THE REASON OF ORANGES

Paloma al aire was the slow burner that brought Ricardo Cases to international attention, despite – or perhaps because of – his attempt to make the photographs "the victim of the book", each one broken in two by its crude spiral binding. Now he's back with his next, published by Mack this autumn, featuring the images he began making after retreating to Valencia following a dark period in his life, and surrendering himself to 'the reason of oranges'. This emblem of the region became a narrative device with which to explore his new home, and weave the wider story of Spain's recent collapse into his own, finds Colin Pantall

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"Three or four years ago, I had a tragedy in my life," says Ricardo Cases over Skype from his home in Spain. "My mother and a good friend had just died. I was angry with life. I was angry with my friends. I lost a lot of friends at that time, so I moved to Valencia, where I knew nobody. I came here to change my life because I had become a monster."

Cases started *El porqué de las naranjas* [which translates loosely as 'the reason of oranges'] while living there. "One of the symbols of the Levante region [the eastern side of the Iberian Peninsula on the Mediterranean coast] is oranges, but also tourism and construction. I needed to start something really open, so as a starting point I chose this question, 'el porqué de las naranjas'. I used it to help me make pictures, I used it to act as a kind of therapy for everything that was happening in my life."

With that in mind, Cases began walking around his new hometown, taking pictures and slowly building them into a narrative that unites the region's past and present. Initially, Cases surrendered himself to the process; it was only with time that the elements of landscape, politics and an economy in crisis became part of a visually connected, coherent whole.

"Levante is a place where I can recognise myself, where I can be myself. I like to work with the things I know, in the places I know. Normally, I know exactly what I want to do with my work, but for Naranjas I wanted my work to have autonomy. I went to work every day, photographed, came home, printed my pictures and began to see what worked and what didn't. Step by step I discovered what the body of work was – that this is my place, my time, my landscape – but at a time when society is changing, when the economy here is changing."

Construction and tourism are among the only industries that offer employment in this coastal area of Spain, but with rapid development comes an inevitable loss of natural beauty, and *El porqué de las naranjas* is the story of precisely that – a landscape ravaged, first in the name of progress, and then by the financial crisis that has decimated the Spanish economy. In Naranjas everything seems worn, held together by pieces of string or planks of wood. Everything seems out of place, not quite as it should be, illogical. This lends a sense of absurdity to the book, the idea that the people, the buildings, the palm trees and the cars don't really belong there. Cases uses the orange as a narrative device to highlight this sense of absurdity, the book begins with a picture of an orange perched by a car wheel, a drum filled with oranges, windfall oranges placed by a roadside.

Cases photographs a coast under attack from a kind of topographical skin disease – a landscape suffering from a rash, ulcers and boils. It flakes and it suppurates. It's dried up, dead. Repeated images of palms show them wilting under the attack of weevil infestation, and an overexposed colour palette replicates the intensity of high noon heat in mediterranean.

"Colour is really important for me – it's a synthesis of all my work. I use colour and light. I'm very happy with Naranjas because I used a Mediterranean palette. I opened the shutter one stop to let the light in, and I played with the colour."

Cases also experimented with the edit when working on the book, which will be published by Mack in October, using a formal layout that is diametrically opposed to the full-bleed colour blast of *Paloma al aire*, now in its second edition and available from Dalpine (www.dalpine.com). In *Paloma al aire*, Cases turns his eye to the culture of pigeon racing, a sport unique to Valencia and Murcia, a curious practice, where male pigeons are painted in vibrant colours and given racing names by their owners before being released in an airborne chase to win the attention of one coveted female bird. "In *Paloma*, the photograph is the 'victim' of the book," says Cases. "Every picture is broken in two by the gutter and the wire. Now I'm experimenting with another possibility. I want the book to be 'in the service of' the photograph. I want to put the focus on the entire picture by having one picture on each double-page spread surrounded by white so that the book is the victim of the photograph.

"It's really enjoyable to play with the two possibilities and to take a risk by having small pictures. I want to play with the perception of the photograph. I don't want to be dogmatic with my photography. It should be free because, let's face it, the economy is not dependent on the photobook."

But this openness, this sense of freedom, does not extend to the editing and design of *El porqué de las naranjas*. Here, Cases follows his vision through to the end, and he was perhaps lucky that Michael Mack, the publisher, understood and shared his vision. "Michael wanted to [reproduce] the book I showed him when we met. I had designed a dummy and he wanted to do it exactly the same. That is important for me. It was also how I made *Paloma*. It was published in exactly the same way as the dummy."

Although Cases believes Spanish photographers have a spontaneous approach to making work, he also believes that the Spanish tradition for collaboration and discussion has been key to the success of many contemporary Spanish photographers. "The collective is very important in Spain. In the 1970s, there was an incredible collective called Grupo Alfil. It put forward the most important photographers of the time – they were from Almería. At the time, Almería was a cultural desert. Now it's super cool, but then it was very isolated. It's where Sergio Leone made his spaghetti westerns.

"But photographers like Carlos Pérez Siquier were a great reference point both for me and Black Paper, the collective I'm a part of. Everyone of my generation studied this group. In my work I reference Siquier because of the amazing way he worked with colour." Siquier's *La Playa* is an example of a revolutionary use of colour. His cropped pictures of Spanish beachgoers in the 1970s appear decades ahead of his time and still have immense visual impact. "I also reference Cristóbal Hara, who is from the next generation. His work is incredible, he is the reason why I use flash in my work.

"Now we have two important collectives – Soffhoto and Black Paper [whose members include Julian Barrio, Óscar Monzón, José Vegas]. Our personality is to make individual projects and to pay attention to every project that people in the group make. This group was really important for the development of my career. I found these people on the internet. I contacted them, told them how fascinated I was with their photographs, and asked if I could join. We have meetings and give opinions on each other's work, it has been so important in helping me grow as a photographer. We're more than a collective – we're a group of friends." ■

El porqué de las naranjas will be available from Mack books in October (www.macbooks.co.uk), and www.ricardocases.es

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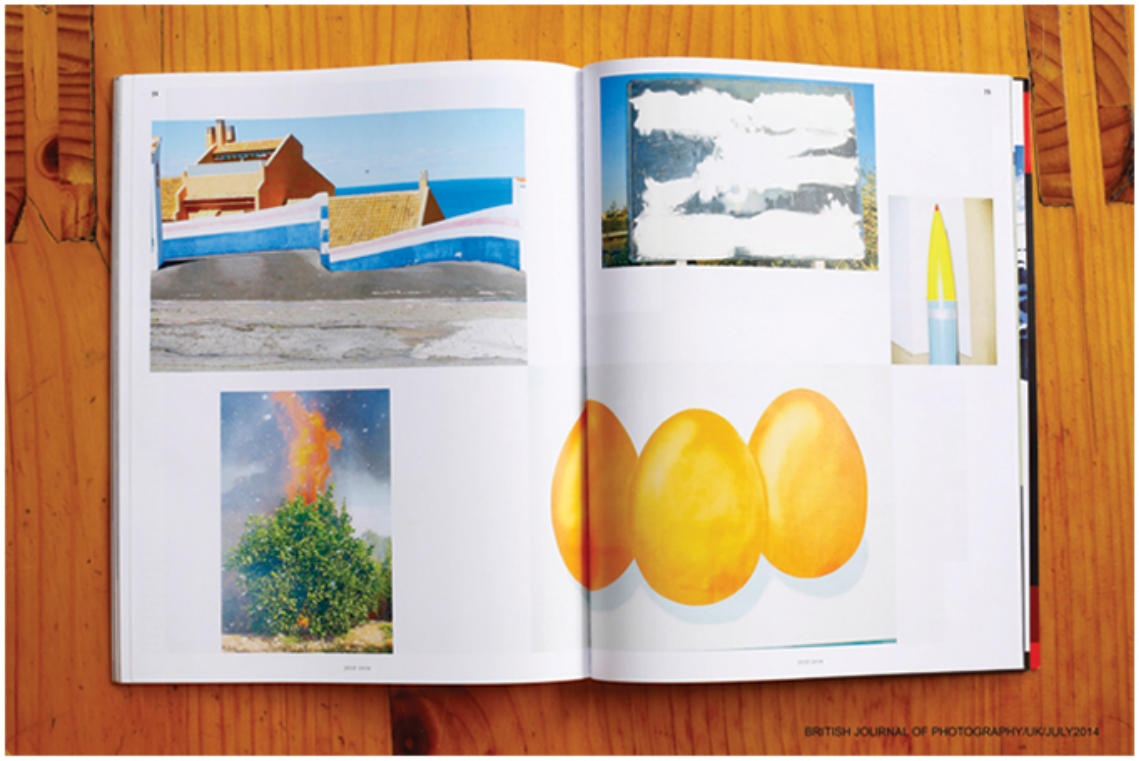
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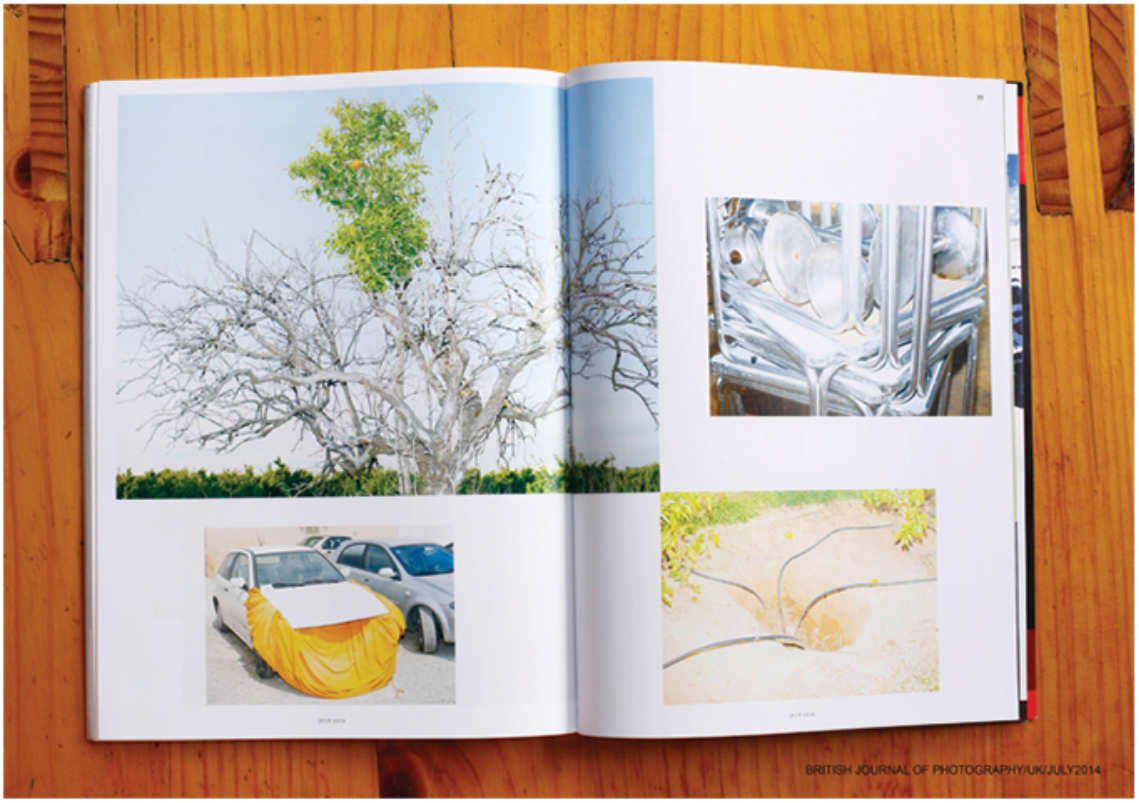
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