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“Interviewing Don Gregorio Antón
About Learning Through the Lens”

by Ramon Nuez

I am an introvert by design. But the camera and lens has allowed me venture. It has given me a courage and a sense of identity that was lost. Or simply misplaced. And in my travels I have been blessed to meet Don Gregorio Antón, a photographer, artist and fellow Latino. There is a mysticism in Antón's work. Which calls for a preoccupation of thought. Provoking a different response in every viewer. Antón's answers are extensive but well worth the read. Enjoy.

The Interview

You explained, "My images do not speak of where I have been but of how I've been, what I have felt and what was learned in the process." Why is the photographic process more important than where you have been?

DGA: Right now, somewhere, there are pictures of us in old boxes or upon the pages of cherished memories. They exist out of love, out of the tender and merciful instant when someone thought enough of us to capture our essence. For a moment we exist smiling in front of a church at first communion, next to a tree by a cousin we really didn't like, there with tears in our eyes, at our grandmothers house with a puppy that bit our finger. In these images beyond price, beyond reason, personal in their meaning and gesture, someone committed the private process, a service to saving time.

You see, to me this is all that really matters. To be able to etch upon halide or digit that which was learned in any moment of thought. That which was made essential to draw in and to study its relation to meaning. Process is the visible act of caring, of believing more in understanding ones own world rather than being understood by it. Process allows entry into those things that are often lost in trying to establish a visible presence.

Of course there will be those of us who will look at these pictures and only see the church, the tree that isn't there any more, or where your grandmother once laid her head. As it is right and proper in establishing a spectrum of significance, each of us determines our depth of focus with a private process, an internal aperture capable of more.

For me, this is how I learned through the lens. It taught me to be who I am in where I stand. To grasp that elusive part of emotional breath that is so absently exhaled and taken for granted. For this I gather and grind the details, I linger in the shadows of thought just long enough to service the study of time. With this process I am content. The images that follow are mere notes made

upon the way.

This, in essence, is what astounds me in how images speak the language of their owners. How they become another form of the person who makes them. They give clue to their width in wisdom and prejudice, in their height of sensitivity and illusion. Yet, what is truly amazing are the images in the process of being made right now. Moments that will shape the way you and I will express ourselves in how we will think and determine the size and shape of our realities. In these instances, over time, we will have changed in light less defined than now.

You see, process is essential. It permits insight, it assesses the weight of emotion, and makes available that proof that refines our ability to focus, thus allowing into ourselves only as much as we are open to it. Here, amongst what we are and what we could be, process permits the undeniable proof of ourselves with objects that change in our presence, in lessons yet to be learned. In this, we create the inevitable product of our experiences, that can only speak of where we come from and why we are here.

As a photographer I fear my work being criticized. So I tend to hold back. I tend to cater to a polite society. Knowing this -- how does a photographer break the limitations of his "emotional footprints?"

DGA: With all due respect, why would any of us wish to "hold back"? What benefit would there be to let less of our light upon the world?

To address this question, and not to answer it, one must understand how we approach criticism. Where it comes from, how it was formed around us, and how it appears in our lives. This is essential if we are really going to look into the issue of how critical fear is created. I have seen it happen all too often. It holds the best part of a student down, tears away at the shy and frightened, and breaks us into those small pieces that never fit together again. In the end, criticism invites comparison, it demands conversion, it duplicates its perception to justify its self. The results are devastating as it wipes away any remnant of what originally stood in its place.

Why does this happen? Why do we let it? Why do we hand over the best part of ourselves so easily? It has a lot to do with who taught us, who put into play our learning self. If you trace this honestly it will take you to the source. It will pinpoint how the impatient teacher made the frustrated student, how the distant parent created a chasm between those who needed each other most. Here one can chart how trust is lost, how empathy is abused, and how easily we settle for less than we desired. The wake of this motion creates a crippled perception, a disinherited position of one's own self worth.

From this it is easier to follow the same path as others, and mistake it for our own. To make what is palatable for critiques to consume, while hiding what truly nourishes our perception.

So do we need to break the "emotional footprint" set upon us? No not really. I do not believe that something must be broken to be put back together. There has been enough of that. What is

necessary is to study how it has been placed upon us. To measure its impact and to gauge our response. This is a process that demands comprehension. It calls on a pliable mind capable of embracing its own truth, unrestricted by safety or acceptance. In itself, beyond theory or trends, it merely waits for the honest answers to honest questions.

Do this and the images make themselves.

Beauty is in the perspective of the viewer. So how does a photographer convince the populous that his imagery is beautiful?

DGA: This is a serious question.

Do we really need to convince others what is beautiful? Is that our purpose? I do not mean to be rude, but if that is the case, then who convinced you?

Here is where society has failed us. It has made a populous of perfect consumers. Those who would rather purchase their identity and follow the easier path of public validation rather than to discover their own. Here it is safer to agree on a consensus of meaning, to duplicate the acceptable, to fit into the well worn belief that I must be like you to be liked by you. This creates an easy formula that anyone can follow. It is not hard to make what has been made before. Soon our imagery is mistaken for others, our style supports the accepted norm in technique and theory, and we feel we belong.

But to what?

I believe we all speak a unique and dynamic language. In it are the structures that create the appalling and the sublime. And yet how will we articulate these voices if we cannot hear them for ourselves? You see, it is not about convincing anyone about anything. It is about convincing yourself how to visually 'pronunciate' your knowledge, what you believe in, and how much you are willing to share it. Without this, there will be little proof that you were here, that you gave a damn, and that you touched and were touched by anyone or anything.

Rest assured, someone will always make what the world will define as beautiful. Examples are everywhere, there is no shortage of that. They will buy it, asses its value, and protect its interests. They will use it to attract others, to help it define their identity and assume self worth, never thinking twice if it was made by them or not. But here is where you will know the difference, and draw from a different source. Here is where you will choose to either make Art that looks like Art, that feeds the masses, or make Art that looks like you, and feed yourself. For this, no one else is qualified, no one else should or could determine your worth by what you create. Including me.

What does it mean for you to be a Chicano photographer? And how does the Latino identity influence the meaning of the image?

DGA: Chicano. This single word caused my father to slap me across the face. It would label me, distort me, form me into the assumed identities that surround its meaning. It would bring me

down to the facts of how edifying and demeaning a word could be used by others. With it I was misdiagnosed by teachers, in schools where knowledge was placed on a shelf too far to reach, where it was easier to take what one would soon forget. There I was taught to rent their knowledge, to lease their beliefs, a cerebral colonization that few could withstand. So I hid in the maze of dark faces that teachers rarely entered, kept my distance from those who would not allow me what I needed most, a sense of who I could be in their presence.

I would ever be the "slow" student until I found out the value of its nature, my own velocity of thought. Here, with a camera, I could sense a world not for what is was, but for what I was in it. For the first time there was balance like I never knew, a place to heal old wounds, to observe the capacity of my own understanding. For all those things in me that were once left homeless, a home was found, a process discovered, a life to be lived.

So I thought, if I could do this then anyone can. I had found my calling, and at the age of 17 I decided to teach. Here is where the chasm would shift once again. So I followed the images for what they taught, how they whispered and unfolded. They would teach me patience, the need to endure, the necessity of courage and the structures of belief. I would need them all as I entered a profession where I would be reminded of why I was hired, affirmative action, why I was exhibited, cultural diversity. For all I could do to define myself, I was once again defined by others, caught in the crossfire of identity.

I was introduced as the Chicano photographer, the Hispanic professor, the Latino speaker. As much as I was labeled, I too was honored that I might stand for what was sorely missing in the world, an example for what this could mean to those who could not find examples for themselves.

You see, we are all capable to speak of our own unique selves. To render the language of the shy and the slow, to reveal the expressions used by the lonely and the strange. This above all else is a right to the living, to give permission to release that part of ourselves beyond label or stereotype, to let loose our identity in a world still unfamiliar with its own.

Answer this question: "When Don Gregorio Antón depresses the shutter button, he... "

DGA: ... releases himself.

Conclusion

What is there to say after reading this interview? For me -- it will no longer be about simply seeing the world through the lens. It will be about the process.

Ramon B. Nuez Jr. is a writer/photographer whose literary contributions can be found at : <http://www.huffingtonpost.com/latino-voices/>.

