

ALIX CLEO ROUBAUD

A portrait in fragments

Translated by Thea Petrou

190pp. Sylph Editions. £14.

Hélène Giannecchini

Alix Cléo Roubaud (1952-83) is probably best remembered for her marriage to the poet Jacques Roubaud, who dedicated his volume *Quelque chose noir* (1986) to her after her death at thirty one. She might also be recalled as a lover of the experimental filmmaker Jean Eustache and the subject of his film *Les Photos d'Alix* (1980).

Yet Alix was much more than a muse. She was a writer - her *Journal*, recounting her years with Roubaud - was published in 1984. And she was a photographer. Her images only gained limited critical attention in her lifetime, but the Centre Pompidou purchased a number of them after her death and the Bibliothèque Nationale hosted a major retrospective of her work in 2014.

Hélène Giannecchini was one of that exhibition's curators, and this "portrait in fragments" is based on her investigations in Alix's archives. It is an attempt to sketch a life of the artist away from the looming shadows of her better-known male partners and reassert her talent as a photographer. But it is not a biography: the limited archival material dooms any attempts to recreate a comprehensive picture of Alix's life. Early on, Giannecchini is honest about the scope of her project: "Of her hopes and attachments, I only know what she has written, I will not fantasize about the rest. Fiction thwarts the scrupulous objectivity of

the archive”.

She also looks at what remains of Alix’s photography. Alix suffered from lifelong chronic asthma and many of her photographs are preoccupied with mortality. Giannecchini describes finding a radiograph of Alix’s lungs, “in a fleecy mass of dust gathered behind a radiator”. This is an intimate discovery that allows her to more profoundly understand the photograph, “Quinze minutes la nuit au rythme de la respiration” (fifteen minutes at night to the rhythm of respiration). Ostensibly, this is an abstract, lengthily-exposed shot of trees, but for Giannecchini it amounts to a photograph “of breathing” itself.

The most moving part of this book - sensitively translated by Thea Petrou (who also contributes a touching afterward, reflecting on the translation process) - is Giannecchini’s reading of Alix’s most noteworthy series, *Si quelque chose noir* (“If something black”), which was exhibited in Créteil the year before she died. Seventeen images show Alix, naked in a dark room, varying her pose in relation to the sunlight entering through a window. In some images she stands, in others, her body becomes a corpse. Giannecchini wonders if these images should read as *rakki tai*, a Japanese “demon taming”, before concluding that she sees “a bullfight, a photographic death dance. But Alix is both matador and bull, both the demon and its master, and the *muleta* she wields is the image, a lure for fear”.

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