

Elizabeth Ferrer Gives Us A Lesson On The Absence of Latino Photographers

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Ramon Nuez FEBRUARY 25, 2013

In 2012 I picked up my first DSLR — a Nikon D5000 with a kit lens. I never saw myself a Latino photographer. Why — well, I was more concerned about learning photography, than identifying myself as a Latino photographer.

But recently I have been drawn to the Latino photography sub-culture. I am not all that clear why or when it happened. And I guess through some introspection I can come up with a profound reason. But I don't think it's important — at least for the moment.

But what I know is of great importance are [Latinos behind the lens](#). And much to my dismay there appears to be a lack of us. Thankfully, I (virtually) ran into [Elizabeth Ferrer — Director, Contemporary Art, BRIC Arts](#). And during our interview Ferrer explains why there's an absence of Latino photographers.

Interview

LBTL: In a lecture in 2010, you explained that there is “an absence of Latino photographers in standard histories of American photography.” Why is there such an absence?

EF: This is a complicated question and there are a lot of reasons. First, prior to the Civil Rights era of the 1960s, there are only a few examples of Latinos working in the field of photography in the United States. Some worked under the radar — there were a good number of portrait studios owned by Latinos in the Southwest, and certainly photographers working for local newspapers that we are unaware of.

But these photographers were so few and far between that a history of Latinos in the field prior to the 1970s would be very fragmentary. Beginning in the 1970s — in the wake of the Civil Rights Movement — for the first time, substantial numbers of Latinos enrolled in college. Some attended art school, and by late 1970s, we begin to see many Latinos pursuing photography in a serious way. So essentially, our history of photography begins relatively recently, in the late 1970s.

This is one significant reason why we are largely absent.

I believe that another reason has to do with the fact that the commercial gallery system plays an outsize role in shaping the careers of fine art photographers. Once a major gallery represents a photographer, he or she gains access to collectors, art fairs, critics, curators, publicists, etc. A handful of Latino photographers have made this leap, figures like Abelardo Morrell, María Martínez Cañas, and Andres Serrano.

But of course there are scores of highly talented photographers at work today who are not part of this system. Many prefer to teach and exhibit at community-based venues than to pursue a gallery-based career, but the reality is that many of these photographers are simply ignored by the commercial gallery system. Without this kind of “power” network, highly meritorious photographers will lack broad recognition and continue to remain absent from these standard histories (and from major museum collections, for that matter).

Finally, the issue is, who is writing these histories, who is making these choices? One can find a handful of scholarly articles and museum exhibition catalogues documenting the work of Latino photographers over the last few decades. These examples might constitute the beginnings of an unwritten history. In addition other efforts are in the works: FotoFest, based in Houston, intends to publish a book documenting its landmark 1994 exhibition, *American Voices, Latino Photography in the U.S.* This was the first major comprehensive survey of Latino photography ever produced, and no exhibition of this breadth has been attempted since then.

En Foco, the New York based organization dedicated to cultural diversity in photography, is for the first time touring an exhibition of its permanent collection, which contains the work of many noted Latino photographers. The A Ver: Revisioning Art History book series, a project of the UCLA Chicano Studies Research Center, is preparing a monograph of the late, pioneering photographer Ricardo Valverde.

These are all important contributions, but they remain fragmentary, not nearly as comprehensive as what is needed. Until major museums and collectors with the wherewithal to develop large collections, and major publishers turn their attention to this subject, the full story of Latino photographers in the U. S. will remain untold.

LBTL: Photography is a mainly white-male dominated profession. And if there is an absence of Latino photographers — then what is there to be said about the near-nonexistence of the Latina photographer?

EF: There are actually some extremely talented Latina photographers at work throughout the United States and some have received strong, critical recognition, for example Kathy Vargas, Delilah Montoya, Laura Aguilar, and Maria Martínez Cañas.

The same situation exists in other creative areas such as painting and writing – there are well-known, highly accomplished female figures, but not as many as their male contemporaries. Obviously, the Latina presence in the world of photography should be

much stronger. With few mentors to help guide younger artists, it is difficult for marked progress to be made.

LBTL: What can photography, as an ecosystem, do to cultivate the young Latina photographers?

EF: One of the best examples I've seen is the portfolio reviews sponsored by organizations like FotoFest, En Foco, and most recently, by the *New York Times*. The people in charge of these events are committed to fostering cultural diversity in the field, so they bring in both reviewers and photographers representing a range of communities and interests.

Young photographers have an opportunity to show their work, hear valuable advice, and be mentored by leaders in the field. They see that there is a support system, and by meeting with gallerists, editors, curators, etc., that there is a direct way to meeting with those who can provide opportunities to create and show their work.

Nevertheless, more needs to be done. I see diminishing opportunities for photographers creating journalistic and documentary work, so at the same time, we all must be increasingly resourceful.

LBTL: So what does the future hold for the Latino/a photographer? Are organizations like BRIC Contemporary Art — ready for those demands?

EF: There has certainly been steady progress made – there are more Latinos working in the field of photography than ever before, more who are enjoying success in the commercial and fine art worlds, and more young Latinos studying photography.

I also see that there is a lot of interest out there simply because the field has been so underexposed. But where I see a lack is among curators, critics, and collectors, again, going back to the question of who chooses who helps advance careers. While I cannot predict the future, I do believe that the concerted efforts of photographers, interested museum curators, and organizations like En Foco – have and will continue to make a difference in the impact Latinos make in the arena of photography.

LBTL: As an educator what advice would you give the younger but aspiring Latino/a photographer?

EF: Study the history. Know who came before you, what they achieved, and how the history of photography has developed.

Find your own voice; photograph what you know and what you are passionate about. While it may be tempting to copy or be inspired by work you've seen that you love, you'll make your greatest contribution by creating a body of work that is like no other.

Be willing to work hard and don't get discouraged when you hear "no" because likely, you'll hear it a lot. Keep at it. Be your harshest critic and take criticism from others to heart. And in the practical sense, make sure you are seeking opportunity in the appropriate arena. Early in

your career, seek out opportunities with alternative spaces or through community-based grants.

Aim to work with commercial galleries and the better known publications only after you've established a track record.

Call To Action

I think Latino creatives have a certain obligation to be mentors. Perhaps not in an official capacity but most certainly in an unofficial one. So if you have the opportunity to mentor, advise or just even critique a Latinos work — then provide that help.

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