

Hine Fellowship Final Report

Though I had already been in Boston for several months, my real work at IBA began after my work with the youth had formally ended. More specifically, the project truly began with a baby shower and ended with a funeral.

In mid-January, I finished my ten weeks of teaching with the Cacique Youth Programs, displaying the youth's final community portraiture project along the walls of the Villa Victoria Center for the Arts at the End of Cycle Celebration. It was gratifying to see the work the youth had done, to watch them learn and grow over the course of the cycle, but as the celebration ended, I was filled with a sense of both apprehension and excitement. It was time to figure out what I was here to do.

As I mentioned in my previous report, IBA does not work with a straight-forward target demographic as most nonprofits do, but with an entire affordable housing complex—from newborns to great-great-grandmothers and all the generations in between. Though there were clearly many “issues” that residents were grappling with— from high drop-out rates to inter-neighborhood violence, drug abuse (and, at a time, trafficking) to teen pregnancy—all of them statistically tied to lower-income urban areas, none of these issues in themselves seemed representative of a place that was so singular in its founding and complex in its reality. To do a project on one issue seemed, essentially, to be doing a disservice to a larger community. Moreover, I was determined that the work I made be meaningful not only to the organization, but to the residents themselves.

Just as I had begun connecting with the residents by photographing in the plaza, I knew that it was important to begin as openly as possible. So I began interviewing current and former residents. Many older residents told a story of the early days of Villa Victoria, expressing frustration that the younger generation and new residents didn't understand or appreciate the struggle that had built this place. Through my work with the youth, I learned that they had created their own history of the Vill', rich with their own meanings and memories. Some longstanding Puerto Rican residents worried that they were losing the community to an entirely new generation of immigrants (mostly from China and though there were new residents from other countries as well). These new-comers, however, were thrilled to have found a new home-- what one new resident later called, “a little bit of heaven”.

It seemed that what the community needed wasn't a project to highlight its problems, but a means to share its stories. Due to language and generational barriers, that history wasn't being told. A portrayal of Villa Victoria couldn't only describe its historic founding 30 years ago; it had to grapple with the changes that the community had seen over generations. I decided that the story of this place should be told in the words of the residents, portraying the many perspectives and histories of Villa Victoria. The format would be simple—portraits of residents with short narratives about their own histories of living in Villa Victoria. Through this template, I wanted the stories and individuals themselves to create a multivalent portrait. The photographs would be made with a 4 x 5 camera capable of capturing reality beyond what even the eye can see, and the stories would be edited from long interviews covering a broad range of issues. Given that

the residents spoke four different languages and that I had only met a small fraction of the residents through my work with IBA, the toughest part of my year was still ahead.

To gain the trust of an individual is hard; to gain that of a community seemed, at the outset, nearly impossible. When one of my students from my Cacique class asked me to photograph her baby shower, this seemed the perfect way to start earning it. We took an initial portrait, which was enlarged and displayed on an easel in the reception hall. I helped fill up balloons with helium, and then, after guests arrived, moved from table to table with my camera. I captured the moments when the grandmother-to-be embraced her daughter, when the young father arrived, when the godmother and godfather helped the mother-to-be sort through the piles of presents. The images I took have only been seen by the immediate family, but the trust I began to build with the relatives and their friends led to my greater mobility and acceptance within the community.

Between taking photographs at community events and daily walks through the plaza, I met a number of members of the community who agreed to take part in the project or referred me to others who might. I asked a few of the youth from Cacique to take part with their families. With each portrait I made, it became easier to approach their neighbors on the street. While the majority of the Spanish and English speaking residents understood the purpose of the project, it was more difficult to engage the Chinese community; language barriers made outreach difficult, and, since most of IBA's programming was in English or Spanish, many Chinese residents did not understand what IBA was, much less my affiliation with the organization. With the generous help of Ida, a Taiwanese MBA student who happened to be volunteering at the Villa Victoria Center for the Arts, I began going door to door and describing the project. We managed to interview several families, who, once they understood the project, welcomed us into their home. They described their immigration from China, hearing about Villa Victoria from friends and relatives, standing in line for hours to fill out an application for housing, the relief of finding affordable housing with room enough for children and often parents as well.

In the end of April, I put together a week-long preview show of the 4 x 5 portraits in the Villa Victoria Center for the Arts. Since there would not be another opening to show in the gallery until the fall of 2011, I thought it was important for the community to see the project before I left for the summer, even though I had another month to continue to photograph and interview. I printed 15 large-scale photographs that filled the two rooms of the gallery. As the images had been taken with a large-format camera, the photographs were still sharp when enlarged to 20 inches by 30 inches. Among the portraits were Barbara Collins (the unofficial Mayor) and her two sons, Carmen and Santiago Adames (residents of the South End and Villa Victoria for 40 years), Mr. and Mrs. Zhong and their daughter Crystal. A professional Latin guitarist provided musical accompaniment to Don Paco, Maria Flores and her son Efrain, all of whom (with the exception of the guitarist) were also included in the show. Many young residents came by, IBA workers accompanied the elders from the community room. An impromptu plena party ensued as members of Las Pleneras, a resident Puerto Rican dance troupe, performed their favorite routine. As I watched the residents fill the gallery with their music and dance, it seemed that the

residents had embraced the project as their own. Their trust, to my great relief, had been affirmed. How the residents would create their own meaning from this project, however, I had yet to learn.

A few nights after the opening, I received a text message from one of the residents, informing me that her grandfather, Santiago Adames, was very ill. Don Santiago and his wife Carmen had been residents of Villa Victoria since the very beginning, and lived in a corner garden apartment that I passed daily on my walk to IBA. In warm weather, Carmen would be outside tending the flowers, and in cold, sitting on the couch looking out her window. The Adames were one of the first families I approached with the project though neither one spoke English and my Spanish remained, to my frustration, at the level of an enthusiastic five year old. One of their many sons or daughters often visited, providing the translation needed to help arrange a photograph or, in their case, a re-take; Carmen had not been happy with her first portrait as a slight stain could be seen on her flowered housedress. She wanted to look her best.

Santiago was already quite ill when I came to retake their portrait. Due to a scheduling mishap, I had arrived when none of their children or grandchildren was present. Carmen was ready, dressed in a vivid red wrap dress-- the first time I had seen her wearing anything other than an apron or housedress. She shrugged to show that her daughter was not here, and I could follow her Spanish enough to understand her husband was not feeling well enough to leave bed. We waited together for her daughter for a half hour or so, flipping between telenovelas, when I decided to take Carmen's portrait alone. I set up my camera, put the hood over my head, and composed a shot of Carmen sitting on the couch, where she always sat, illuminated by the light of the open window. I took one frame, recomposed, and then I caught a flash of red out of the corner of my eye. It was Santiago, dressed to match Carmen in a crimson polo. Without a word, he sat down next to her, seemingly in perfect health, steady, stoic. He held my gaze. I quickly reframed, and took two more exposures.

The morning after I received the text message about Santiago, I learned that he had passed away. Unsure what to do with the portrait then hanging in the gallery, I took it down, thinking it the proper thing to do, and went to their home to pay my respects. Relatives from as far away as Puerto Rico spilled out of the living room. Sons, daughters, grand-daughters, great-grandsons. Carmen was sitting in her bedroom with one of her daughters, who stood up and embraced me.

'I took the portrait down....,' I began.

'You what?' her daughter asked.

'I took it down. I assumed that...'

'You need to put it back up. We all want it there. It's an honor to him.'

She brought a large poster from the other room. It was a two by three foot print of Santiago's half of the portrait I had taken, mounted onto a panel. The family had taken the print I had given them, had it scanned and enlarged as soon as it was clear his health was declining.

'It will be beside his casket at the funeral,' she said.

I was speechless. I returned to the gallery and replaced the Adames' portrait. For the next few days, family and friends came by the gallery and created a kind of shrine at Santiago's portrait, writing personal notes and memories on purple post-its, creating a handwritten halo around the print.

That Friday, I attended the funeral. Family members wore buttons adorned with Santiago's portrait, while the enlargement sat on an easel in the front of the funeral chapel. Family ushered me towards the front, and Carmen embraced me as her nieta, her granddaughter. On the way from the funeral home to the graveyard, the funeral train drove, at the deceased's request, up to the South End and through the clover leaf of Villa Victoria for one final time. Down San Juan and Aguadilla, past the Plaza Betances and O'Day Playground, past neighbors and friends, where most of his life had been lived so fully within a few square blocks. A year ago I didn't know that Villa Victoria existed. But a year later, I was part of the procession, smoothing my black dress as we drove by residents waving goodbye from their front gardens. When we arrived at the graveyard, I pinned his button onto my dress and, following his family's example, left a crimson rose at his grave.

After the show came down, I was careful to preserve the posted notes Santiago's family left, combining them into small book to give to Carmen. That next month, I continued to interview and take more portraits. I also dropped by the Adames house often, spending time with Carmen and her family who would frequently, at mealtime or in between, have an extra plate of food for me. I admired the new furniture her children bought her, the new placement of the couch against the back wall of the living room, the new curtains for the front window embroidered with flowers. And when I left in early June, I promised that her nieta would visit in the fall.

I have collected enough material now to create the larger portrait of Villa Victoria: hours of transcripts in English, Spanish, Mandarin; dozens of portraits, contextual photographs and archival images. But despite how I recontextualize the work and regardless of its eventual scope, I do not know how to make a photograph that is more meaningful than the one I took of the Adames. Though I may have learned how to juxtapose photographs to generate more complex readings and look forward to editing the interviews to construct the final piece, I have learned that the most important meaning may, in fact, be made by the subjects themselves.