

Immediate Surroundings

Gabriel de Guzman

The precise role of the artist, then, is to illuminate that darkness, blaze roads through vast forests, so that we will not, in all our doing, lose sight of its purpose, which is, after all, to make the world a more human dwelling place.

—James Baldwin, “The Creative Process,” 1962

Artists who work in photography, a medium which depends on light, illuminate what is taking place around us. They notice what is hidden in plain sight, revealing the overlooked—whether it is the geometric abstraction of New York’s urban architecture or the grandmothers who form the bedrock of Latin American families. For many photographers, their practice takes them on travels to document unfamiliar surroundings, such as the battlefield of Mosul in Iraq, or the weather-beaten landscape of Bangladesh.

En Foco’s ten Photography Fellows represent rising stars in the field. This Fellowship shows the importance of supporting artists of color, giving them an opportunity to develop their creative voice and gain well-deserved exposure. In today’s political climate, when public support for the arts is under threat, those who suffer especially are artists from historically underrepresented communities. How do artists survive and find the support they need to express their viewpoints and professional ambitions. Organizations like En Foco are more crucial than ever. The ten fellows represented in this issue of *Nueva Luz* are all included in an exhibition that I curated at the Andrew Freedman Home in the Bronx, making their work accessible to public audiences. The portfolio of images published in the pages of this journal gives their work significant visibility and posterity, not to mention a critical perspective on the important subject matter that they portray. As skilled photographers do, these artists bring awareness to the people who have lacked visibility and shed light on what has gone unnoticed in our history and in our current environment. The photographers selected for this fellowship challenge us to *look* at our surroundings, to heighten our awareness of it, and to imagine possibilities for improving how we relate to one another.

Several artists are trying novel approaches for looking at everyday sites. Santana Copeland takes the city’s buildings, scaffolds, lampposts, and ancillary architecture and reduces them to the abstract shapes and grids that make up the infrastructure of a dense metropolis like New York. The stark contrast of black and white highlight the severe angles in Copeland’s images. Skewed vantage points turn modernist towers into isolated fortresses and storefront gates into gridded lattices. Through this reductive imagery, Copeland makes city dwellers aware that the commonplace geometry of these secular structures actually forms barriers, obscuring views and cutting off access.

Daniel Martinez also focuses his lens on a common urban space—the basketball court. His series *A Gated Community* gives reverence to these fenced off recreational areas, places that the artist and friends in his Bronx neighborhood come not only for athletics but also to play, socialize, eat, fight, perform, and enjoy the summer. Martinez considers the courts “a home away from home.” The images reveal the balance of playfulness and rivalry that the courts engender for the Bronx youth depicted. In one photograph, a group of boys is giving their friend

a wedgie so strong that it pulls him off the pavement. In another, a teen holds a fake gun to his friend's head in jest, but the scene is jarring nonetheless. Another image shows a young woman with a daring look on her face as she holds a basketball to her hip while a group of boys stand behind her appearing to chuckle and taunt.

A few of the photography fellows, including Lisa DuBois, Daesha Devón Harris, and Jonathan Santiago, have focused on the crucial importance of water but are taking distinct approaches to the subject. In her photojournalistic practice, DuBois photographs water rituals in cultures across the globe, from New York to the Caribbean and throughout the African Diaspora. Her recent series, *Holy Water*, highlights water's universal significance, not only as an essential element for survival, but also its value spiritually and culturally. DuBois captures the role of water as a means of cleansing, whether literally for bathing the body, or figuratively for purifying the soul in religious ceremonies. In one image, for example, a woman pours molasses into the sea as a libation.

Inspired by African American folklore, slave narratives, and Harlem Renaissance poetry, Harris's series *Just Beyond the River* is a reflection on the black experience that is deeply connected to the landscape, the idea of home and its intersections with water. In this context, water becomes symbolic of freedom. While bodies of water can be a vehicle for movement, they can also be a barrier, one that represents social, cultural, and political borders. Harris's work combines anonymous historical portraits and aquatic landscapes that pay homage to the contributions and sacrifices of ancestors who have had to traverse rivers, oceans, and boundaries. Cabinet card portraits of unidentified sitters that the artist has amassed are layered with still life images of flora and memorabilia in riverbed settings from the local landscape. They suggest forgotten narratives of those who have struggled and made important sacrifices for future generations.

Santiago's long term project, *Bengal*, documents the effects of climate change on Bangladesh, which is in Bengal, one of the most impacted regions in the world. Hundreds of thousands of migrants are forced to flee their homes because of calamity and economic hardship inflicted by natural disasters. Over the next decade, Santiago aims to document the individuals affected. The images from his first trip to Bangladesh show people living on the southern islands who were at risk of being displaced due to river erosion. The panoramic photograph, for example, portrays a woman whose home and land are under threat of disappearing in the next violent storm.

Artists such as photojournalist Byron Smith are addressing the displacement resulting from conflict and violence in the Middle East and other regions. He has been documenting the war in Iraq from the perspective of the civilians caught in the crossfire. Attempting to understand the clash between the U.S.-backed Iraqi Security Forces and ISIS, the photographer captures the events of history unfolding. While the Iraqi army's offensive push to retake the city of Mosul from the Islamic State has waned, there remains a steady flow of residents fleeing the hostility. Parents struggle to keep their families safe amid the carnage and rubble. Smith reveals the disturbing everyday reality in which children play on the front lines of violence and destruction. In these images Smith tries to photograph the cause and effect of this worsening conflict.

Beirut-born, New York-based artist Rhea Karam documents urban environments in transition, focusing on "public walls and the role they play in our daily lives." They reveal shifting identities,

socio-political change, and the history of displacement in the landscape. Working primarily with photography, Karam also employs strategies from street art, such as screen printing and wheat pasting. In her series *Déraciné* (uprooted), the artist has photographed trees in New York that she then prints, paints, transports, and “replants” by wheat pasting these images onto public walls in Lebanon. After relocating the tree into its new environment, she then photographs it in the often incongruous, dilapidated urban context. They are green interventions that question the lack of urban planning and viable natural space. At the same time, these images represent the displacement of being transplanted from one country to another, an uneasy feeling that many immigrants share.

Other photographers are exploring the human condition by mining their personal experiences and relationships. Erika Morillo uses photography as a tool for preserving memory and for evoking the emotional environment that surrounds her. The word *Umbral*, the title of her current series, means gateway or portal. Portraying her son in various scenes, this body of work attempts to capture moments of transition that occur during childhood and adolescence. As a woman who became a single mother at a young age, Morillo was afraid of passing on intergenerational baggage to her child. She says that she longs for her son to experience and enjoy his childhood in a way that she never could because of her upbringing in a dysfunctional family. In this work, Morillo creates an imaginary space for her son, but she cannot keep reality from creeping into the scenes. Her son appears to be dreaming but also lost in contemplation—sitting at the edge of a bed, lying in a field of dandelions, or curled up on a window sill reading a book. While the artist gives her young son freedom to explore this fantasy world, she also realizes that she cannot prevent him from growing up.

Photographers like Nichole Washington and Cinthya Santos-Briones are using the camera’s power as an image-making tool to show pride in their cultural identity and their community. Raised in the 1990s, Washington’s recent work looks back to the decade’s female hip-hop artists as a source of inspiration and dignity. The women in the *For My Girls* series are liberated and strong individuals. Bold strokes of paint applied directly to the photographic prints enhance the portraits, giving pops of color that emphasize the self-assured poses of the black women depicted. This series celebrates the sisterhood of black females and the support engendered by shared experiences and history.

The undocumented Mexican immigrant women in Santos-Briones’s series *Abuelas* represent the elders of their community. Twenty or thirty years after settling in New York, often working unstable jobs with low wages, many of these grandmothers remain invisible and undocumented even though they have managed to build lives here for themselves and their families. Photographed in the comfort of their own domestic spaces, the sitters choose how and where they would like to be represented. They are depicted in a way that decidedly reflects their own sense of identity. In these images, the women’s homes and belongings portray a larger, symbolic re-creation of their culture, memory and pride across borders. By allowing the grandmothers to participate in their own representation, the artist attempts to reverse the power imbalance and exploitation that these women have experienced.

In our current political environment, divisive rhetoric and actions have continued to marginalize people of color. For political gain, those in power have misrepresented and perpetuated persistent stereotypes about communities of which they know little. It is more important than ever to support artists from underrepresented populations, who pay attention to their immediate

surroundings and who uncover forgotten narratives. En Foco's Photography Fellowship is a celebration of these artists' visionary work, opening our eyes to diverse perspectives, to what many have chosen to ignore or avoid. While these images form mere glimpses, collectively, with artists as our guides, we can begin to see the fuller picture.