. Everything here becomes grand and charming: huge columns soar into a sky they seem to support, never-ending walls create scenes which define spaces; steep planes establish new unforeseen balances in a universe which seems suspended in an allusive void. Nothing we see is real even if our perception says it is: we are just like those anonymous 19th century onlookers who found themselves before the show and the rumble of the falls, who would probably be reached by some sprays of water brought in by the wind. We, men of two centuries afterwards, in order to feel the same sensations must face a completely different world made of geometric constructions whose grandeur we do grasp but not quite its meaning: clouds trapped by net-like solids; lights going down from high above as though they were thrown by spotlights hidden in a deep faraway blue sky; stairs running upstairs and downstairs and chasing after each other according to an impenetrable logic. The employ of a black and white of an extraordinary formal cleanness and a careful use of the digital techniques enhance the mysterious quality of these places which consequently become more and more theatrical. Franco Donaggio leads us into a world which remembers the science-fiction's but which at the same time he seems to suggest that what we see we don't have to look for it in other far off realms. In fact, he induce us to look at what surrounds us through new eyes: those gangways suspended inside a sort of a cupola; those squares built like labyrinths; those stone slabs one upon the other designing strange borders; those abysses attracting our curiosity: well, all that is our world. It's the projection of the thoughts, hopes, fears and dreams of those small human beings who move about in those spaces and observe them, as we always tend to do, a bit scared and fascinated.