

THE NEW YORK TIMES
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THE NEW YORK TIMES, THURSDAY, JANUARY 8, 1998



Valdir
Cruz in his
14th Street
studio.

AT HOME WITH
VALDIR CRUZ

A Fragile World Through a Lens

By RANDY KENNEDY

FOR anyone looking at Valdir Cruz's beautiful, silvery photographs of the remote Indians of the Amazon rain forests, it is difficult to shake the notion that they are images of ghosts populating ghost towns.

In these images, the product of visits to northern Brazil and southern Venezuela over the last three years, children curled up in hammocks and groups of painted hunters stare into his camera from a lost world: spare, circular bamboo villages, cut into the dense rain forest like sundials, their ancient physical and religious rhythms ruled by the need for food, still sought by men using bows and poisoned darts.

The ghostly feeling is underscored by the knowledge that the very existence of these Indians, known as Yanomami in Brazil and Yanomamo in Venezuela — the last tribes in the Americas still untouched by modern civilization — is gravely threatened. Since the mid-1970's, they have been devastated by malnutrition and malaria, caused by the incursions of gold miners and others who have forged into their isolated homelands.

For the Brazilian-born Mr. Cruz, whose earlier successes as a portraitist centered on the famous — the likes of Henry Kissinger and Spike Lee — it was this sense of something unknown to the world and rapidly slipping away that lured him from his home and studio on West 14th Street into the rain forest.

But in the process, what started as a simple project to photograph rain-forest leaders has become a remarkable artistic and now humanitarian obsession for Mr. Cruz, 43, whose work is focusing attention on the Indians. Some of it is being shown for the first time in the United States at Throckmorton Fine Art, 153 East 61st Street, through Saturday.

"I have a tendency to fall deeply into whatever I'm doing," he said last week, unrolling a rug-size map of Brazil on the floor of his modest apartment, where photo equipment competes for space with bows, arrows, straw baskets and other rain-forest mementos (he said they keep him connected).

"But this has gone a lot further," he continued, his dark, Che Guevara looks animated by a glimmer of missionary zeal. "And I see a project

that will, probably, be a lifetime project." The pictures have been compared by critics to "The North American Indian," Edward S. Curtis's classic pictorial study.

But Mr. Cruz is interested in more than artistry or documentation. Vicki Goldberg, whose photography criticism appears in The New York Times, writes in the introduction to the show's catalogue: "These photographs lie halfway between anthropology and art. Halfway may be the safest place to be today, when conflicted feelings about interest in tribal people run so deep that even curiosity about their appearance can be read as exploitation."

But Mr. Cruz is frank about using his pictures as political documents, hoping that their publication will pressure the Brazilian and Venezuelan Governments to control mining and to increase medical help against diseases like malaria, which infected as many as one-third of the Indians in the villages he saw.

This strength of conviction has surprised no one more than Mr. Cruz himself. His early work — as a sought-after photographic printer, as well as photographer — stressed the medium's technique. His first work in Brazil was a meticulous architectural study of a century-old cathedral, in which human figures, if seen at all, seemed secondary.

But in 1994, he photographed several rain-forest leaders who came to New York to address the United Nations. "I started to dream — why not try to go in?" he recalled. He acknowledges that his first trip, in the fall of 1995, was motivated by a kind of swashbuckling artistic curiosity.

"I wanted to go in and live with these people and see if I could do something new with photography," he said. But after he reached the traditional Yanomami villages, known as shaponos, some already devastated by disease or disrupted by contact with miners, his intentions were transformed.

"It happens when you have been in the forest for days, and you think you'll never see other humans again," he said. "And then you come into a village, and you can't believe it's there, that people can live there. They are so strong, but they are also so defenseless when it comes to protecting themselves from the modern world."

The villages were almost as incomprehensible to Mr. Cruz as he

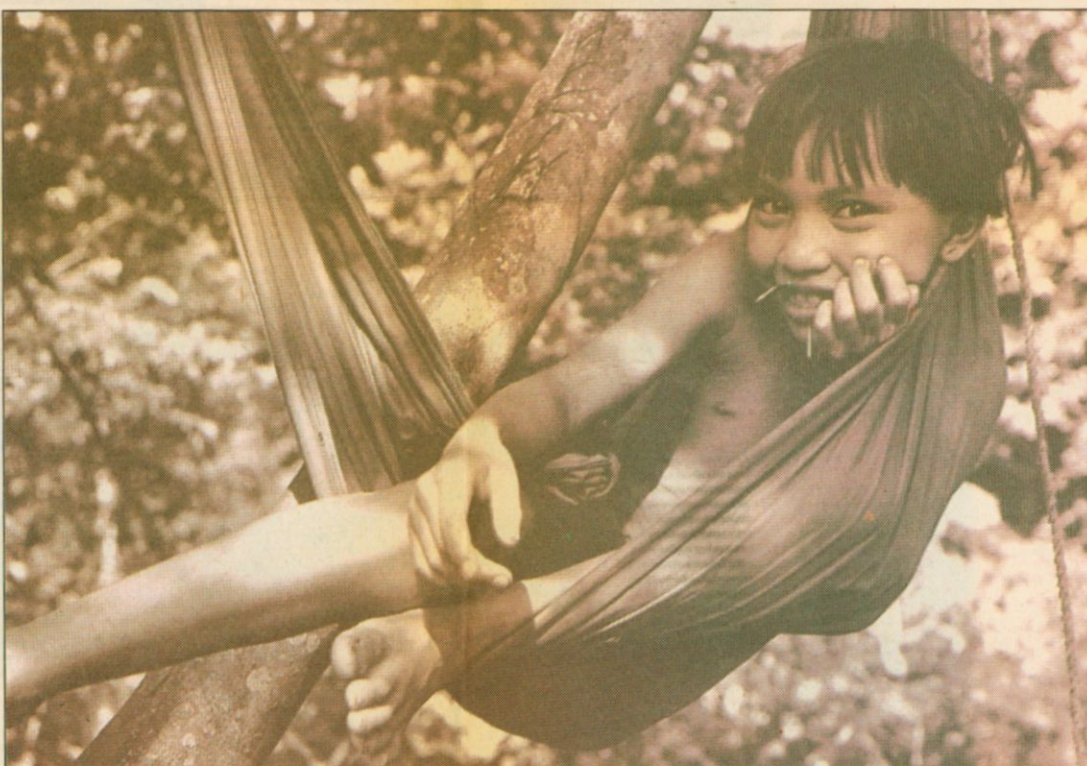


Photographs by Valdir Cruz



ENDANGERED
PEOPLE AND
PLACES

Above, in a
Yanomami village,
the degrading of
building traditions
with plastic, and a
pair of boots, show
contact with miners.
Left, a woven roof of
the Ingarico Indians.



REMNANTS OF A WORLD STILL UNTOUCHED

A child in a Stone Age Yanomami village in the Brazilian rain forest. Gaining the trust of the villagers was the start of a photographic project that grew from recording to assistance.

The making of a passionate advocate for the Amazon Indians.

was to the Stone-Age Yanomami. "They don't understand, first of all, why we have so much stuff or what we can possibly do with it all," said Patrick Tierney, a writer who has studied the Yanomami for almost a decade and traveled with Mr. Cruz on his second trip, in 1996. "They share everything."

The shaponos, villages made of one common bamboo-and-leaf house in the form of a ring, are closed along the outside but open on the inside. Within the ring is a disk of land swept of trees and underbrush, for dances and for children to play.

But because villagers must rely intimately on one another for survival, families have no separate dwellings, not even curtains as partitions. Their hammocks are simply draped around their fires, with one family inches from the next.

"The shabono is remarkable for observers," Mr. Tierney said, "because everything is occurring in this open-air theater, readily apparent."

Even so, it took Mr. Cruz days before he could begin to photograph. And he felt dissatisfied with simply taking pictures as so many lay sick or dying around him.

So on his second trip, and a third last year, which was on a Guggenheim Foundation grant, he took medicine and medical workers partly paid for by Brazil's National Health Foundation.

"I would say that he spent two-thirds of his time with us, assisting the medical team," Mr. Tierney said. "He didn't go in posing people, taking shots. He just kept a very low profile and helped, typically for four or five days, before he even started thinking about the cameras."

"It was a generous way of working," he added.

As Mr. Cruz worked, his pictures took on an added dimension. Barbara Millstein, curator of photography at the Brooklyn Museum, said: "I think he was as surprised as anyone at how well he did with it. He was able to look at them as individuals and not parts of a tribe, not as objects."

The closeness he nurtured made him sensitive to the gradual but often debilitating effects of outside culture on the Indians, including the slightly less isolated Ingarico, near the Brazil-Guyana border, and the Macuxi of the Brazilian grasslands. The more remote Yanomami villages in the highlands, spare as they are, are visibly much more ordered and cohesive than those near mining areas, like the Homoxi district of Brazil. Those villages could be mistaken for São Paulo slums, with dirty children and houses patched with plastic.

"You look at those people, and you look in their eyes, and you see something lost, a sadness, like they've lost hope," Mr. Cruz said.

Mr. Cruz's last stay in the forest lasted five months, but he is raising money for a fourth trip that could last even longer.

"You begin to understand why anthropologists will go spend a year in the forest and then stay for years," he said. "You start to question things about life outside."