

Grace and its Sorrows

In some cases (perhaps in too many) art history favours history over art. It is then that an artist's work is read in terms of his or her life (a collection of anecdotes of apparently unquestionable veracity) or position in the unidirectional (always forward) arrow of chronology. But sometimes, even – paradoxically – very often, the arrow points the other way, and neither life nor history can explain what we see. Jacques Henri Lartigue, whose legend is always told, is one such case.

If we start not from what is (his work) but from who was (its author), we might say that until he turned sixty-nine, when the MoMA discovered and labelled him as a pioneering and influential photographer, Lartigue was no one. That is, no one other than an amateur painter obsessed with preserving everything he experienced, which is what led him to practise two forms of taxidermy of the ephemeral: the intimate diary and the family album. From an early age he noted down (and ranked) everything in his personal diary, and before being given his first camera at the age of seven or eight, he invented the 'visual trick', a literal opening and closing of the eyes with which he could 'capture the smell of happiness'.

Born into a wealthy and loving family, Lartigue wanted for

nothing. But the myth demanded that he become ill and spend part of his childhood at home. A home with dogs and a garden and the toys, nannies and jumping cousins that appear in his first photographs. Other intimate details would come on his honeymoon, and other passions – for technical innovations, speed, sport or fashion – would make him a casual reporter of modernity. Hence the title of the show, *A Floating World*, a translation of *ukiyo-e*, the genre of Japanese woodblock prints that portrays the pleasures of bourgeois life; and also one of Lartigue's favourite themes, that of jumping in the air.

Lartigue's volatile beings take their place alongside a plethora of suspensions, from the celebrated leap caught mid-air by Cartier-Bresson to the celebrities who jumped for Halsman. But, beyond formal analogy, the idea of catching in flight a reality more physical than conceptual leads us to connect him to the action art of Pollock and Klein (and his *Leap into the Void*). Moving away from the Bressonian *decisive instant* and closer to the poetics of the mundane, Zavattini's *sguardo indistinto*, Lartigue's is a photography found *between* the key moments.

The interest in apprehending what is happening, from joyful times to mere unremarkable time, is in vain. What goes up must come down. Only a few, as Simone Weil writes in *Gravity and Grace*, manage to come down without gravity, with grace as cause and consequence. And if, as the song says, falling

feels like flying for a little while, the jump of joy that Lartigue freezes contains its fall within it, in the same way that too much happiness foreshadows nostalgia to come. Like the guy in the film who, having stepped off the edge of a tall building, repeats to himself as he falls 'so far so good', Lartigue catches the euphoria of Icarus, that glory of the *meantime* that holds within it the final defeat.

Precociously conscious of the fleeting nature of life, as an adult he retained his childlike enthusiasm, which shines though in his work. Because there may be no photographer who is not curious, but Lartigue goes further: 'I always feel the urge to eat a bit of earth, just to see.' Well aware as he was that sight is a limited sense, his camera soaks up everything around him, trying out novel points of view despite the unwieldiness of the camera and achieving a contemporary familiarity despite the appearances of his time. Despite the myth, this is his great merit.