

Mayan photographer preserves culture through art

By Verena Dobnik
The Associated Press

NEW YORK — For years, the green highlands of southern Mexico were reddened with blood as Zapatista rebels battled the government for the rights of poor Indians.

Amid the gunshots in Chiapas, one young woman found a separate peace: She pointed a camera lens away from death, capturing instead the life in her village — the people, animals and objects she loved.

But Maruch Santiz Gomez is doing more: The 24-year-old mother of two is helping rescue the Mayan oral tradition from oblivion, with images and words that illustrate the beliefs of her elders.

Though she first held a camera only six years ago, her testament to the Mayan way has made her an internationally known photographer.

"I found her photos so startling, so postmodern — these odd objects in the middle of open spaces in the village," says Carlota Duarte, an American artist and photographer who first taught Maruch — as she's universally known — to use a camera.

Maruch recently made her New York debut with a solo show at an elegant gallery off Madison Avenue.

With her baby sleeping in a knotted shawl on her back, the artist greeted visitors cradling glasses filled with wine.

Her vision of everyday life in Mexico's poorest state has been critically acclaimed in galleries from England, Germany and Iceland to the Netherlands, South Africa and Spain. Harvard and Stanford universities both have displayed her work.

A book titled "Creencias" ("Beliefs") features her haunting images from Romerillo, a hamlet of about 300 people where she lives in a wooden plank house with a dirt floor and no running water. She cooks on an open fire.

Speaking Spanish, Maruch says that she wants "to rescue and maintain our ancient culture and our mother tongue" — her Mayan language.

She begins with images close to the earth: pottery, a log, a fire, a child, a pig.

They come with curious bits of ancient Mayan advice passed on from the elders in the Chamula Indian community. For example, the picture of a person asleep while a hand holds a sandal over him is accompanied by the words: "If someone snores a lot, you can hit him lightly on the nose with a sandal or insert a little lizard's tail up one nostril."

It's important to save these traditions, Maruch says. "These words have never been written down, and no one has ever taken photographs of them. The new generation doesn't speak much of these things."

Her recent New York exhibit at the Mexican Cultural Institute off Madison Avenue brought prices of up to \$800 for each black-and-white photo — a fortune for a young woman who lives in the Chiapas highlands near the southern city of San Cristobal de las Casas.

"I was very moved that they treated me with respect," she says. Gallery visitors "were very clean, nicely dressed, and I felt a little ashamed of my own simplicity."

With the earnings, she and her husband are now buying the taxi-cab he drives. But money is not her motive.

In a state moving forward fast — there's now a cybercafe in San Cristobal — Maruch is keeping alive her ancestors' beliefs "so that

they do not disappear," she says.

Until now, cameras that recorded Mexico's Maya Indians were usually held by hands several skin tones lighter than those shown on the film.

"They are people who have often been depicted as quaint, picturesque, romantic," says Duarte. "They're modern and very real, and I wanted to empower them to take their place in the world. Photography is a strong carrier of information, and why should other people present the information about them?"

With that in mind, Duarte in 1992 started the Chiapas Photography Project, which teaches indigenous people to record their own world. Having heard of the project by word of mouth, men and women of all ages come to learn to click a camera shutter. Some travel all day by bus from remote villages, Indian peasants who wear no shoes and speak no Spanish. Others live in cities.

"I gave people access to tools and materials. And I gave them only technical information — how you hold the camera and so on — not a standard of what makes a good photo," says Duarte,

who calls the budding photographers her "colleagues."

At first, they use disposable cameras, recycling even those while their color film is processed in local shops.

One photographer stood out — a teenager named Maruch, who had once spent her days herding her family's sheep.

As she snapped away with a manual 35 mm camera years ago, Maruch noticed that Duarte's automatic one was more practical. She wanted it, telling her, "Every time I get focused, an animal runs into the picture. And I have to start all over again."

So they made a deal: Maruch would weave Duarte a Mayan shawl in return for a Fuji 35 mm automatic camera she uses to this day.

Being a photographer comes with a price: "The women in the village speak ill of me, saying I'm not a good wife. They say I should stay at home, spin wool and weave, take care of the babies, prepare meals and wash the clothes."

But, adds Maruch, "I've been to other places where men sometimes fix the meals."

The Mayan admonitions that accompany her photos "speak to

the profound human need and desire to control the vagaries of life," explains Duarte. And they're an antidote to the harsh lives that unfold close to nature — and close to the bloody five-year civil war between Zapatista guerrillas and the Mexican government.

In addition to doing family chores, Maruch works at the project's Indigenous Photography Archive in San Cristobal, which has thousands of pictures taken by about 150 Mayan photographers. Some are in a book titled "Camaristas," a word derived from "camera" that project participants invented to describe themselves.

"The majority of the photographs are of domestic activity, the families' experiences, their fields, their animals, their celebrations," says Duarte.

She says the native photographers are paid — albeit only about 10 cents in pesos per photo — "because we want to respect people's work."

Born to a Mexican father and an American mother, Duarte says her mixed roots helped her set a special artistic goal for the project: "Seeing what kind of images might be created by people who had free use of a

camera and no familiarity with the history of photography. I wasn't there as a colonizer."

The project came about almost accidentally after she visited Chiapas several times as a tourist from Boston, where she had taught college and produced a book of her own photographs. Drawn by the Mayan culture, she remained for eight years. Duarte holds dual Mexican and U.S. citizenship.

At first, the 55-year-old artist funded the project with her own money and contributions from friends. Now the Ford Foundation gives \$17,000 yearly for six staffers and the training programs. Despite private donations for other needs, it's a struggle from year to year.

"I want to give people a voice, when society or circumstances have denied them that opportunity," says Duarte.

She remembers "standing next to people who were trembling because they'd never used a telephone before. Now we have people using cameras, computers."

Maruch has no intention of leaving Chiapas.

Neither does Duarte.

"I'd like to stay here till I die," the artist says.

Measure 20-25 Safer Communities

If approved by voters, during the first fiscal year Measure 20-25 would pay for enforcement programs, address gaps in the community safety system, and address the needs of youth and families.

How Does it Address the Needs of Youth and Families?

Prevention

Healthy Start — Parenting education; home visits and services for at-risk families.

Alternative School Programs for At-Risk Youth — Academic and other programs for youth who have been expelled or are at risk of being expelled.

Intervention

- **Juvenile Assessment** — Immediate evaluation of risk to community for each arrested youth.
- **Jail Intake Center** — Replaces existing 35-bed center with 100-bed center at Lane County Jail.
- **Jail Book-In** — Adds staff to handle expansion of intake center; speeds up book-in, requiring less of the arresting officer's time.
- **Pre-Trial Release** — Adds staff to supervise persons arrested and released before trial. Supervision would expand to 24 hours/7 days per week.
- **Early Intervention for High Risk Youth Offenders** — Intensive treatment for youth identified as high-risk for repeat offenses.
- **Court School** — 30 additional slots for youth offenders on probation, who either can't or don't attend regular school.
- **Drug Court** — Treatment for non-violent drug offenders, with direct oversight by Judge.

This would *not* be a tax on your annual income. Measure 20-25, on the November vote-by-mail ballot, would authorize an 8% surcharge on state personal and corporate income and excise taxes. It would raise about \$22 million the first year. Know what you're voting on. Get the facts.

For More Information

Call 541-953-3466

www.co.lane.or.us

Lane County, 125 East 8th Ave., Eugene, OR 97401

