

## ***San Pedro La Laguna Portfolio Essay***

*To whom it may concern (likely the new owner of this portfolio),*

I am writing to you about my first photographic portfolio and series *San Pedro La Laguna*, which include photos I took in San Pedro La Laguna, Guatemala. To really understand that moment in time (late 2013 to early 2014), I have to go a little further back than that, to a place called Australia.

Post-graduation (circa 2010), armed with a BBus in Economics and a Certificate in Art and Design from Auckland University of Technology, I was feeling the pains of life after the recession. Maybe it was in my head, maybe it was real - the truth was I couldn't get a job, I didn't want to make art, and all I really wanted to do was drink myself blind in a park. I was at the height of my alcoholism, depressed, in a confusing 3-way love square and I wanted out - so I moved to Melbourne. I had \$900NZD saved and I blew it in a week on booze, expensive food and drugs. I was unemployed, broke, stealing wine for kicks and homeless. I'll tell you now, I can't just go and call my parents and ask for money - people who know me know that, so it was hard. I eventually got a job door knocking, selling insurance. It sucked. Hours were long, expectations were high and the culture was weird (the whole upper echelon were British (or other) ex-pats whose lavish, electronica lifestyle was fuelled by hearty commissions ranging from \$4,000 to \$8,000 a week). It's safe to say that I tapped ... and gapped - running away with my own measly commissions, bound for Sydney.

Sydney was fun for a time. I got a job off the ground fundraising. I quit that quickly (mainly because of the stoner-hippie culture, which I'm not against, I just don't want to talk about bush doofs and weed all day) and moved on to the ultimate cowboy job as a bike messenger. That job was the definition of being free. I was a contractor, so technically my own boss, I got to see parts of Sydney reserved only for traditional lurkers (skaters, taggers, bums etc.) who I have an affinity with, I could work when I wanted and go as hard as I liked. I got to eat lunch in a different place every day, and my coffee break was whenever I felt like it. It was fun until my bike was written off (I crashed into a scooter). After that I got into selling insurance (albeit after a short period of living on the streets and eating free meals at shelters. I saw some crazy stuff - fights, absurd arguments, boisterous claims of masculinity). I was good at selling insurance. I made shitloads of money from commission, and like any poor kid who comes into some money, I wanted to spend it. I went to New York.

In New York I drunk at dive bars and took cocaine. I skated around the streets and ate pizza and sandwiches from bodegas. I poured beer into empty Monster cans and took regular swigs throughout Manhattan. I bought some Adidas Superstars, some Ralph Lauren gloves and a Babe Ruth Yankees tee. I went to MoMA and saw my first Cy Twombly and Picasso's *Les Femmes d'Alger (O. J. R. Version O)*. For me (and I hope for any artist) seeing your first Twombly is like taking your first breath. After that you can say "I'm alive." You have to be able to live before you can be OK, let alone happy and healthy. I don't think I would be the resolved artist I am today without that experience. Seeing *Les Femmes d'Alger (O. J. R. Version O)* is like that moment you understand you can run, that you're in the race, but you aren't as fast as you think. In other words it teaches you humility. Like everyone, I had seen this painting before in print. I'll tell you now, it's big in real life! Picasso's vision and all his disruption is very evident in it. I felt that very strongly. I cried at the back of the room. It made me want to run. I think it helped keep me in the race. Moments like this make you realise there's so much more to do and see.

As you know, New York is expensive. I had X amount of money and I wanted to go out with a bang. So I bought a one-way ticket to Costa Rica. I didn't like the capital San Jose (Latin American capitals, bar CDMX, scare me. It was my first time in Central, too, so I was extra spooked), so I bussed to smalltown Nicaragua. I spent some time in San Juan del Sur swimming and skating these little gaps at the local park. I became friends with a local drug dealer. I later went to Ometepe Island on Lake Nicaragua and went to a crazy disco party on the beach. Local cattle drank straight from the lake on the islands fresh water beaches. It was awfully windy. I eventually made it to Granada, and then Leon, where I became friends with a skate crew. We drunk at a heavy metal bar every night. I made song requests and played "Slice of Heaven" and some Shapeshifter songs (for some reason they were the only Kiwi songs that came to mind). I jumped a few more borders (Honduras and El Salvador) before making it to Guatemala at the back end of my trip. That's when I bought my camera.

Way back before I even got to Guatemala, I lost my smart phone. And I didn't and still don't travel around with some fancy DSLR. Before I left my mom said "please take photos!" Towards the end of that trip my mother's voice started ringing louder and louder in my head - "bring back photos! I want to see photos!". I hadn't taken

any photos of my travels thus far, so in a lot of ways I had very little to show. I felt guilty about that because I had achieved a lot, especially coming from my background. Yeah, I drunk a lot and took drugs - but I had proven that I could hold down a FT job, save and make my ambitions a reality. Thats a lot coming from a family with taints of poverty, organised crime and antisocial tendencies. So when the time was ripe I bought a basic point-and-shoot 35mm camera (buying a digital camera was out of the question). It cost about \$5.00USD. It's all I could afford.

I didn't go into this with preconceived knowledge about photography. I didn't know who William Eggleston was back then. What I really wanted to do was take some photos to share with my family. I didn't want the images to turn out arty (I don't ever want to sit down and contextualise abstract photographs with my mom). They did. They definitely captured something human, or at least a very human problem. I didn't intend for that to happen. Looking back at now, it definitely helped me develop new ideas. I think we need to take these risks to give ourselves the chance to really understand new ways of thinking about art (before then I was creating solutions through painting. After *San Pedro La Laguna* I became less obsessed with creative solutions, and I became content in knowing that the conclusion can be an unresolved statement or observation). My key finding was that we very much live in a fragile world. Water is rising. What we see here is water in the lake rising from excess rain. Does global warming have something to do with it? Maybe. Probably. I'm not a scientist so I don't know. What I do know is that the water in Lake Atitlan rose and people suffered for it, and there isn't an easy solution. Insurance doesn't work in Central America like it does in the West. You can't just call up AMI and say "hey, my house is flooded by 6 feet of water, rescue me please! Send me money! What do you mean I have to fill out a form? Just do it, damn it!" The truth is there isn't an easy solution to natural disasters or global warming *anywhere*. It isn't a Guatemalan problem, it's a global problem. We're *all* liable for how we treat our planet, and we tend to forget that we're at the mercy of Mother Earth. These photos prove that.

When improvising, Miles Davis believed that first thought is best thought. It represents your gut intuition, something beyond conscious reasoning. It symbolises true expression, something emotive. Feelings - anger, grief, happiness, they are all beyond reason because of just that - they're emotions. These were my first photographs and they are probably the best, as is the case with most my series - first is best, and not because I can't do better, and because the rest isn't good. It's best because it's sincere. It's a dive into the unknown. It's being content with mystery. It's about doing and not knowing. If you know what you're doing then you lose a lot of that. I didn't know what I was doing then, I don't know what I'm doing now, and I don't really want to know. I take photos with very little to no thought and I accept them for what they are. These photos started this train of thought. They were a personal breakthrough - they really gave me the courage to incorporate photography into my practice as something deeply serious. Before this series I didn't have the courage to do anything other than paint, which I thought was my calling. I now understand that the artist has the power to do whatever they want, you just got to try. This is testament to that. I've tried relentlessly to incorporate my photographs into my practice. They have featured in both my artist books (as of November 2017). I'm going to be working on this until the day I die. I feel happy about that. I'm writing this on November 25th 2017, with one goal; that this pre-printed portfolio will be printed and exhibited possibly five or more years after their development in 2014. This writing will feature and only feature as a part of that said portfolio. If you are reading this, we made it. We can't give up on these things. Ever.

P.s. These photos became so artistic to the point I never showed my mom. I owe her.

P.p.s. Our lust for Latin American sourced drugs finances drug wars in Mexico and beyond. Aside from ruining lives, drugs causes death via brutal execution and mutilation. I foolishly played a part in this and I deeply regret it. I did it, and I won't lie about it. Anyway, DON'T BUY COCAINE. Smoke legally sourced or friendly grown weed instead, if you must. El Chapo and El Chapolito don't need your money (they do actually, but don't give in!).

P.p.p.s I featured *San Pedro La Laguna* in the printed publication *The Sun, Moon and Stars*. I never got around to printing and exhibiting the series in *Mackie Boy*, the exhibition *The Sun* was based on. I mention, in short, a lot of what I say here, but not all of it. This could be considered an addition to that writing. In it I omit mentioning my mother. I did that because *The Sun* was dedicated to my late father. The truth was I wasn't really thinking about her in the book, I was thinking about my dad and the subject, *San Pedro* and global warming (the topic), without directly mentioning the latter. Anyway, I'm thinking about her now.