

=Luis Minaya

Senior Project Essay

“We Continue to Reach”

We Continue to Reach is a collection of photography that presents the immigrant experience of those who come to the United States of America, it questions within them how they define their culture, themselves and the American dream that evokes imagination and hope for a different life: that life would soon be tested in discovery. The concept of America is one that varies in each and every person. This gamble does not come with a guaranteed insight of the future, we must define it. I am an immigrant and have known the experience of change since I was young. I found a responsibility to share this very important moment of life because it is felt by many others.

This idea came into fruition through a long process of evolution within itself. I began the project by wanting to present ways in which the youth of Hispanic immigrants expressed themselves in the United States of America through their use of fashion and engagement with culture. Ultimately, this idea wasn't truly definite within myself. These photographs and stories are a powerful statement of the immigrant experience and so the idea changed from creating a magazine into a book. Their photographs reflected my own experience and so the connection between myself and them needed to be revealed. As I began to reflect on my own story, different moments of life came into my imagination. Like a photograph from the past, these memories are moments where time stood still. Memories of a culture where music and dance filled the senses with an environment of emotion. I knew that these photographs much like the scenes I pictured in my mind would have to speak a million words. I asked myself what would lead me to get that true, raw expression from the immigrant people. I wanted to reach through

their story that which they have carried for all their life, some in secret while others proudly embraced it. Empathy was to be the foundation of the relationships that I would share with these people for their experiences where much like mine. Relationship between the photographer and the subject is one that reveals an intimate connection to the inner self. Looking closely at my world, the ideas came. What world can I present within a photograph? It strikes a familiarity to graphic design. The environments of people and the ways in which they themselves had defined it had to be simplified and clarified the style of buildings, to the marks left behind on the walls. The idea of lives being lived every day, from decades to generations of culture and heritage, these were some of the keen ideas I wanted to convey.

When I look around the traditional Spanish neighborhoods, I feel a presence of home. I see how the people who have brought their culture to America have helped define their buildings. How people dress here in comparison to some other places traditionally with a more Caucasian population. How that fact comes from a great difference in upbringing, wealth, and ideas. Art was very much important for me to capture in my photographs because art is broad yet defines a whole group of people. What music reminds you of home? that rhythm of beat that sounds so distinct. It's an intimate beat; A melodic tune. Then came the style of clothing that has been shaped and molded through cultures. It could be the colors that create a pattern on a shirt, to the hair that is uniquely braided or combed.

Before I photographed Ismael; an immigrant from Mexico, I found his story to be one of great achievement. He is the creative director for a law firm in the heart of the city. I wanted to lead the basis of his photography to be that of leadership, achievement and even looking at it as though his goals are not near but not far either. This was all derived from the conversations I would have with him as I tried to learn more about his character. I wanted to capture that gaze of seeing what you want to strive for and hoped for even if you had achieved so much already.

The thing I learned was that Ismael still wanted more for his passion of design, that there were a few things he found unfulfilled. He wasn't regretful of that idea nor of the life he had lived. That's something very important about the message of the title. That with America, the land where a dream is given the opportunity to be limitless. That we as individuals have our very own goals and hopes for the new life ahead and yet we get to those goals and keep striving for more. We continue to reach. That can't be defined as good or bad by others. It must be defined by you alone. America is beautiful because it is truly a world of opportunity and shows us more. We see within ourselves that we also can do more.

Jose is an immigrant from Peru, he is a mechanic and one day hopes to own his own shop. He continues to reach too for himself and his family as he has a son to provide for. Jose gave me a look into the idea of reaching for our dreams with a more realistic approach. He put things bluntly that this dream would require sacrifice. It would require hard work, it would need time because as an immigrant, you truly start from the beginning of the levels of life you'll soon need to climb. There are great adversities which we have to face when we make such a gamble. Jose spoke on those challenges greatly. He is a man who has seen much physical work all of his life. It's shaped his back, hands, and tested his mindset. I wanted to capture his physical posture and the great expression in the eyes of a man who's seen a lot. The picture captures the presence of this person to an almost exaggerated affect. The shadow that reaches his body is one that speaks words into that photograph and I began to think about the story of success and how we define the word immigrant. Jose is like many of the immigrants we see working the manual labor jobs that truly make America run. To me, he represents the hardest working people of America. A group of people they say are taking jobs and opportunities when in reality, they are finding the only opportunity given to them.

There is a lot of talk from the political sides of this country who ignorantly define Latino immigrants as drug dealers, criminals, and rapists. There will always be individuals who embrace such ignorance in hopes of speaking that into others. As I explored the stories of Ismael, Jose, and many other men and woman, I found it important to capture these people for who they truly are. It is up to us as immigrants to respect and represent ourselves. What I mean by this is that we have a duty to break those stereotypes derived by certain individuals put in place to define us. Being the “new kids” of the block, it is our responsibility to succeed in our very own ways and that varies for each and every one of us. What it means to be Latino varies as well in each person but ultimately, to be Latino means you will look, sound, and think differently. In the United States of America, that can put some at a disadvantage just from the groups you are placed into by your presence. It’s a sad but very truthful concept that not just impacts Hispanics but African American and Asian immigrants too. Since you look black or brown, for some that already takes them to the bottom start of the competition and the harsh truth is there is a great competition in America founded upon racism and unjustly causes. Something that still makes an impact in the work force today whether it be intentionally or unintentionally by companies, banks, and housing leading to a common effect upon education, income, and crime.

It is truly wonderful what I had learned as I shared my experiences and that of others in this book. I found within myself a quality of leadership that I hadn’t truly embraced as much in my past. I had learned to art direct, curate, and speak to people as a professional and a friend. Much like this book has been a process of understanding myself, I know now what I truly hope to achieve in the future. The fundamental principles that have led to this project’s creation are some that I will carry with me for the rest of my career and personal life. To be an Immigrant, I go about my life with pride knowing that through all the experiences my family and I have had,

we continue to reach for more because we see limitless possibilities within ourselves. I hope that can be connected to others through my photographs.