



Andrea brushes her hair

SURFACE TREATMENT

What: "VIACRUCIS" by Veronica Gabriela Cárdenas
Where: STC Library Art Galleries, Bldg. F, 3201 W Pecan Blvd
When: August 27-October 3, 2019
Hours: 7am-9:30pm Mon-Thurs, 8am-7pm Friday
Artist lecture Oct 3, 1pm
Reception Oct 3, 5pm
Info: 956) 872-3488

Journeys of Hope

Color photographs dramatically document migrant travel to their destinations at the southern U.S. border.

BY NANCY MOYER

SPECIAL TO THE MONITOR

At first glance, VIACRUCIS is a collection of beautiful photographs on display at the STC Library Gallery, but closer inspection yields a complex reality. Photojournalist, Veronica Gabriela Cárdenas, documents journeys made by Latin American asylum seekers. Information about each particular scene is posted next to its photograph; sometimes the information is heartwarming, but other times, heartbreaking.

Living in south Texas, and wanting to better understand the migrant experience, Cárdenas joined three caravans in 2017, including La Bestia (The Beast), which was the first migrant caravan organized from the Mexican southern border to the U.S.-Mexico border. The photographs in this exhibition include scenes from the Matamoros caravan and the Tijuana caravan. She traveled with them, sleeping in shelters, in crowded vans, freight trains, and in the streets. When they went hungry, so did she. She also shared their danger, but while they were forced to migrate, her actions were by

choice. Reasons for forced migration included being victims of domestic violence, gang violence, dire poverty, or political conflicts.

Her photographs incorporate areas of intensely dark tones, particularly the indoor pictures, where migrants seem to be emerging from the darkness that initially propelled them on their journey. Compositions echo the dramatic 17th century paintings of biblical tales, where high tonal contrasts enhanced dramatic settings of biblical stories already familiar to the public. These works reflect that aesthetic; we are familiar with the fact of the caravans, but have had no images upon which to hang the story. Through her on-the-scene photographs, Cardenas gives us visually empathetic information.

She is expert at capturing the defining moments experienced by those seeking asylum in the United States. In her photograph of a teenager brushing her hair, the act of traveling on La Bestia is shown along with a record of human kindness: when the train stopped briefly in Mazatlán, a man living across from the railroad tracks offered his house to people in the caravan to shower and wash their hair. We see the young woman facing away toward the movement of the train. In the foreground beneath/behind her, is a dark shadow. The photograph moves our attention from the dark space, to the hopeful girl, and into the journey's direction toward the future.

There are pictures of migrants in transit, in shelters, and some families coping with no assistance at all. There are stories about the LGBTQIA+ migrants. One man was denied asylum by the Border Patrol and refused shelter; a transgender woman fleeing violence was processed through the San Isidro Port of Entry in San Diego but died at a hospital while under ICE custody. The concern on a father's face as the family has to bathe in the Rio Grande is in contrast with the smiling faces of Victor, Steven, María, Sophía, and Alison as they pose in a shelter before turning themselves in to seek asylum at San Isidro. The bit of light coming into the shelter illuminates their faces against the dark room; it is the emerging light at the end of a dark and arduous journey. This image tells a full story.

Overall, not only do these photographs offer breathtaking beauty in their visualization, they also provide a deeper and more personal insight into the efforts of those seeking entry into our country. Meet the photographer at the reception on October 3 in the STC Library's upstairs gallery.

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