

Mara Sánchez-Renero : Mexico
'iluikak'

Nahua Civilization

The Nahuatl word *tlapializtli* refers to the act of keeping or preserving something. This concept reminds us that the Nahua civilization once possessed both a cultural and a spiritual legacy; as the bearers of this heritage, they had to persevere in order to strengthen the most vitally important elements of their existence. In the Nahuatl language, **iluikak** means "in the sky." The Zongolica mountain range in Veracruz is characterized by its high altitude, and clouds are an essential part of its imagery.

The Nahua community living in the sierra is primarily dedicated to agriculture and the practice of religious customs, in which ancestral traditions that keep them connected to nature remain an important part of their particular identity. Iluikak is an attempt to breach the conventions of an assumed identity. It is only at the limits of both the evident and the concealed—in isolating men and women from their everyday contexts and instead portraying them within the space of their imaginations, the space of their mythical existence—that we can witness the dissolution of constructed identity and thus confront the true uncertainty of human nature.

Violence of Veracruz

When Sánchez-Renero returned from a ten year period in Barcelona, Spain, she was immediately confronted with the Socio-political instability of Mexico; a society that was collapsing and gripped with corruption and violence practiced with impunity within the political framework. It was evident that Mexico had lost contact with its roots, heritage, and territory, and Veracruz was one of many places where citizens face injustice on a daily basis. Veracruz was one of the most violent states in Mexico under the cruel rule of Javier Duarte who was the governor of Veracruz, fortunately he was deposed and Veracruz has returned to normality. Sánchez-Renero has a profound interest in social issues related to identity and instead of documentary style photography on the impact of violence she decided to focus more on a community sheltered from the mainstream by mountains, and who maintain beliefs and a lifestyle that connect with the origins of its cosmogony.

Identity of a community

The construction of this imagery was generated through mutual agreement and collaboration with the local community to tell their stories, traditions and customs. It was everything that happened behind the photo that enriched her project. A lot of time was spent researching and exploring the Zongolica mountain range. She worked before sunrise and after sunset and the only light she didn't use was the sun. Logistics

in this project was a challenge, especially in the early hours of the day. Sometimes they drove for two plus hours to reach the place where the picture was to be shot. To move around the mountain in the dark was an adventurous and tricky game.

Once she extracted the elements of their identity and daily life to provide a worldview of this community, she then planned where to place these scenes and illuminate them. It was a project where she experimented and played with every source of light available: flashlights, filters, fire, spotlights. Although there is a degree of control when it comes to creating images, there is a very important factor of naturalness and spontaneity that always happens while shooting the photo. She looks for the magic that is created in the moment where the elements meet and generate something; a gaze, a posture, an expression, a moment of authenticity.

Sánchez-Renero has successfully created imagery that draws our attention to a different reality and viewpoint. Her unique approach with light to trace and depict a certain symbology has produced a new way of perceiving each character. The message that she conveys in this series is one of hope, peace and respect for traditional cultures that are being destroyed by modern society.

Biography

Sánchez Renero studied photography in Barcelona, Spain, where she lived for 10 years. She was part of the collective boom of 2008, in Spain, where she was co-founder of the collective Malocchio and PHACTO. Since 2012 she has focused mainly on issues of identity within the Mexican territory where she currently lives. She received 1st place POY Latam 2015 with her series "*Nuestra Mirada de memoria e identidad*" and the SAIF 2015 photographer revelation award, at the Voies Off festival in Arles, France.

Her work has been exhibited in: France, Switzerland, India, Spain, Cuba, Haiti, Belice, Panama and Mexico. Her last solo exhibition "iluikak" in 2018 was at Almanaque Gallery (Mexico City) and, in the same year, she was part of the exhibition "*Áfricamericanos*", at Centro de la Imagen (Mexico City), curated by Claudí Carrera. In February of 2019 she was invited to be a resident at Casa Wabi foundation and in May she was selected to be a tutor in 20 Fotógrafos Atitlán. She has participated in fairs at Basel Photo (2017), Zona Maco Foto (2016, 2017, 2018) Material Fair (2017,2019) and San Francisco Photo (2018), Arteba (2019) and Photo London (2019) and her work has been published in blogs and magazines such as: CNN Photoblog, Lens of the New York Times, OAI, Zoom Magazine, Exit, Photography is art, and Vision.

Currently she is working on two books with the aid of a grant from *Sistema Nacional de Creadores de México* (FONCA 2018-2020). Her future projects aim to generate discussion around the use of natural resources.