



Casting silver bars at the Loreto cyanide plant in Pachuca, Hidalgo, in 1993.

In few places is human life valued and lost, shines and slowly fades away like it does in the mines. Marco Antonio Hernández discovered this when he first arrived to Pachuca in the early 1980s and started photographing the miners' routines and lives. Now his photographs are living memories, instants suspended forever in the heart of the workers of Pachuca and Real del Monte.

The Last Lens

Eugenio Martín Torres*

During the 1980s, no miner could conceive of not going up and down the Pachuca and Real del Monte mineshafts. They knew that the price of silver had dropped and felt that the end was near, but they did not accept it. Hidalgo's miners could not imagine it, these centaurs of silver and rock, whose photograph flashed around the globe in 1983 showing hundreds of them naked, wearing only helmets and boots, protesting the lack of equipment in the mines. Famous miners with no voice or fears! However, the closures soon came, and the bustling activity stopped in the hot, vaporous Alamo Mine, then in the frozen, noisy Roca and Dificultad Mines, culminating in the union's historic number two pit at Real del Monte. And so on, up to the many silences of today.

In the twenty-first century, the Pachuca or Real del Monte mines are not dead; they are just asleep, wrapped in historic memory. They are only waiting for the justice of a decent and transparent life, excavated in the silver-filled veins of the hills and mountains all over Mexico, where miners still live, now and tomorrow, because their vestments are clear firmaments of stars, golden denunciations and debts waiting to be paid. In few places is human life valued and lost, shines and slowly fades away like it does in the mines. Mar-

* Dominican friar and historian specialized in the history of mining. This essay was written for Marco Antonio Hernández's book of photographs *Entre la tierra y el aire* (Between the Earth and the Wind) published by the Archivo Histórico and Museo de Minería A.C., 2008.



Drillers in the San José La Rica Mine in Real del Monte, Hidalgo, in 1988.

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As Marco Hernandez captures in his work, the daily tasks of mining were not carried out by nameless individuals, but by “cuates”, brothers or “compas” who never learned to live alone. On the contrary, they always ate, worked, played, drank, sang or cried in pairs, teams and shifts. The work day started and ended in the dressing room or *secadero*, the place where each miner left his life's dreams before going down into the mine, before sinking into the ground to bring out the silver. Once down there, they walked or took the train to the coal face and started the arduous work that made them sweat their souls. In the midst of profound shadows, their language was expressed by the light of their lamps. That is how the miners talked to each other, shouting and most of the time using double- or triple-entendres.

With his pictures, Marco captured the order and the fraternity of miners, their pride in posing, their strong, free, defiant expression. In many old men, it is sad and nostalgic because, they say, “There used to be 20 of us, and now I'm the only one alive.” Marco discovers them, and they appear as flesh-and-blood men, the brave workers who now pray and weep for their dead co-workers and carry in a sack the tools of all of Mexico. His work talks of their relationship with machines, with the mother rock and with the strength and the life that could vanish in just a sip of *mezcal*, *pulque* or *tequila*. It also shows their liking for parties, wrestling and for the direct, bright light when they come out of the mine, headed back to the patios.

Miners taught Marco to look at the vaults, tunnels and galleries from above, to measure in them the steps of the light. They taught him to touch Pachuca's air and Real del Monte's humidity. They introduced him to the industrial aesthetic, so virile and mining-related, because machines not only prolong men's strength but also multiply it and dazzle us with their beauty. Marco photographed the profile of the steam pumps, now gone or broken into a thousand parts, also winches and machine rooms, foundries and workshops, big shafts and boilers with many escapes to the world of the stars. This is another legacy of his work, the graphic memory of a very important part of the local mining heritage. **MM**



Drillers at the San José La Rica Mine, in Real del Monte, Hidalgo, in 1998.





The Dolores Mine in Real del Monte, Hidalgo, in 2007.

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Miners exiting the bucket at the San Juan Pachuca Mine, in Pachuca, Hidalgo, in 1983.