

The Paris of today is perhaps not so different from the one that Constant Anée left almost twenty years ago. Many of the same people who he knew then, who he photographed then, who he loved then, are still here and still doing much the same thing. As for Anée, he moved to Argentina in 2007 to open a restaurant accompanied by his two children, Lou and Violette, and their mother, Natalia. Located in Buenos Aires and named A Nos Amours after the 1983 film by Maurice Pialat, the restaurant is still operational today and teeming with regulars who come to enjoy the charms of a model Parisian bistro with good wine and specials written in chalk on a blackboard. At the same time, the restaurant is a shelter for Anée's dormant creative spirit, acting sporadically as a temporary gallery or even an impromptu cinema on Sundays.



CONSTANT ANÉE

written by Rhys Evans



Sweatshirt by Raf Simons, published in Self Service, 2002

When Natalia died tragically in 2023, Anée found himself cast back into the complicated past which they shared together. With the help of a new friend with expertise in analog film processing, Anée was able to restore a pile of ruined negatives from their younger days. The friend was from Ukraine, and had only come to Argentina because of the war; without him, the photographs would probably have been lost forever.

What Anée calls his family photos, in fact, seem more like diary entries. And as in a personal journal, moments that might have been easily forgotten are preserved, and lived reality is rendered with a frankness that is only possible in conversations with oneself.

Habitual use of the tripod allows Anée to make regular cameos in his own images. Stepping out from behind the camera, he often joins Natalia and his daughters to participate in an authentic glimpse into his family life. Nothing is forced, and behaviors are allowed to unfold as if no one is watching. Yet at the same time, the tripod allows for a grounded perspective, a careful alignment of everything in the frame: in one photo the white lines on tarmac seem to separate the couple into their own zones, in another they lean towards each other in the same gentle way as the trees behind them. In yet another the camera is placed level with a steep hill throwing the couple's whole world off kilter as they huddle together on an askew bench. What this spontaneous yet considered method produces is a feeling that although things might seem out of place, everything is somehow where it ought to be.

Anée's way of looking at and being in the world is informed by his dearly held principles. He is hesitant to look at other photographers as points of reference, wary of being influenced by a certain prescribed mode. Despite working under Steven Meisel in the 1990s, Anée inherited little desire to capture an ideal gesture of expressiveness which defined that era of fashion photography. Those simple emotions—joy, fear, rage—the ones that can be acted out for the camera, weren't what Anée was interested in recording. Instead, Anée looked towards cinema for a way to render something more ambiguous.

Of all of Anée's cinematic idols who formed the French New Wave, none outrank Robert Bresson, the precursor to all of them. When he jokingly tells me, "Bresson can be boring too", it's clear that it comes from a place of genuine affinity, and from a deep understanding of the truth within that so-called boringness. Bresson outlined, in detail, the philosophy which informed his directorial approach. He famously prioritized the "movement from the exterior to the interior." over the "movement from the interior to the exterior." In the absence of expression, a wide space opens up for the viewer to pour themselves into. This inwardness is the core of Anée's work, but the techniques that he employs to arrive there are entirely his own: intuited, rather than intellectualized. In his own words, "I always knew what I didn't want".

When he was still living in Paris, Anée was commissioned by magazines like *Self Service*, *Encens*, and *Le Monde* to photograph the personalities which made up the art and fashion scene of the time. Amongst the subjects of these portraits was Dries Van Noten, who Anée photographed outside his boutique beside the Seine, which is still there today, as it was being constructed. These images are not just portraits of people but also of the environments in which they lived, worked, existed. These spaces are organized with the same sturdy composition as his later work: the straight-on perspective, the lines parallel to the square frame, the feeling of belonging. Somehow these character studies feel not only personal to the subjects but to Anée himself and his own artistic principles.

Anée typically uses the same kind of square format camera. Although he tells me, "It's good because you can crop or make it horizontal or vertical," in fact he very rarely adjusts the framing. Instead his photos are presented just as they were taken; the scene is preserved just as it was framed in the moment. But within the formal structure of the square, spontaneity is allowed to take place. Anée recalls how one photo, which ultimately became the cover for *Encens* n°8 in 2002, came about as an accident—a double exposure of a scattered pile of toys and a shot of a church's exterior. And Anée's refusal to use flash in any of his photos, turns the light into another volatile element in the scene. The final shot was always candid about the time of day in which the film was exposed. Anée laments all the photos that were ruined by too little or too much light.

Of these many inconstant elements, the subject is always just one. They are suspended in the image, nestled within their surroundings. There is intimacy in distance. An aura fills the space around a person with something of themselves, like a cloud of perfume or body odor, and Anée somehow captures this. Although the scenes are sparsely decorated, the sitters in his portraits are rarely entirely alone, often sharing the space with particular articles of interest. It could be a sign, or a painting, or a piece of medical equipment, a bookshelf stuffed with books. Sitting visually on the same plane, these objects draw some attention away from the subject. Anée tells me that these objects were never added to the scene, but they instead revealed themselves through a process of subtraction. Arriving at the home, studio or workplace of his subject, Anée would take the clutter away until one of two things remained. As most of the portraits were taken in a setting familiar to the subject, these things sometimes held some significance to the subject of the photo, otherwise they acquired a new meaning by their inclusion. In one image the magazine which commissioned the portrait is tucked into the pocket of one subject, in another a framed print of two entwined lovers hands above the heads of a couple sat at an almost empty dinner table. Perhaps that is why Anée's series for *Self Service*, which features handheld signs reading "I ♥ MARTIN MARGIELA" or "I ♥ RAF SIMONS" or "I ♥ HUSSEIN CHALAYAN", feels somewhat at odds. The signs are an addition, rather than the result of subtraction. Inserted at the request of the editor-in-chief, they color each otherwise serious scene with a tint of irony, pulling us outward rather than inward.

Outside of these commissions, Anée engaged himself in photographing some of the ordinary people of Paris, as he puts it, "I was looking for people with personality". Anée recounts how he visited the home of an elderly woman with twenty-five cats. He describes the pungent smell, and how the woman insisted that Anée photograph her cats rather than herself. When one cat bounced onto her head, Anée took his shot. In the resulting image, the cat is radiant with daylight pouring in from the window and blurred in playful movement. We see for ourselves the cat's illuminating and animating presence through the eyes of a woman living a fairly dingy and stagnant life. It's the kind of photograph made possible only by Anée's way of looking at the world. Through his adherence to his principles, Anée is afforded a special kind of freedom. Through his openness to the moment at hand, the moment itself in turn opens up into some beautiful coincidence which could have never been forced.

Anée's daughter, Violette, is his number one fan. A budding photographer herself, she was eager to coax her father out of his fourteen year hiatus from the discipline. He has taught her what he knows, and in turn she has helped him to rediscover things that he thought he had forgotten. She has only been taking photos for a short time, but, with the guidance of her father, her own style has already begun to emerge. Together, they are working on a new book in honor of Natalia's memory.



Constant Anée self-portrait, 2003



Joshua in Yohji Yamamoto, published in Encens n°9, 2003





