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Ernesto Bazan

Ernesto Bazan's Cuban Trilogy

By David Gonzalez Oct. 3, 2014

Destiny took Ernesto Bazan to Cuba. Politics forced him out. Yet that bitter farewell in 2006 was but another moment where fate intervened to change the course of his artistic life. Eight years on, Mr. Bazan, an Italian-born photographer, has been mining a body of work that in two previous books has already redefined how the island is portrayed.

Now, in the final installment of his Cuba trilogy, he has published “Isla,” an ambitious collection of black-and-white panoramas that span genres from portrait and landscape to street photography and still lifes. Mind you, he sometimes accomplishes this in a single frame. While the panoramic camera he used forced him to step back a bit — unlike his up-close 35-millimeter street work — it nonetheless gave him a different intimacy.

“Using that camera I can tell different stories happening at the same time and capture much more,” Mr. Bazan said. “I just love that.”

That is an apt sentiment when considering his work. His previous books, “Bazan: Cuba” and especially “Al Campo,” exude an affection for a place that had attracted him like a siren song. In “Isla,” which he will be presenting during a talk and book signing Saturday night at the Bronx Documentary Center, he has continued to mine that feeling, as well as capturing the contradictions, absurdities and challenges of life on the island.

Mr. Bazan started using a panoramic camera about 10 years ago, buying it from a friend who had little use for it. He liked the format, and he soon discovered it let him express himself in a way he had not imagined. The lens was sharp, and the frame almost all-encompassing.

“To work with it, you have to forget 35-millimeter and understand how to compose and make pictures with a camera that is twice as wide as a normal one,” he said. “All of that was an intuitive process for me. I can tell you now, 10 years later. But at the time I did not know.”

Judging by the images, his intuition was spot on. Separate little dramas play out in some images, while others take full advantage of the wide frame. Through skill and serendipity, he was able to capture scenes that existed for only as long as he was able to frame them in his viewfinder. The cover image, of a hawk flying over a man on horseback on country landscape, exemplifies that.



Young wrestlers. Havana. 2003. Ernesto Bazan

“I saw the hawk, and at the same time saw a dog looking at it,” he said. “There was the mountain, a campesino taking cattle to pasture. You have to take it fast, but later you see magic in the photo, and that is one of those. The fact the dog was not only looking at the hawk, but has his tail pointed up to the heavens. That makes it special.”

And he took it while on horseback himself.

Mr. Bazan produced this book as he has his others, with the support of students from his workshops and some friends. They helped not only finance it, but edit the work, too. The editing of “Isla” is especially sharp, with some pairings that accentuate aspects of life in Cuba today. An image of a religious pilgrim dragging himself to a shrine is juxtaposed against a man rising from a sewer with a shoulder-fired rocket. A child wearing a mask is contrasted with a scene of a woman surrounded by others wearing gas masks.

“I was in a land where the people, the regular people, are so friendly, open and generous, despite the difficulties they experience each day,” he said. “I could have stayed there all my life taking pictures.”

But he would not. Already he had chafed at rules, like when his Cuban-born wife, Sissy, and their sons Pietro and Stefano had to ask for permission to travel overseas.

“I always got permission,” Mr. Bazan said. “But it seemed anachronistic that in 2005 people needed to ask permission to be able to decide what to do with their lives.”

He and his family stayed in Veracruz until this summer, recently moving to Jersey City. He has continued to give workshops abroad, and he now plans to publish the work of several of his students. He also has an idea for his next book.

“I have 17 years worth of pictures of my family,” he said. “For me, I feel the need to leave something, not just to my children, but to my grandchildren. I want to leave them a legacy. This is what we built together. I will call it, ‘Before You Grow Up...’”

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