



Dona Clara holds a photograph

SURFACE TREATMENT

With COVID-19 rebounding and slowing gallery openings, we will keep your art experiences alive by looking back at some more memorable shows/reviews. Today we revisit a 2013 human rights photography exhibit from the Lobby Gallery, McAllen Public Library.

“Our Culture is Our Resistance: Repression, Refuge and Healing in Guatemala”, photographs by Jonathon Moller

BY NANCY MOYER

SPECIAL TO THE MONITOR

With his poignant, yet beautiful, black and white photographs Jonathan Moller reminds and informs us of the extreme wave of brutality that engulfed the people of Guatemala in the 1980s, reflecting the inherently brutal nature of minority oppression. “Our Culture is Our Resistance: Repression, Refuge and Healing in Guatemala”, is an exceptional series of photographic images on view in the McAllen Public Library’s Lobby Gallery.

Moller’s compassionate eye and photographic skill transport us to the small villages that suffered through the 1980’s genocide. In 1993, Moller worked with human rights organizations in Guatemala to support populations uprooted by the long and violent civil war in that country. In 2000 and 2001, as a member of a Guatemalan Office of Peace and Reconciliation Forensic Anthropology Team, Moller photographed exhumations of clandestine cemeteries that had, at long last, been identified. Every clandestine cemetery that was found, every bone that was recovered from Mother Earth spoke of the people who were annihilated, of the homes burned, of the indiscriminate massacres. In short, they speak of the crimes against humanity, of the genocide committed. A UN sponsored Commission for Historical Clarification in 1999 concluded that a genocide had taken place at the hands of the US-backed Armed Forces of

Guatemala; under the National Reparations Program, searches for the disappeared and exhumations of victims to bring closure to families was established. The Commission for Historical Clarification (CEH) report advocated social and agrarian reform, specifically declaring the need to reform the judicial system and address racism and social inequality. Of these recommendations, only a few have been implemented by 2012.

Moller's photographs show us exhumations in progress, exposed remains, how remains were transported back to the villages, and the resulting religious ceremonies that took place honoring the deceased. They are priceless documentations of the meaning of death for those who survive.

There are also photographs of the local villagers and a brief look at their way of life. Photographs such as "Community health promoter," which shows an infant being examined on a makeshift table, and "Juan and Maria's wedding," a beautiful photograph of a rural Mayan ceremony in Tzucuna, Cabá, record the return to a safe way of life.

Here in the United States, we were not fully aware of the terrible acts of genocide that happened right at our geographic backdoor. The prominent writer, Eduardo Galeano, called it "the worst massacre since the times of the Conquest in the 16th century."

The photographs remind us of the horrors faced by Latin Americans in countries dominated by the externally imposed National Security Doctrine. Under this doctrine, which was a result of the cold war to stamp out communism, the practice of systematic annihilation of political enemies in Latin America began as early as 1954 with the military coup in Guatemala. Large sections of the population were exterminated in various parts of Latin America. It established a pattern of genocide against indigenous populations and continued almost until the beginning of the twenty-first century, spreading throughout most of Latin America.

Quoting Rigoberta Menchú Tum, 1992 Nobel Peace Laureate, "Jonathan Moller's photographs speak of this. But they also show another face, the face of life, hope, redemption, and demands for change. These images both denounce and give a message of life. They inform while capturing the beauty of a passing moment that is fixed in memory."

The book, containing Moller's photographs, "Our Culture is Our Resistance: Repression, Refuge and Healing in Guatemala" by Jonathon Moller and Rigoberta Menchú Tum, may be purchased online.

Nancy Moyer, Professor Emerita of Art, is an art critic for The Monitor. She may be reached at nmoyer@rgv.rr.com