

## OLIVO BARBIERI. IMMAGINI 1978 - 2014

Over 100 works in the first major Italian retrospective that tells the story of one of Italy's greatest contemporary photographers

A new work, created for MAXXI, enters the Museum's permanent collection

May 29 – November 15, 2015

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*I have never been interested in photography, I'm interested in images.  
I think that my work starts where photography ends.*  
(Olivo Barbieri)

Rome, 26 May 2015. He has described Italy's landscape, its provinces and its outskirts, but also the collapse of the legend of modernity, the transformation of China and the globalization of the Far East, the cities of the whole world viewed from above, and the relationship with Nature. Olivo Barbieri (Carpi, 1954) is one of Italy's most important contemporary photographers and from **May 29 to November 15, 2015** MAXXI will hold the first major Italian retrospective of his work entitled **OLIVO BARBIERI. IMMAGINI 1978 – 2014** curated by **Francesca Fabiani**.

The exhibition presents a selection of over 100 works – photographs, films and other materials – which illustrate this photographer's artistic trajectory from the late 1970s to the present, and it is also the chance for the creation of a **new work dedicated to the Adriatic Coast, produced specially for MAXXI**, thanks to **Eni** main partner of the exhibition.

A retrospective that retraces Barbieri's themes and research, underscoring his constant attention to the theme of perception, his capacity to envision and interpret reality. With his photographs this artist casts doubt over the conventional modes of representation, to instead breathe life into new narratives by means of continuous, incessant *perceptive experiments*.

The exhibition is divided into **seven sections** beginning from **VIAGGIO IN ITALIA (1980 – 83)**, a period during which Barbieri dedicated his work to the city and the landscapes in the Italian province, with no folkloristic purpose, but rather to simply remain faithful to the visual given. The works during this phase, which were all made in color, then became part of a pivotal event: the *Viaggio in Italia* exhibition organized by Luigi Ghirri in 1984. Showing their works, besides Barbieri, were some other great Italian authors, including Jodice, Basilico, Guidi. The event is still considered to be a crucial experience for Italian photography.

This section includes the photographs that Barbieri presented for the 1984 exhibition and the ones he took in the three years before that.

The second section is called **IMAGES (1977 – 2007)** and it includes the *Flippers* (1977 – 78) series, which Barbieri first became famous for, and which he exhibited following the invitation he received from Ghirri at the Galleria Civica di Modena.

Images taken inside an abandoned factory, in which the icons of post-Second World War American culture, from the pin-up to science fiction, from cowboys to the Beatles, became the ruins of the very modernity that falls to pieces, just like its myths. It is a series that raises symbolic issues, such as the juxtaposing of the icon and reality, but it also reveals a thinking about the mechanisms of vision.

These reflections also characterize the series dedicated to the paintings housed in the museums: *Paintings (Uffizi)* and *Louvre*, 2002, and *TWIY (Capodimonte)*, 2007, where the use of selective focus offers the shots an unprecedented depth.

The exhibition continues with **ARTIFICIAL ILLUMINATIONS (1982 – 2014)** in which phantasmagorical cities characterized by impossible and almost immaterial colors are the absolute protagonists. These are not post-produced images, but the result of very long exposures to artificial light. As Barbieri says: "There's more time inside these photographs than the time it takes to look at them"; it is through these pictures that the photographer analyzes the potential of the photographic medium and the limits of the human eye.

The fourth section called **CHINA (1989 – 2014)** is dedicated to journey to the Far East that since 1989 has been a constant in Barbieri's life: India, Tibet, Japan, but first and foremost China, characterized by a unprecedented social and urban change. This is a narrative that unfolds over 25 years, from the first urban portraits of the 1990s – which witness the persistence of vernacular elements, of people-oriented architectures – up to the images of the new millennium which testify to the advancement of structure and infrastructures of disturbing proportions.

In the section called **VIRTUAL TRUTHS (1996 – 2002)**, the exhibition tells the story of the earliest experiments with "selective focus," a technique that, thanks to the use of special lenses, allows the photographer to focus only a part of the image, leaving the rest of it out of focus. This technique, which would become a distinguishing feature of Barbieri's work, has allowed him to create a new visual mechanism, redefining the hierarchies among the elements of the visible. And it is thanks to his work that the term "out-of-focus" had become part of the contemporary language of photography.

The sixth part of the exhibition is dedicated to the project called **SITE SPECIFIC\_ (2003 – 2013)**, research which has involved flying in a helicopter close to more than 40 cities around the world, from Rome to Shanghai, from Las Vegas to Seville, from Turin to Montreal, from Beijing to Los Angeles, from Amman to New York, from Brasilia to Tel Aviv - all of them cities that at a certain point in their history have undergone sudden and irreversible transformations. Through this project Barbieri changes perspective, he subverts the point of view and, using a wholly museum-related term, that of the site-specific installation for a certain place, he seeks to represent the world as if it were a temporary installation.

The exhibition ends with **PARKS (2006 – 2014)**, a project that is almost the counterpart of *site specific\_*, in which the key role is played by the relationship between Man and Nature. The linguistic instruments are the same ones that have been tried and tested over the years: photos taken from a helicopter, selective focus, design, rendering. Neither method nor language change in this constant visual experimentation, poised between the reality and the representation that characterize all of this artist's work.

The exhibition is also enriched by a series of in-depth **Focuses**, dedicated to **documents** and **books**, to the works in **MAXXI's permanent collection** (3 projects for some 35 prints altogether), and to the **videos** that Barbieri has produced over the course of his career. These include the one dedicated to *Shanghai* (2004) made without audio so as to denounce the West's indifference towards one of the fastest social and urban upheavals in history, *Seascape #1 Night/Shenzhen 05*, a mesmerizing black and white film on a mass bathing in the moonlight, and, lastly, *Beijing Sky*, which immerses us in the Chinese visual imaginary.

On the occasion of the exhibition a catalogue will be published by Marsilio

**The press pack and images of the exhibition** can be downloaded from the Reserved Area of the Fondazione MAXXI's website at <http://www.fondazionemaxxi.it/area-riservata/> by typing in the password **areariservatamaxxi**

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**OLIVO BARBIERI. IMMAGINI 1978 – 2014**

Giovanna Melandri, President Fondazione MAXXI

From the porticoes of the docile cities of Emilia to the reticular megalopolises of the planet, from crowded stadiums to the mutable profiles of certain natural spaces: the journey made by Olivo Barbieri over the course of his four-decade-long career has been a rich and adventurous one.

The exhibition Olivo Barbieri. Images 1978-2014 that the MAXXI is dedicating to the Emilian photographer sets out to convey the complexity of this journey, which I do not hesitate to define as “existential” in its breadth, dedication and rootedness.

The curator has chosen to stage a major retrospective divided up into seven thematic sections with the aim of covering the full range of a research that has certainly not been confined to a single theme or subject. A choice that reflects the desire to fulfil the museum’s cultural mission through an approach able to provide new critical instruments.

And in fact the exhibition is enriched with videos, documentary materials, publications and works already present in the collection of the MAXXI, all of which will serve to make the public even more aware of the quality of Barbieri’s work.

The attention paid to this artist is not an occasional interest on the part of the MAXXI, but the fruit of an ongoing project of promotion and familiarization with contemporary photography that began with the monographic exhibition devoted to Luigi Ghirri, in 2013. This was followed by a homage to another protagonist of Italian photography, Gabriele Basilico. Two poets of the gaze who are now joined by Olivo Barbieri, another key figure in the generation that was able to offer a new vision of the reality of an Italy in transformation, with an always questioning and never banal sensibility.

From the seventies to the present day Olivo Barbieri has turned his subtly probing gaze on places, settings and above all perceptions, incessantly investigating the way we look at the contemporary world.

An institution like the MAXXI, which has made the exploration of the “contemporary” its mission, cannot avoid making a strong commitment and offering constant support to a field like photography, which deepens our knowledge of the world with its firsthand testimony.

We are delighted to have shared our mission on this occasion with ENI, which has immediately grasped the value of this wide-ranging project of “viewing” the world, commissioning from Olivo Barbieri a work on the Adriatic coast that will be included in the exhibition and become part of the museum’s collections of photography.

With this exhibition the MAXXI wants to offer the public a vision capable not just of stirring a sense of wonder, but also of increasing comprehension. Of cajoling the eye but at the same time of stimulating its capacity for understanding.

Photographers, great photographers like Olivo Barbieri, help us to carry out this mission; with the quality of their images and the intelligence of their gaze, which is focused poetically and profoundly on the present.

**OLIVO BARBIERI. IMMAGINI 1978 – 2014*****Continuity and Rupture***

*A preface for Olivo Barbieri's exhibition at the MAXXI*

Hou Hanru, Artistic Director MAXXI

Over the last few decades, we have seen the rise of photography as an important genre in the contemporary art world. This was especially intensified in the 1990s when major movements and figures came to the fore in the international art world. These major movements included the now classic Düsseldorf School and Vancouver School, with stars such as Bernd and Hilla Bercher, Thomas Ruff, Andreas Gursky, and Jeff Wall, alongside other major figures such as Cindy Sherman, all of whom brought about a kind of conceptual revolution in photography. On the other side of the world, the Japanese photography scene—with major figures such as Daido Moriyama, Hiroshi Shugimoto, Noboyoshi Araki, and Yasumasa Morimura, to name but a few—has presented dynamic and abundant reinventions of photographic language to engage with both social changes and the redefinition of identity... In between, we have also witnessed the rise of a loosely defined Italian school of photography, with a lineup of interesting figures such as Luigi Ghirri, Gabriele Basilico, and Massimo Vitali, with their strong focus on landscape and especially urban spaces and architecture. Their works provide testimony of the contemporary evolutions in Italy's urban and social life from personal, singular, and particularly poetic perspectives. Olivo Barbieri has been following this trend and has creatively extended his work to incorporate the global world beyond Italy, both in terms of subject and language. For the last three decades, he has been a frequent traveler, at first throughout Italy and then, in quick succession, the world at large, especially the “non-Western” world. These kinds of traveling experiences have helped him understand that a new globalized reality is looming on new horizons, far beyond the Eurocentric visions and models of modern society. Through his photography, he aims to capture this unprecedentedly rapid mutation of the image of the world—the booms in Shanghai, Dubai, Mexico City, and even Lagos, for example, are bringing about totally new and unforeseen manifestations of urban development and novel social systems, as emphasized by Rem Koolhaas in the research of urban expansions in the Pearl River Delta and the Gulf. This is a world of excitement and drama, driven by contradictory and conflicting forces of utopian social projects and capitalistic, speculative profit-making, of claims for democracy and new forms of totalitarianism... New techniques are needed. As a global traveler, he has devised a way of photographing urban scenes through a “selective focus” that presents phenomena afresh: streets, buildings, people, and situations in the making, something that suggests the imminent, the possible, and the unpredictable. A new kind of poetry, completely different from, and even opposite to, Ghirri's melancholia and Basilico's soberness emerges from these fluid, moving, somehow naïve, but definitely refreshing views. They shed light on hidden yet significant aspects of the new global metropolis—a kind of leviathan of urban dynamism and hybridity...

MAXXI, with its long-term dedication to supporting and promoting dialogue between art and architecture in particular as well as an intimate collaboration between photographers and urbanists—architects, is now organizing a retrospective of Olivo Barbieri's work. It is not only a logical step forward after major events around the works of Luigi Ghirri and Gabriele Basilico; more importantly, perhaps, it demonstrates our efforts to develop a new vision of the interactions between a new global reality and a new understanding of creativity, through both an openness towards new languages, technologies, and poetics on the one hand and critical positioning on the other. The Barbieri exhibition provides us with a precious opportunity to revisit our ambition and strategy. It is both continuity and rupture.

*April 6, 2015*

**OLIVO BARBIERI. IMMAGINI 1978 – 2014*****Peeling the Shadow off the Ground***

Margherita Guccione, Director MAXXI Architettura

"I started to use a helicopter to distance myself from the sound of words, to see the city from afar, a long way from voices. What interests me is the form of the city.<sup>1</sup>"

This is how in 2010 Olivo Barbieri described the process that has led him to make use of "distance" to decipher the world and to perceive cities as living and complex organisms, characterized by an extremely contemporary aesthetic. A reversal of the functional point of view that has induced him to see the urban landscape as a mutable and temporary installation, to duplicate the visions of the world. With the exhibition "Olivo Barbieri. Images 1978- 2014" MAXXI Architettura confirms the interest and the power of photography as an autonomous language and not just as a tool for the critical interpretation and analysis of architecture and the city. It is a story that began long ago and that is reinforced in the projects that the Museum of Architecture is dedicating to great names in photography, both through commissions aimed at expanding the collection and with major monographic exhibitions.

In fact it is for several decades now that the work of photographers has been linked to research into the themes of architecture, city planning and "space" in the broad sense of the term, understood both as concrete materiality and as dynamic time that flows all by itself, outside any control. It is to these artists that the museum has dedicated a program of research, with periodic appointments: after the extraordinary success of the major retrospective on Luigi Ghirri, the intense monographic "TO FACE" devoted to the work of Paola De Pietri, the exhibition on Guido Guidi's series of pictures of the Brion Tomb and the homage paid to Gabriele Basilico, we are now presenting another great figure in Italian photography: Olivo Barbieri.

The exhibition, which takes the critical form of an ample retrospective, also represents a confirmation of the collaboration with Barbieri that the MAXXI embarked on in 2003, commissioning a series of projects from him. To the works realized in this way—which are now part of the museum's collections—the exhibition devotes a specific space, the "Focus Collezioni," made up of three different groups: the first, composed of twenty-one photographs, is a work on the Strait of Messina carried out in 2003 for the project "atlante italiano 003. Ritratto dell'Italia che cambia"; in 2004 the museum again invited Barbieri to contribute to the "Sguardi contemporanei" project, which set out to reexamine the Italian architecture of the last fifty years: the result was a series of six photographs that interpret the white structures of Pier Luigi Nervi's Palazzetto dello Sport in Rome in an almost abstract sense; finally, in 2006, Barbieri was involved in the "Cantiere d'autore" project, creating for the collections a fascinating sequence of images of the museum under construction.

In the wake of this ongoing collaboration, the exhibition presented here will also be the occasion for a new acquisition, a work that Barbieri will create specially for the MAXXI as part of his decade-long "site specific\_" project: a "flight" over the Adriatic coast of the Italian peninsula, through the airspace between Ravenna and Vasto that embraces the shoreline, the oil rigs and the sequence of major inland cities (San Marino, Urbino, etc.). A project that will focus on the conurbation and landscapes of the mid-Adriatic, and therefore one that turns around the form of the contemporary landscape, bringing out the diverse and unprecedented configurations of the present.

Once again photography shows that it is better than other media at helping the public to understand cities and urban changes, with a sideways and critical gaze that each of us can exercise and experience, even individually. In order to learn—Barbieri teaches us—to use our eyes as a "selective focus," by taking the distance that is proper to art and that prompts us to look at the world from above, peeling the shadow off the ground, as in the original title of Daniele Del Giudice's novel about flight.

**OLIVO BARBIERI. IMMAGINI 1978 - 2014**

Francesca Fabiani, curator

«I've never been interested in photography, but in images.  
I believe my work starts where photography ends».  
Olivo Barbieri

This apparently paradoxical statement contains a fundamental key to the understanding of the complex research of Olivo Barbieri (Carpi, Modena 1954), one of the most important figures in contemporary photography. Barbieri is mainly known for his analysis on the shape and the iconography of contemporary cities.

Yet it would be too simple to reduce his work exclusively to an investigation of urban space and architecture: while this is the framework in which his research forms, it has more to do with an analysis - and a questioning - of the concept of perception,

so with our ability to see and interpret reality. Moreover this is the first step in order to understand it. Through an experimental use of photographic instruments and language, Barbieri undermines the usual modes of representation, clearing the way for new and more often than not surprising interpretations: what interests him is not to faithfully reproduce, nor to make the world spectacular, but to translate his personal perception of what's visible into narration, into a story. The exhibition, conceived as a broad retrospective of his work, is structured in seven thematic sections that allow visitors to follow the development of Barbieri's thought from the seventies up until the present day: from the early pictures of pinball machines discovered in an abandoned factory that play with the decadent icons of modernity, to estranging nocturnal images of urban settings that are contrasted with visions of paintings in museums (even more ambiguous owing to their appearance of reality); from the exploration of Italian cities and of their outskirts in the 1980s to the numerous trips to China and the Far East; from the first experiments with "selective focus" in the 1990s, to the aerial views of cities such as Rome, Las Vegas and Shanghai, the starting point of his site-specific\_ series, which features more than forty towns and megalopolis around the world.

His bird-eye shots of cities, taken using the "selective focus" technique (which highlights only some elements, deliberately leaving the rest of the picture out of focus), ushered in a new way of perceiving the city that, thanks to the conscious introduction of photographic "errors," is presented to us in an unprecedented manner, closer to a scaled down model than to a real place.

The fine line between a photograph that represents a place and the use of a language that ends up decreeing the ambiguity of any representation is where we can position Barbieri's photography: poised between the certain and the uncertain, between the real and the plausible, between knowledge and obvious. Between the horizontality of his journeys on the surface of the planet and the verticality of a journey that investigates the internal processes of seeing and knowing.

The exhibition also features a series of in depth Focus areas that are dedicated respectively to video productions (with 9 films on display); to editorial productions thanks to the presentation of a rich bibliographic section; and also a space dedicated to photos taken by Barbieri that are stored in the MAXXI collection, the result of ad hoc commissions, which demonstrate a long lasting and fruitful collaboration between Barbieri and the museum, which began in 2003, while the huge building designed by Zaha Hadid was under construction.