

Teresa Jiménez*
Photos by Lourdes Almeida **

"Terra Incognita-Migrants' Shoes" The Path of a Dream

From among the thousands and thousands of images in Lourdes Almeida's archives, we have chosen a few photographs that were the result of the three years between 2015 and 2017 when she walked in the footsteps of, wore the shoes of, and shared the suffering of migrants on both sides of the border between Mexico and the United States.

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** All photos are from the project Terra Incognita- Migrants' Shoes (2015-2017), courtesy of the artist.

Voices of Mexico: Lourdes, why were you known as the Polaroid photographer when you were starting out?

Lourdes Almeida: At the end of the 1970s, the Polaroid SX-70 cameras were booming, and I came on the scene with that technique. When I began working with a Polaroid, I came under a lot of criticism, and "established" photographers didn't take me seriously. They would say, "Oh, sure, you do instant film." But today, 40 years later, it seems to have been really important, and in Mexico, I seem to have been the only one that really deep dove



into Polaroid, and that's why I was known as the master of Polaroid. And well, now they're asking me for a lot of my photos. For example, there's going to be an exhibit at the Fine Arts Palace in August that will be called "Mexicrom," and the only photo of mine to be included is a Polaroid. It seems that the new generations of photographers very much appreciate that technique.

But, for me it wasn't just taking instant photos. I always liked playing and making constructed image photographs. I would take the emulsion off the Polaroid photos and put them in water, so then they'd have angels floating in water in pharmacy jars, or I'd glue the Polaroids on other things, or do transfers. I played a lot; maybe that's why people remember my work in Polaroid.

VM: What's your feeling today about how that period evolved?

LA: I don't think it actually evolved. Rather, I think they're different languages, different techniques and tools that you have at any specific time. You work with those tools and you learn all the techniques. What you don't learn is actually what you want to say, and that, of course, does evolve. It's true that, with time,

I've become more introspective and what I want to say becomes vitally important to me. My teacher Manuel Álvarez Bravo used to talk about that a lot to us. He was very wise and had impressive vitality. He didn't teach us technique; he taught us about life, about how he saw life. That's where an artist truly evolves, in the shades of how he or she sees life.

VM: How do you pick the themes for your projects? Or do the themes pick you?

LA: I believe that the themes pick me. Life has taken me down different roads. Since the 1990s, I've worked on family-related themes. And the theme of the family has brought me to everything I'm doing today. The theme of the family leads me to act. It's incredible, but everything has its time and its moment; one thing leads to another and another. You put off some themes and then others emerge. "Terra Incognita-Migrants' Shoes" initially came about because of my granddaughters. They're twins, and this year they'll be 19. From the time when they were born, I began saving their shoes so that when they turned 15, I could give

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them the footsteps of their lives. I kept their shoes for 15 years. Then I shot them and did an installation with them. When my granddaughters were 13, they migrated; they went to the United States to live. Having them far away was painful for me; when I'm emotionally upset, I always try to work it off. And that's how I got involved in something that made me even more upset. That's when I began to understand, as I was doing it and as I understood why my grandfather emigrated to an unknown country, why my granddaughters left, why people move. Today, we're surrounded by movement; many people migrate. Is it that movement is in our nature? We each tell our stories from our own perspective, from our own little corner of the world, and when you speak from your depths, the facts take on a different meaning.

VM: What did this project consist of?

LA: I applied to the National Fund for Culture and the Arts, and they gave me a fellowship. The idea was that I had begun the project in the sphere of my family, with my granddaughters' shoes, and I wanted to move it into the sphere of society, to the migrant

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community. At that time, my project was much more limited because the work I eventually did was very extensive.

My project focuses only on the Mexican migrants who cross the border on foot. That's why I decided to go to the different deserts and walk through several border crossing points and look for shoes and talk to migrants both in the United States and in Mexico. I talked to people who were already established and also with people who had been deported to see if they would let me photograph their shoes. When I did, I was able to create my own metaphors with constructed image photography; all the rest was fieldwork.

With time, I realized how valuable fieldwork was for showing the different kinds of deserts, deserts and the extreme difficulty in crossing them: with white sand, you walk and you sink in; it's very, very difficult, and yet, there's a little bit of the desert where you can cross. In the desert, the climate is extreme: in the daytime,





it's blazing hot and at night, tremendously cold. And then there's the ambiguity of its fruit: some cacti are edible and help you to keep from getting dehydrated —there have been people who were lost for four days and survived thanks to the cacti—, but then at night, which is when the migrants walk, there are very light cacti, like cholla, that jump out at you and have millions of barbed spines that can cause injuries that sometimes get infected and can kill you. The migrants crossing have a dose of adrenaline in them that lets them survive such an inclement environment. It's amazing what these people can do with so much hope, so many expectations, and so many that unfortunately are left along the wayside.

VM: How did you conclude the project?

LA: I shot some of the shoes where I found them, and there were others that I didn't find, but others did, and I was able to shoot them. But they all come from the Arizona or the California deserts, and many also from the banks of the Rio Grande; because I started in Tijuana and ended up in Matamoros. Between 2015 and 2017, I went back and forth, back and forth, and tried to go over all the crossings on the border to be able to understand this world of migrants. I walked along some of the tracks that they leave in their wake; that really was hard for me. We're used to homogenizing migrants' stories, but each one is unique, and each story touches you according to your mood. That's why it's very

important to listen to people to be able to transmit their real feelings and that way make sure that the people who see your work empathize with them.

VM: You said it: "Nothing is like putting yourself in other people's shoes."

LA: Well, Ryszard Kapuscinski used to say, "You want to do a project? Live with it, eat with it, sleep with it." I met a lot of people who crossed the border three or four times. For example, one woman told me, "The only thing that terrified me about crossing were the snakes, and one night while I was sleeping, I suddenly woke up feeling a huge weight on me. When I opened my eyes, I saw the snake on me, but it was crossing over me. So, I stayed still and it crossed and left. But I was in shock." And, well, they told me so many things. I ask myself how many children saw their mothers raped or stumbled on a dead body —because there are lots of dead bodies on those roads.

VM: What is the most beautiful and the ugliest thing you've photographed?

LA: It's hard to say. I'm very afraid of physical violence, no matter who's perpetrating it, men or women. I run away from that; I haven't photographed that; I can't. And beautiful . . . everything, from the corniness of a landscape to scenes of affection, of love, like my daughter-in-law nursing her twins, breasts bursting with milk, making life. **MM**