

Jill Magid

ART IN GENERAL

"I roamed the lobbies of hotels in the city looking for a man in an expensive vintage suit," writes Jill Magid in her book *Failed States* (2012), "a discreet, older, subtle man who knew things, who was looking for me too." Magid keeps searching for the right partner. Those who have followed her career over the past decade have met security-camera operators in Liverpool, UK, agents of the Dutch secret service, and an officer of the NYPD. With these (mostly male) members of government authorities, Magid has cultivated chaste but intimate relationships, and then turned the ensuing rapport into raw material for exhibitions and publications that spotlight the surveillance state.

It seemed like an anomaly, then, that "Woman with Sombrero," a solo show curated by Anne Barlow, focused on the contested legacy of Mexican architect Luis Barragán (1902–1988). Magid initiated the project after a visit to the Luis Barragán House and Studio in Mexico City, where she learned that the architect's professional archive had been purchased, along with the copyright to his designs, by the Swiss furniture company Vitra. The wife of Vitra's chairman, an architectural historian named Federica Zanco, has dedicated herself to preparing an exhaustive catalogue raisonné. She has meanwhile stoked controversy in Mexico by limiting access to Barragán's records and zealously enforcing his copyright. Corporate ownership, displaced national heritage, onerous legal prohibitions: juicy stuff, but hardly conducive to Magid's usual cloak-and-dagger courtships. Yes, Barragán qualifies as an older man who knows things, but he has also been dead for twenty-six years.

In execution, however, "Woman with Sombrero" proved less anomalous than programmatic, the most formally cogent crystallization of Magid's working method to date. At talks, Magid occasionally lets slip

her interest in a largely forgotten gem of Jean Baudrillard's, *Seduction* (1979), a theoretical tract she has productively repurposed as a playbook. For Baudrillard, seduction had its heyday in the courtly rituals of the eighteenth century; since then, it has lingered on as a sly riposte to the goal-oriented gratifications of the bourgeoisie. Only glancingly connected to sex and desire, seduction is above all a game, and its pleasures accrue from submitting to a set of rules. In Magid's earlier projects, seduction was preparatory work, a covert foray into her designated partner's professional milieu that preceded public exhibition. In "Woman with Sombrero," by contrast, Magid embedded seduction into the very logic of display.

Hence, Magid here made a game of showing Barragán's work while also acquiescing to the copyright restrictions imposed by Zanco. A film of the celebrated Barragán landscape design known as El Bebedero revealed only a close-up of shadows cast by eucalyptus trees against a wall. Photographs of his buildings hung in frames while still physically attached to the printed catalogues Magid purchased to source them. Images culled from Barragán's personal holdings in Mexico City lay against a pine lectern purportedly "inspired by" his aesthetic—a teasing knockoff. According to Baudrillard, seduction's currency is the secret, which "maintains its power only at the price of remaining unspoken." Barred from Barragán's archives, Magid treated the architect as just such a secret; the gambits she devised for exhibiting his work were so many winks and allusions to an absent presence. Thus, Barragán served as seduction's token, the means of exchange in a tête-à-tête that continues to unfold. In *Failed States*, the "discreet, older, subtle man" whom Magid locates ultimately disappoints. "I wish I were attracted to him," she grouses; she later adds, "He is transparent in the most unerotic sense." With Federica Zanco, a commanding and possessive scholar ensconced in Switzerland, Magid has again found a partner of alluring opacity.

—Colby Chamberlain



Jill Magid, *The Shadows of the Eucalyptus Trees at El Bebedero*, 2013, 16 mm, black-and-white, silent, 9 minutes.