Street Photography

Daniela M. Báez

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Advisory Committee Members:
Prof. Fran Lattanzio
Prof. Nancy Nichols-Pethick
Dr. Alden Cavanaugh
I have always had an inclination towards taking pictures. When I was young the first object I bought with my first savings was a simple automatic camera. I remember reading the entire manual so I would be able to use the camera properly. I took pictures of my family and friends all the time. I would send the roll to the Kodak store to be developed and I would show the pictures to everyone. I continued taking general pictures as I grew up, but I never really did anything beyond that.

While I was earning my Bachelor of Fine Arts in Motion Picture Production I was required to take four photography classes. I really did not know what to expect. I had never used a manual camera and of course I had never seen a darkroom. Learning to take pictures with the manual camera was very challenging. With time I got better at looking through the viewfinder and controlling the settings of the camera. The most amazing part of the class to me was developing my own film and processing my own images in the darkroom. To have to deal with chemicals and exposure time to get an image just right was a challenge but being in the dark room was so relaxing and entertaining I would be in there for hours and hours. With practice I got better at the technical aspects of the medium. Furthermore, through the class, I also acquired a desire to look at photographs. Before each assignment my teacher showed us images from different photographers. From all those photographs, the one that caught my eye was the French photographer Henri Cartier-Bresson’s Behind the Gare St. Lazare. (Fig. 1)
Cartier-Bresson helped develop the "street photography" style and this photograph is one of his most famous. Every time I see this image I am impressed by it. Cartier-Bresson succeeds at capturing a specific moment in time. If he had taken the photograph a second later the image would not be the same. When jumping over the pond, the position of the man is almost exactly the same as the dancers' on the poster behind him. This element is reinforced by the fact that part of the image is duplicated in its reflection on the water. The softness and graininess of the image add to its interesting appeal.

From then on, the photographs that appealed to me the most were the ones that showed the "real" world at a specific moment in time. The photographs of the American photographer and filmmaker Helen Levitt work in the same way. Her images are also
captured at a specific moment in time and depict “real life”. She did her work believing that “the realities of life are most truly seen in everyday things and actions”. Her photographs taken at Spanish Harlem in the late thirties and early forties reflect her views and are the most appealing to me. Through her images we can see how “real life” actually was in that neighborhood at the time. These images show the different sides of “reality”. At first look, many of the photographs show the innocence of children at play. If we look at the images more in depth we notice that they also show the dangerous environments surrounding the children and even the children’s hidden violent human nature. Beyond the social content depicted in the images, the artist’s composition and choice of subject matter add beauty to them. These are two of her photographs where we can see the elements mentioned above (Fig. 2 and Fig. 3):

Fig. 2
Helen Levitt, New York City, 1939

Fig. 3
Helen Levitt, 1945
At the end of the four photography classes I was required to take, photography became a passion for me. As soon as I finished with my B.F.A, I decided to enroll in the Master of Fine Arts program in photography. When I joined the program at Indiana State University, I already knew what I wanted to do: I wanted to photograph the “real world”, so I decided on street photography. From the first photography class I took, I always found myself taking photographs of people and places. From all the photographs that I would see in books and magazines, I was most attracted to street photographs. I was particularly fascinated by images in National Geographic magazines: images from different people and places around the world. Being an international student I have had the opportunity to meet people from different countries. Learning from them about their culture and customs has being fascinating. However seeing images of different aspects of countries around the world has been much more exciting. We have heard the familiar saying “a picture is worth a thousand words”. By looking at these kinds of images we are able to travel with our imaginations and see different places around the world. We are able to look into other cultures and other people’s ways of living.

After a semester of trying to take photographs of different subjects in Indiana, I went home to Quito, Ecuador, for Christmas. Taking photographs of people and objects in the streets there came naturally to me. I tried to do street photography here in Indiana but it proved to be a hard task to accomplish. In the United States, and especially in a smaller city like Terre Haute, Indiana, people seem more self conscious than in bigger cities. Many people are not comfortable with having their picture taken. The fact that I look foreign does not make photographing people on the streets any easier. I do have a long
lens so people do not see me, but sometimes even that is not enough. So far the only 
place I found to be easier to take pictures of people in this country is when there are 
festivals of some sort. Usually there are a lot of people walking around with cameras so 
others just forget about them. Also people are more relaxed at these kinds of events and 
therefore they are less likely to notice when someone is taking a photograph of them. 
Given the difficulties I have had in taking pictures here, I decided to do my street 
photography project back home. At home it is easier for me to take photographs. People 
are more relaxed about having their picture taken. It is probably the fact that there are a 
lot of tourists around and therefore Ecuadorians are used to being photographed. Also 
the fact that I look like them makes them feel more comfortable. When I am in the 
streets, I use the long lens and I also try to hang around for a while until the subject 
forgets I am there or becomes so comfortable with having me around that he or she keeps 
his or her normal routine. This distance from the subject gives me the opportunity to 
capture a “real life” image.

The streets are an exciting place for me as they are filled with images of everyday life. 
When I leave my house to take pictures I do not have a photographic agenda. It is 
impossible to know what I am going to find in the streets or what I am going to be 
interested in photographing. When I walk around the streets, there is a specific moment 
when somehow I just know that the scene I am about to photograph is what I want. 
Everything in the scene comes together. It is the right location and time, the lighting is 
correct and the people and objects are exactly where they need to be. As all of these 
elements are on the move I do not have time to lose. Therefore, as soon as I know the
image is just right I take the photograph. The split second I have to press the shutter is one of the elements that make “street photography” exciting for me.

Taking pictures of home is also a way to be able to somehow keep my country with me even though I am so far away. Photographs have the power of helping us keep people and places in our memory. The photographs from Ecuador show my identity and culture. As soon as I came back to school and developed my rolls of film and images I decided I wanted to pursue this project further. Through the photographs that I took I am able to show people my own culture and environment. Like in the different photographs in National Geographic magazines, I wanted viewers to be able to transport themselves to another place in the world and learn a little more about a totally different culture. I have looked into street photography in Latin America. I have particularly enjoyed seeing old photographs from Latin American countries in the book *Introductory photographs, Images of History: Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Century Latin American Photographs as Documents* by Robert M. Levine. Many of the photographs in this book remind me of my own work. In the book there are portraits of vendors which remind me of the pictures I have taken of vendors in my hometown. There are also images of people in traditional costumes and images of places in “old cities”. In fact, there is a photograph that caught my attention as it shows a street in Quito, Ecuador which has not changed since the time when the photograph was taken in the 1880’s.

My first set of images shows the different cultural and traditional elements that make Ecuador and Ecuadorians. These photographs are all taken in the “old city” in Quito.
Places have changed in the "old city" but we can still see and appreciate traditional buildings and churches. People have undergone changes of modernization, but we can still see their culture rooted within them. Walking through the "old city" we can still see all kinds of people walking around. There are men polishing shoes at the plaza, men selling different objects or singing on a corner for some coins. We can also see and admire old buildings and churches with their Spanish styled entrance doors and architecture. Figure 4 was taken at the "old city" and depicts a man polishing a client's shoes. The details in this image show traits of this man's life and culture. The little box he is sitting on is his shoe polishing kit. He most probably walks around the city looking
for clients. Men polishing shoes on the street is a common sight in Ecuador as it is part of our culture. In the background, we can see the old facades of the buildings and many people walking around. When I was about ready to take the photograph, I had to wait for just a second to have the shoe polisher actually doing his work. This image just shows one moment in time in the life of the polisher and every element that surrounds him. While he is working, his client is looking elsewhere and the two men sitting next to him are just chatting. Figure 5 works the same way. It was also taken at the “old city”. Ecuadorian traditional buildings and narrowed stone streets are shown. There are many persons and objects that make the image. Like the previous image, this one also shows a specific moment in time. The photograph would have been totally different if I had waited just another second to press the shutter.

Both of these images are black and white. The lack of color gives the images a sense of a time that has long passed. Even though the images were taken in 2006, they have that feel of “old” or “antique”.

Besides showing the different elements that make Ecuador unique, I also want to show that keeping our own culture, customs, traditions and way of life is important. It is a way of keeping our identity. We all live in a globalized world but it does not mean that we all need to be the same. My second set of images express this. The photographs of this group are all taken in the new and modernized part of Quito. We still see parts of the old town through the people. We still find street sellers and people dressed in traditional Ecuadorian clothes. However, most of what we see is modern. We can see the bigger
streets and new architecture. There are modern buildings, malls and even churches in the new city.

Fig. 6


In figure 6 taken at the new part of the city we can see the result of modernization. The newer façade of the building is totally different from the more traditional buildings seen in the black and white images above. The vibrant color is also a sign of the change that the new part of the city is undergoing every day. The importance of this image is that even though it shows the modern side of Quito, they are still some traditional elements depicted. The Ecuadorian and Quitenian flags are set on the top of the building. The powerful colors show the friendly and relaxed Latin culture. The abundant telephone cables that run from side to side are also part of our more laid back society. In
comparison to industrialized countries, we can see that Ecuador is less organized and strict. Actually, in Ecuador many people say that “we live in a somewhat organized chaos”. In fact, it is that “chaos” in life that makes Ecuador what it is.

The contrast between the two cities is impressive. Both cities and the people in them show our culture and customs in a different way. We cannot choose one instead of the other. Modernization has an impact on our country every day, and it is a necessity. We need modernization to be able to survive among other countries around the world. However it is important not to lose our history and identity along the way. What we have in the “old city” is part of our culture and our way of living.

Taking photographs in Quito took me on another interesting path last semester. Because the light is so different there, the regular print developer (Kodak Dektol) used at the lab and the paper (Ilford Resin Coated) I was using were not giving me the results I wanted in the photographs. The contrast was too harsh and therefore the photographs were not successful. For a full semester I decided to try different papers and different chemicals. I tried five different kinds of papers: Ilford Resin Coated, Mitsubishi, Oriental Double Weight, Bergger Double Weight, and Oriental Variable Contrast Resin Coated. I also tried four different developers: Kodak Dektol, BW 65 (A&B), Agfa Neutol Plus, and Dr. Beers. Even though it took some time to try these many different kinds of papers and developers, I was glad I did. With this experiment I actually realized how many different possibilities we have when developing photographs. It is good to know that by trying different elements we can improve the quality of our photographs. Finally I decided to
print my photographs on Oriental variable contrast resin coated paper with BW 65 (A&B) developer.

Last December I went back to Ecuador and shot in color. I am pleased with the different color photographs I obtained but I definitely missed the long lens I usually use when I am photographing with the manual camera. The regular lens in the digital camera limited me when taking photographs of people. Printing digitally has been a little harder for me than printing in the darkroom. I am not very familiar with Photoshop but this experience is helping me to learn how to use it. I love to shoot in black and white and I am definitely more comfortable with darkroom printing but I am glad I experienced digital color photography this semester. This experience has deepened my interest in learning more about Photoshop and working in color and I look forward to seeing where this journey will take me.
Bibliography:


http://www.in-public.com/