Melissa
December 2006
Country of Origin: Peru

TWO PLACES
ON EARTH

Chan Chao

Nazraeli Press
American University Museum
at the Katzen Arts Center
INTRODUCTION

“In this finding oneself adrift, supported by nothing, nothing to hold onto, one’s life that still exists cleaves unto itself. One comes to feel the heat and the pulse of one’s own potential for existence.” — Alphonso Lingis, Accompaniment, 1994 (236)

There is a sense of yearning in Chan Chao’s photographs to bring the very essence of “personhood” together regardless of time, distance or lived experience. To put the humanity back into being human through the power of portraiture. To realize, even just for a moment, through the lens of a camera, a long unfulfilled desire of belonging where people watch each other—eye to eye—and instinctively recognize themselves through the gaze of the other.

This yearning perhaps comes from Chan Chao’s own history as an American born in Burma. His is the perpetual optimism of a US citizen whose leaders helped establish the United Nations after global war, tinged with the memories of a country that has always struggled to achieve internal peace. The human struggle is palpable in each photograph and one can be forgiven at first glance to see more that divides in Two Places on Earth, than binds. Upholding age-old traditions where men guard, and women are guarded, the UN peacekeepers enjoy the freedom of nature while the female prisoners are contained within walls. Sewn badges name and “claim” each soldier’s individuality, while women “dress up” for the camera to gain a sense of themselves. Weapons are replaced by accessories—watches, necklaces and even cigarettes—and smiles are reserved for mothers who hold their children close, because after all, “keeping the peace,” and being peaceful, is a serious business.

However, for all that separates, there are also invisible ties that bind. Each group is as untethered from their homes as the other, and all share a sense of purpose—to survive—where needs must. Both represent a United Nations of sorts. The women come from eight different countries and the soldiers from seven. They meet improbably on the walls of the art gallery and across the pages of a book because of the power Chao’s gaze to re-frame “nationhood” from a geo-political concept into a human condition that is universally seen, shared and celebrated.

Two Places of Earth could in fact be millions of places on the planet, where each person is—as the philosopher Alphonso Lingis notes—filled with potential yet finding themselves adrift. The key, as Chao perceptively documents, is to reach out across time and space to see each other.

Kim Sajet
Director
National Portrait Gallery
Country of Origin: Slovakia
Ladislav
January 2004
Country of Origin: Slovakia

Vanity
October 2006
Country of Origin: Netherlands
Liliana

November 2006

Country of Origin: Peru
Marcelo
June 2003
Country of Origin: Argentina
Shylla
October 2006
Country of Origin: Peru

Christofords
January 2004
Country of Origin: Cyprus
Roxana
December 2006
Country of Origin: Peru
Country of Origin: Cyprus
Greysy
September 2006
Country of Origin: Mexico
Fiona
June 2003
Country of Origin: Ireland
Giulina
April 2007
Country of Origin: Peru

Alejandro
May 2003
Country of Origin: Argentina
Sadith
January 2007
Country of Origin: Peru
Alexandra
April 2007
Country of Origin: Peru
Rosario
October 2006
Country of Origin: Peru

Michael
January 2004
Country of Origin: Cyprus
Syrinis
January 2004
Country of Origin: Cyprus
Raquel
June 2003
Country of Origin: Australia

Country of Origin: Australia
Bela
January 2004
Country of Origin: Hungary
Papaya Buds
April 2007

Rafaela
April 2007
Country of Origin: Colombia
January 2004
Country of Origin: Slovakia
Savvas
January 2004
Country of Origin: Cyprus
Florita
January 2007
Country of Origin: Bolivia
Prison Playground
December 2006

Yolanda
September 2006
Country of Origin: Spain
Consuelo

Country of Origin: Peru

October 2006
Claudio & Oscar
June 2003
Country of Origin: Argentina
Ada
December 2006
Country of Origin: Peru

Lucy
September 2006
Country of Origin: Peru
Alex
May 2003
Country of Origin: Hungary
Koku
August 2006
Country of Origin: Netherlands
Craba
May 2003
Country of Origin: Slovakia
In an age of unprecedented mobility, forces of globalization enable information and imagery, capital and commodities, and certain kinds of people to travel and connect faster and further than ever before. Chan’s images celebrate and invite the ultimate possibilities envisaged by this headlong dash into a fully linked up future—a humanity undivided by borders and the violent practices and creeds that they uphold. It is an altogether hopeful vision, all the more poignant against the recent backdrop of pandemic lockdowns, border closures, and isolation.

This light cast upon humanity’s growing interdependence must have its darkness. To conjure connection through the gaze of strangers requires first imagining the subjects’ separation from one another. Struggle and even violence lie just below the surface of things; soldiers from around the world deployed to Cyprus to calm ethnic conflict between Turks to the north and Greeks to the south. Bucolic images of Europe’s expansive green borderlands and deep blue maritime border belie the histories of violence that made them, and the promise of violence for those who trespass them. A playground in a Peruvian prison can only do so much to soften the hard-edged reality of confinement abroad for women caught attempting to smuggle narcotics out of Latin America into Europe and North America.

These images beguile us to invent stories, intimate histories that bring the subjects—strangers to one another residing in far flung corners of the earth—improbably together. In Chan’s hands the camera lens itself becomes a portal through which their gazes meet across time and space. However, their eyes can only look into one another’s through our own. The circuit only closes with the intensity of our desire for connection. The collective need for such intimacy transforms atomized individuals into lovers, partners, best friends, kin reaching out to hold one another across impossible distances. Might our complicity in completing Chan’s connections remind us that, in a world in which things fall apart for so many, borders and walls must be trespassed?

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