

Photo Booth

The Power of Portraits with Hidden Faces

The Zapotec photographer Luvia Lazo documented her grief, and her community, by asking her subjects to conceal their faces or turn away.

By **Ana Karina Zatarain**

March 30, 2022



“Rafaela on the Day of the Dead.” Photographs by Luvia Lazo

Luvia Lazo's great-grandfather, Domingo, had already lost the vision in one eye when the other began to fail him. "Luvia," he said to her one day, "*kanitlow*"—I am losing your face, in the local Zapotec language. The word took on a sharp poignancy for her when he passed away, in April, 2021; it echoed in her mind along with the thought that it was his countenance, now, that had vanished. Lazo, a self-taught photographer from the Indigenous Zapotec community of Teotitlán del Valle, in Oaxaca, Mexico, was raised by her great-grandparents, whom she lived with until she was twenty-three years old. They were the first subjects she pointed her camera at as a teen-ager, and they remained fixtures in her work until their deaths. "As I grew older, so did my fear of losing them," she said. "Unconsciously, I started a registry of our moments together."



“Emiliano and the Bananas.”



“Lucía and the Flower Stand.”



“Daisy-Colored Hair.”



“Rosa.”



“Juanito Is Not Driving Anymore.”

Several months before Domingo took a fall from which he never recovered, Lazo had received a government grant to produce a photo series on women and Indigenous identity. “But I was destroyed after he died,” she said. “I couldn’t make portraits of women, or think about

representation.” Grief transformed the world around her, rendering the familiar unintelligible and labyrinthine. Lazo navigated her mourning as most do: intuitively, inexpertly, groping in the dark. She found herself succumbing to the hopeless and irresistible urge to reconstruct the departed through her memories and, later, her photographs. That was how “Kanitlow” came to be.

Sign up for the New Yorker Recommends newsletter.

What our staff is reading, watching, and listening to each week.

E-mail address

Sign up

By signing up, you agree to our [User Agreement](#) and [Privacy Policy & Cookie Statement](#).

At the market in Teotitlán del Valle, a town known mainly for its wool textiles, Lazo began approaching elder artisans who were selling their products. She would ask them about their grandchildren, tell them about her recent loss, and photograph them. The images are all variations on a simple concept: bodies that don’t reveal their faces, either covering them with the items they hold or turning their backs toward the camera. The motif stemmed in part from her unresolved qualms about the ethics of documentary photography—“I’m not convinced that it’s my place to exhibit those faces,” Lazo said—but mainly, she granted, the project was an incantation of sorts, an attempt to conjure those she had lost. Devoid of their most identifying features, the subjects of “Kanitlow” became abstract canvases upon which she could project her grief.



“María and the Xicamiti.”



“Mina, My Grandmother.”



“Rufinita and Her Flowers.”



“Galdino and His Creations.”

In one photograph, the profile of a man who appears to be made of shadows is pictured holding eight wooden utensils, three of them obscuring his head below a straw hat. Some women hold floral bouquets, both simple and elaborate, before their faces. Three flecks of garish pink punctuate a photo of a woman’s back: a bundle of

cockscomb blooms, satin ribbons twisted into her braids, tassels that peek out from under her blouse. The photographs like this one, of people facing walls, are the most affecting; their subjects, bowed by age, appear to have reached an end, which they inch toward, almost as if in deference. “I think it’s curious that people see these images as cheerful, because, to me, they’re very sad,” Lazo said. “My loss is still recent. These photos still hurt to make.”

VIDEO FROM THE NEW YORKER

Crossword Puzzles with a Side of Millennial Socialism

Although grief is a universal experience, Lazo recognizes an ethnographic value in “Kanitlow.” Placing certain photos side by side, she noticed that some of her subjects wore jeans and T-shirts, while others dressed in traditional garb. It’s all part of the story she wanted to tell. “Things vanish because everything undergoes transformations—life, but also cultures,” she said. Negotiating one’s heritage is a practice with which Lazo is intimately familiar. “I speak the language and consider myself part of who we are, but I can’t say I preserve every tradition,” she told me. Her spiritual beliefs leaned atheist before her great-grandfather died, but still she found solace in observing the rituals that succeed death in her community. She split a silver coin in half and placed it in his coffin, along with pieces of purple maize, miniature tortillas, and a flask full of water, to sustain him on his nine-day journey through limbo. She was diligent about keeping a candle lit throughout that period, insuring that his soul would find its way to the afterlife.



“Epifanio, Anevy the Dog, and the Water Flowers.”



“A Blue Man Shopping in Town.”



“Isaac and His Harvest.”



“Julia and the Nochebuenas.”

When time passed and she was still bereft, Lazo was instructed to wash her hands at Domingo’s grave, so that she could forget him. In defiance of the advice, she dyed them a deep indigo, wanting to see her sorrow on her body, but also to watch it fade away. “I didn’t realize indigo dye

lasted so long,” she said with a soft laugh. She made another photograph, a partial self-portrait, that shows her blue, outstretched palms, limp but reaching.



“Un Domingo Sin Domingo.”