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Visualizing Magical Realism in Ecuador

By David Gonzalez Jan. 4, 2018 [Comment](#)

Though her photographs have touches of the ethereal, Karen Miranda-Rivadeneira insists she does not go out looking for magical moments. Still, she encounters them often in New York, where she was born, and Ecuador, where she was raised, visually teasing out the traditions, routines and beliefs shared by those two places in her heart.

In her most recent work, she has returned to a region of Ecuador that she first visited as a child 30 years ago. There, she met people who opened up to her, as she encountered scenes reminiscent of her upbringing, like when she came upon a woman who was passing an egg over her child to cure the evil eye. Her own mother had used the same ritual on her decades earlier. Even her Andean landscapes were transformed when she collaborated with a traditional painter who embellished them with flying people and golden animals.

“There was something about the relationship between the ordinary and the extraordinary that I have always seen since childhood,” said Ms. Miranda-Rivadeneira, 34. “It’s not unique to me. A lot of people from Latin America and the Caribbean grew up with that. For me, it stuck around.”

Those images will be on display at Miyako Yoshinaga in New York in her first solo show, “In the Mouth of the Mountain Jaguar Everybody Is a Dancing Hummingbird.” The magical realism reflected in the show’s title refers to the region of El Bolivar province where she pursued her project in seven towns, which was done with the assistance of France’s Musée Quai Branly.

She had started her project with a simple concept: to go to a place she was long familiar with and try to look at it through new eyes. At first she had planned to walk through a part of the Andes and

photograph the people and places she encountered, but decided to stay more or less out in a part of El Bolivar province, an area that she had often passed through from Guayaquil, where she grew up, to the Amazon.

Working with both a medium-format as well as a view camera, she introduced herself to the locals, getting to know them before asking them how they would like to be photographed. In some cases, the encounter was brief. In others, it could stretch over a day or two.

The resulting images reveal the degree of trust her subjects had, like the photo of a woman soaking in a tub. Ms. Miranda-Rivadeneira had been wanting to do her portrait when she went to the woman's home. "I not doing much except taking my Thursday bath," the woman told her. "Take a portrait of me inside the tub."

Another subject, a young man who aspired to be a musician, suggested they visit some ruins that he thought would be the perfect setting. Once there, he made a surprising admission. He said he wanted his skin to be similar to the texture of the ruins," she recalled. "Then he said: 'So, I am going to take off my clothes. Is that O.K.?' Perfect. He got into position and I took the photo. It developed little by little, interacting and sharing and being present."

In contrast to the documentary-style portraits and daily scenes, her collaboration with Julio Toaquiza, a farmer who was also a painter of traditional pastoral scenes, had mystical overtones. Looking at some color landscapes she had done, she felt they were missing something. Though when she approached Mr. Toaquiza with the idea of his painting on her prints, he was a bit puzzled at first.

"Why would I paint on top of a photograph?" she recalled him asking. "He's a farmer who goes from working with cattle to painting and portraying the stories of his community."

Looking back on her time working on this project, Ms. Miranda-Rivadeneira said it helped her draw the connections between herself and her subjects. And sometimes — like when she saw the mother performing a healing ritual with an egg — it was enough to just savor the moment.

"I was so moved and I could have photographed her, but I had already done that with my mother," she said. "That moment, I breathed it in. Wow, this magic still happens and is still very present in people's lives."

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