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"Entre lo invisible y lo tangible ... llegando a la homeóstasis emocional," 2007

A BLIND PHOTOGRAPHER CAPTURES WHAT HE CAN'T SEE

Sensations, smells, touch and instinct guide artist Gerardo Nigenda when he takes a picture

BY MARIA GALLUCCI • SPECIAL TO THE NEWS



"Entre lo invisible y lo tangible ... llegando a la homeóstasis emocional," 2007

Most people view the world through their eyes, absorbing lights, colors, curves and shapes. But Gerardo Nigenda sees things differently. He sees the world through touches, sensations, smells and sounds. Nigenda, a blind photographer, heightens these senses and promptly points his lens, capturing moments of inspiration on camera.

Nigenda's work is on display through March 31 at the Universidad del Claustro de Sor Juana in Mexico City, in an exhibition titled "Tiresias fotógrafo: Fotografiar sin ver" ("Tiresias Photographer: Photographing Without Seeing").

Tucked in a stark white room overlooking the university's aging stone walkways, Nigenda's black-and-white photographs cover tall boards throughout the space. Each photograph is superimposed with a few lines of Braille, detailing Nigenda's take on each image.

"These suspended moments allow me to plant an idea and not close it, so that those who receive the message can also impose their ideas, their imaginations, their sensations," reads a quotation by Nigenda, originally printed in Spanish.

Carmen López Portillo, the university's rector and daughter of former President José López Portillo, said Nigenda's exhibition expresses the possibility to redefine reality.

"Reality is not just what we see, it's what we feel, touch, breathe and hear. This is the value of the project," she said at the exhibition's opening ceremony.

"I think it would be worth it to visit the exposition with closed eyes, and see there are other ways to look at the world, and that the world continues to be beautiful."

ON DISPLAY

The recurring theme in Nigenda's work is contact: personal, physical touches or emotional interactions with nature, for example. His photographs are captured on a Yashika pocket camera with a 35mm Carl Zeiss lens.

His first set of images on display explores a woman's nude body in a 12-frame series. His outstretched hands appear in each photograph: on the curve of her torso, between her breasts, gently touching her thigh or lightly stroking her chin.

The second set captures bodies of water in southern Mexico. In one image, a couple embraces on the beach at Puerto Escondido. In another, a solitary man paddles his raft in the middle of a lake in Lagos de Montebello,

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"La armonía del silencio con el movimiento del agua conduce al sosiego," 2000



"El encuentro con el olor de la tortilla," 2004.



"En espera de ser vista," 2007

Chiapas. The next image captures the lake's smooth, glassy water wrapped by a cove of tall, scraggly trees.

The third group of photographs includes individual portraits: a man riding his bike, a child hobbling down the stairs or peering through a bus window. The images are from Nigenda's early days as a photographer, when he first started snapping pictures of his walks around Oaxaca.

Nigenda said the opportunity to present his work at the artistically esteemed Universidad del Claustro de Sor Juana helps him continue to challenge attitudes toward blindness in Mexico.

"I want to continue opening this stigma, this concept in Mexico that blindness is synonymous with fragility and shame," Nigenda said, sitting in the quiet, green garden of the Pedro Meyer Foundation in Coyoacán.

"I don't know from where one can start breaking such traditional ideals in this country, but I believe I have to try," Nigenda said.

BECOMING A PHOTOGRAPHER

Born in 1967 in Mexico City, Nigenda has spent most of his life in Oaxaca. After becoming blind at 24, he became caretaker of a local library with materials exclusively in Braille. A short time later, the library's director opened the Centro Fotográfico Manuel Álvarez Bravo within the same building.

"She took an activity in which, for many, the use of light is a basic necessity, and combined it with a place that lacks light, where the use of light isn't necessary," Nigenda said, relaxing into the back of a metal bench.

The dynamic between blindness and photography continued to grow, he said.

He eventually asked the center's director to teach him photography, capturing his first frames in 1999.

"I began to understand photography as a form of art, of expression, of communicating what you perceive. I said to myself, 'OK, visually I don't perceive things, but I can perceive through many other forms,'" he said.

He started by taking photographs around his house and of his path to and from work. When the results came out, he realized he could transfer his perspectives and emotions onto images that he himself could not see.

Nigenda said he continued taking photographs of people and places that heightened his senses or stimulated his emotions. His first photography project told his story as a young, blind man living in Oaxaca.

To properly orient the lens, he straightens his body and stretches his

hand in front, establishing a horizontal line. The automatic features on his camera do the rest.

"I've continued taking photographs without a formal plan and not as a job or a project," he said.

Nigenda realized he could transfer his emotions onto images that he could not see.

"I simply continue experimenting and enjoying myself. I express a visual image that I don't have in my reach, but that others do, and through this image I try to express my internal being," he said with his perennially warm smile.

CAMERA ASIDE

When he's not snapping photographs of inspirational moments, Nigenda works with the blind in Oaxaca at the federal family development institute,

Desarrollo Integral de la Familia.

Teaching Braille, mathematics and computer basics, he said the most important part of his relationships at the institute is helping people gain new perspectives on life.

"These people, apart from their blindness, can continue to develop completely as individuals," he said. "I continue supporting the community, understanding that in this country, the social differences are large, strong and distinguished."

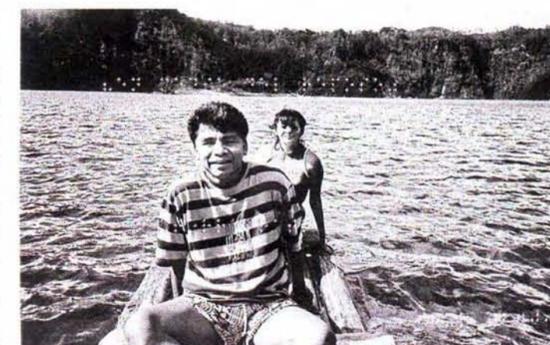
The bossa nova aficionado said he tries to enjoy life each day in a peaceful manner, limiting his obligations and spending weekends at his small home near the water in Huatulco, Oaxaca.

"Life has taught me to enjoy," he said.

"There are things that are uncomfortable, unenjoyable, but I always try to find the positive side to everything."



"Trílogo," 2004



"En medio del reposo (Autorretrato)," 2000

MORE INFO
Check out Nigenda's experimental style.

- The "Tiresias fotógrafo: Fotografiar sin ver" exhibition of 34 photographs will remain on display in the Plantel Regina at the Universidad del Claustro de Sor Juana through Tuesday, March 31.
- The Plantel Regina exhibition room is located on San Jerónimo No. 24, near the Isabel la Católica Metro station.
- The exhibition is open 10 a.m.-7 p.m. Monday through Friday and 10 a.m.-3 p.m. on Saturdays. Admission is free.
- For more information on the exhibition and the artist, visit www.ucsj.edu.mx and www.tiresiasfotografo.com.

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GERARDO NIGENDA
Photographer