

Photography as a Way of Holding Oneself in the World

Christophe Avella Bagur — reenchantment, gaze, presence

Richard Hale - essay 2026

For a long time, Christophe Avella Bagur maintained a clear separation between painting and photography. This separation was not an abstract principle. It had a concrete form, an almost physical geography, an inner distribution of time and place. Painting and drawing belonged to the studio, to that enclosed yet active space in which form is built through returns, layers, and slowly organized tensions. The studio was not merely a place of fabrication: it was a place of condensation. Matter found its thickness there, time became visible there, and the image was brought to necessity through deepening, withdrawal, return, and insistence. Photography, by contrast, belonged to the outside. It was bound to movement, to walking, to the street, to travel, to the discreet or brutal event of the world encountered far from the studio. It implied the body's exposure, a direct relation to the outside, a different form of readiness. For a long time, these two regimes did not merge. They coexisted, but at a distance. On one side stood the painter and draftsman in the studio; on the other, the photographer in the world.

This dissociation was not a weakness. It probably allowed each medium to find its own law. Christophe Avella Bagur's painting has never been illustrative. Very early on, it established itself as a field of tensions, in which body, face, mass, surface, and space never matter for themselves alone, but for the relations they set up. From the first bodies of work, one can see this desire to submit the image to an ordeal of intensity: nothing is simply placed; everything is set under tension. In the early works as in the later, larger deployments, the issue is not to paint a subject, but to hold together forces that often contradict one another. This is already true of the Early Works, where painting seeks neither demonstration nor narrative, but the organization of an unstable presence; it becomes even more evident in those ensembles where the human figure asserts itself as a field of struggle between apparition and disappearance. What must be called his regime of gift and withdrawal gradually takes shape there: offering a calm, almost welcoming surface, then withdrawing that comfort through deformation, tension, and the gravity of what is inscribed within it. The eye enters, then understands that it will not inhabit the image innocently.

This logic finds a major formulation in the large Face Floating Souls ensembles, where the face is no longer merely a face, but a site of condensation of the human in all that is floating, uncertain, exposed. The face there is not portrait in a psychological sense. It is a surface of passage, a threatened apparition, a point of intensity where history, violence, spirituality, fall, and elevation intertwine. The transition between the earlier works and what would later be called the News Paintings, and then the clearer emergence of the Face FS bodies, is decisive here: something happens there of the order of a turning point. The media world, contemporary violence, fragments of collective history, and also the great figurative legacies — from El Greco to Goya, from Caravaggio to certain more modern iconographies — are not summoned as tokens of erudition, but as materials of tension. The face lengthens, burns, hollows, tightens. It no longer simply represents a being; it becomes the ordeal of representation itself. Later, other ensembles such as Golgoth'Art or the New Apostles would push this logic further still, turning the figure into not merely the site of a wavering presence, but that of an open confrontation between incarnation, violence, history, myth, and the sacred. Once again, painting does not narrate: it thinks visually.

Alongside this painted work, drawing was never secondary. It often became the site of a barer, more frontal decision, sometimes swifter, yet no less demanding. Graphite, leadpoint, ink, line — none of these function merely as preparatory sketch; they assume an autonomy of their own. One might say that drawing often carries, in Christophe Avella Bagur's work, the mental armature of painting, its visible nerve, its system of supports and cuts. There is a precision of hand here that has nothing decorative about it. Everything must hold through exactness. In later ensembles such as Madonna - Les Pleureuses, the suddenness of gesture and the density of line do not oppose construction; they accomplish it otherwise. This ink work, in which the image seems to surge forth from a single night of concentration, does not arise from expressive abandon, but from an internalized rightness. The gesture becomes total because it has been long prepared by a lifetime of looking.

It is within this already constituted, already strongly thought work that photography returns with a new force from 2023-2024 onward. And it is indeed a return, but a transformed return. Not the return to a practice once set aside, as one might pick up a familiar tool again, but the return to a form of ordeal with the real that suddenly becomes indispensable. This return to photography is not merely an aesthetic shift. It accompanies a

more direct resumption of reality, in contact with situations, spaces, and disciplines in which body, decision, risk, and attention to the world once again become primary. Christophe Avella Bagur's practice as a military reservist, notably as a photographer, participates in this reactivated relation to concrete life, to the fragility of existences, and to what the image may still grasp when it places itself as close as possible to necessity. One must be precise here: this fact does not amount to a picturesque biographical supplement, still less to a warrant. It sheds light, rather, on the more direct, grave, vigilant relation he now entertains with the visible. It helps explain why photography does not return to his work as relaxation or as a side practice, but as a place where something decisive is replayed: the confrontation between the eye, the world, history, the body, and the possibility of seeing rightly.

Here, an essential fact appears. The painter nourished by history, by art history, by the human condition, by ancient forms of representation, and by the great photographic myths — from the earliest major records of war and ruin to the mythologies closer to modern reportage — does not return to photography as one might return to a lighter medium. He returns to it because photography, in its very nakedness, demands another kind of rigor. Time there is no longer that of the pictorial layer, studio reworking, or slow inner deepening. One must choose, prepare, leave, travel, wait, recognize a place, read an angle, understand light, sense the moment at which a set of relations becomes just, then return, scan, correct, edit, assemble. In this sense, photography too becomes a stratified medium. Not stratified by layers of paint, but by layers of acts, decisions, sensitive labor, and conceptual labor. This formulation seems decisive to me because it frees photography from the illusion of the pure instant. In Christophe Avella Bagur's case, photography is not simple seizure; it is construction. It merely displaces the site of stratification.

It is here that one must understand the major role played by the rediscovery of the negatives. For a long time, the image of the journey, the image of Belfast, Berlin, Palermo, of roads and passages, had fixed itself in those photographs chosen long ago, in the era of long developments, the darkroom, prints made under safelight, when a month or more of labor established a first memory of looking. That first choice was real, necessary, just according to the time of then. But it did not exhaust the whole. The films from the 1980s and 1990s remained there in their boxes as a reserve. The contemporary technical possibility of rescanning them, rereading them, correcting them with more precise, more patient, more

comparative digital means does not merely alter their visible state: it changes the author's relation to his own memory. This is not a matter of improving the analog through the digital. It is a matter of giving latent images a chance at a second appearance. Photographs once set aside, not because they were weak, but because they had remained outside the first assembly, return with an intact necessity, sometimes a greater one. What occurs then is far more than an archival dusting-off. It is a reenchantment of the gaze. The past is not restored: it is reopened.

This rediscovery has an existential scope as much as an aesthetic one. Human existence is made of dilution. Days pass, works are built, consciousness fixes itself on certain images and leaves others in the shadows. One believes one knows what a journey, a stay, a period was because one has kept a few chosen photographs from it. Then one day the boxes are reopened, and one understands that the gaze of the time had seen more than memory retained. The negatives then become the site of an indirect self-portrait. Not because they would show the photographer, but because they preserve his speed, his patience, his manner of approaching, his way of letting things come. One rediscovers oneself through what one knew how to see, without yet fully knowing it. That is why the word reenchantment is right. It is not nostalgia. It is a matter of finding again in the image the reserve of possibilities that a first selection had not sufficed to bring forth.

In this context, Belfast assumes an exceptional importance. Because it was a first major reportage, a long stay, a founding moment; but also because the city itself, in February–March 1992, constituted an ordeal for the gaze. To photograph there the frontier between Catholic and Unionist areas, before the ceasefires of 1994 and long before the agreements of 1998, does not amount to documenting a conflict in the journalistic sense. It means walking a threshold. The frontier is not always a visible line; it is often a breathing of the streets, a seam in the bricks, the flags, the pavements, the walls, the silences, the postures. What these images reveal is not only a divided city, but the density of a space in which every movement weighs its side. The force of Belfast, in Christophe Avella Bagur's work, lies precisely in this refusal of demonstration. The gaze does not seek the spectacular. It does not seize violence as a visual trophy. It attends to thresholds, low tensions, tiny signs that give the city its moral climate. The eye is quick, but not hurried. It scrutinizes, cuts, waits. It seizes the decisive instant not because it would be dramatic in a media sense, but because it crystallizes a rightness of relations.

One should insist on this expression: the eye that scrutinizes with a scalpel the slightest portion of life, of light. It says something fundamental. This gaze is not flâneur-like in the weak sense. It is mobile, sensitive, but also extremely constructed. It knows that the visible is never simply given; that it must be read, and even assembled within the frame itself. A wall, rain, a bright strip on a pavement, a waiting silhouette, a child, a flag, a sky hanging too low: nothing is secondary. Everything enters a system of intensities. Photography no longer belongs to extraction; it becomes a composition of phenomena. One might almost say that it thinks like painting, but with the means of the immediately encountered world. It does not model matter by layers; it arranges the tensions of the visible through decision and waiting.

This is true of Belfast, but also of other major photographic ensembles. Side Road already bore this logic: walking, letting things come, rendering readable without seducing. This cycle of journeys and roads, spanning decades and very different places — Belfast, Berlin, Palermo, Rome, Sicily, Budapest, Bucharest, Spain, Northern Ireland, Germany, Greece, Israel, Taiwan, Japan, the United States — does not hold together like a travel diary, nor like a record of wandering. It holds as an obstinate search for the right distance. The road is never picturesque there. It is the place where the world becomes readable through its edges, its masses, its breaths. A 28 mm lens, a walk, a street, a pavement, an angle of light are enough to organize a visual thought. Here again, the photographer does not collect facts; he builds constellations.

More recently, ensembles such as Faith, devoted to the churches of southern France, or the nocturnal work of MBK — Malta, Bari, Kraków — show how photography can assume other regimes without losing this fundamental demand. In Faith, what matters is not only the religious building, but the relation between silence, inner light, the memory of a place, and the contemporary gaze. The move to color has its necessity there: it is not a matter of palette effect, but an attempt to render the subtle differences between light temperatures, stained glass, painted surfaces, shadows, densities of air. Photography there becomes almost meditative, while retaining its documentary rigor of the visible. In MBK, by contrast, the urban night, the eye at human height, available light, human traces, screens, reflections, grounds create another grammar: denser, more discontinuous, sharper, but always held. It is never a matter of aestheticizing night; it is a matter of reading human presence, often indirectly, through its remnants, its flows, its zones of withdrawal.

And if one finally looks at the more recent body *Natures Mortes Contemporaines* — *Abrégé existentiel*, one sees how photography, having fully become a medium of creation, rejoins without collapsing into the deepest ambitions of painting. Here there is no reportage, no street, no journey, but the same will to make tensions, signs, objects, traces of life hold within an image that must never be a simple illustration. The absence of the human figure does not cancel human presence; it displaces it into objects, arrangements, remains, signs, accidents. Once again, photography does not record a staging; it constructs an icon of existence. This is very important because it shows that photography, far from being only the medium of the outside, has ended up reinvesting in its own manner what gave the studio its force: construction, thickness, tension, the thought of the image as a lasting place.

This is why one must refuse to think of Christophe Avella Bagur's photography as a mere appendage to his painted work. It does not matter because it would be made by a painter, nor because it would prolong painting in a quicker mode. It matters because it confronts, otherwise, the same fundamental questions: how can an image hold? What makes it endure, not as archive, but as presence? How can one bring into a frame, without crushing it there, the violence of the world, its fragility, its silence, its matters, its contradictions? How can one render readable without seducing? How can one give, then withdraw, in such a way that the viewer understands that what is at stake is something other than an illustration?

At bottom, what links painting, drawing, and photography in Christophe Avella Bagur's work is neither identity of motif nor of process. It is one and the same morality of the gaze. An image has value only if it supports real tensions. It must never be a simple décor of meaning. It must produce it. Whether one considers the great taut faces of the *Floating Souls*, the dark intensities of *Golgoth'Art*, the condensed impulses of *Madonna - Les Pleureuses*, the roads of *Side Road*, the thresholds of *Belfast*, the luminous interiors of *Faith*, the nights of *MBK*, or the charged arrangements of *Natures Mortes Contemporaines*, the same demand recurs: to make sure the image is not an answer, but a place of holding.

One should then return to this formula, which now seems central to me for understanding the whole: photography here is not a record of the world, but a way of holding oneself within it. The sentence is valid for past and present alike. It is valid for rediscovered negatives as for recent work. It is valid for the photographer who walks Belfast in 1992 as for the one who,

thirty years later, rescans, corrects, reorders, rereads, and understands that the work was more extensive than what he had first preserved of it. It is also valid for the painter who, after a pause, rediscovers in photography not a substitute for painting, but another path toward the real. This return is not secondary. It transforms the entire economy of the work. It reminds us that the image, when it stands as close as possible to its necessity, may still accomplish something rare: not only show what is there, but save within the visible a quality of presence that time, without it, would have lost.

This is perhaps where the deepest singularity of this photographic work lies. It does not merely document life. Nor does it make use of life. It honors it. It honors it in what it has of vulnerability, tension, perishability, decisiveness. It honors it because it knows that every just image is also a form of responsibility. And that is why, when one reopens these boxes, when one rescans these films, when one sees these streets, these edges, these faces, these skies, these walls, these passages reappear, it is not merely a past that returns. It is silent proof that the gaze, when it has been exact, can still teach us today how to see.