

The Planet is a Favela: Numo Rama

Written by Miguel Angel Ceballos



When I was a kid, I was fascinated by the traveling photographers that went to far away towns to shoot portraits either on donkeys or on foot. They returned weeks later with the picture and got the rest of their pay. They were always welcome, except by my grandfather, who kept his distance, thinking they scammed money out of people. I can't remember being photographed by any of them. I don't have any pictures of my childhood. My oldest picture was shot when I was 16.

My name is Numo Rama and I am a photographer. I live in a poor neighborhood of Natal, capital of the state of Rio Grande do Norte, with my wife and my two children. Even though we are financially stable now, I don't feel better off than everyone else here. What I have is the feeling of having great social responsibilities towards the rest of the community.

I come from an underprivileged background, I lived in a small provincial town. My father still lives of farming and raising live stock. My mother worked as a maid. I was five years old when

they separated. A year later my father killed another farmer in a duel and had to run away, so our life became extremely difficult.

- The hard days-

I went to live with my mother's parents, who dwelled in a rich man's land. We were poor, but my grandparents were even poorer. My oldest brother and I went through very difficult times during our childhood. My other brother was adopted by my father's parents and my youngest brother always lived with my mother's parents. But we were strong and kept ourselves active. My grandmother hit me almost every day.

I loved going to the city to see the fair, this was the invention that made my life.

For example, electric light had kind of a spell over me. I would stare at a lamp in an uncle's house in the city for hours. I made myself suffer electric shocks several times, they would make my hair stand on an end. My mother hit me when I took out the lamp to get another electric shock. In my imagination, light had a smell, but only those electric shocks would bring it out. Radiance, life, everything was contained in the light.

When I was 13, I went to live with my father and worked with him in the farm. My father slaughtered the livestock and my brother cleaned off the meat to sell it on the local market the next day.

(I am currently working on a project called “Meat Eaters”, which is a 100% autobiographical. The images are very disturbing and since I began I haven’t been able to eat meat.)

Three years later I went to look for new experiences in the North, I went to the state of Acre near the Bolivian border. Eight years later, I reunited with my mother in the outskirts of Brasilia, where she still lives. From that point on, my life changed pace dramatically. That place left deep marks on me. Since I couldn’t change the past, I decided to learn from it. I got good lessons out of it. That was my true school, and those are my real assets.

To be honest, I don’t even know if I am a real photographer. Everything started out in Portugal in 1991. I arrived there as an economic refugee, escaping from Fernando Collor de Melo’s government, which had shattered Brazil’s economy. But in 1994, photography crossed my path. My girlfriend, who is now my wife, gave me my first book about photographic techniques.

- Discovering the World -

AI started out to explore the universe of the photographic image. It was all so vast and far from my comprehension, that several times, I tried to do anything but photograph.

Everything became more clear when I read the biographies of the greatest photographers of the different epochs.

I was thrilled when I read about Manuel Alvarez Bravo and the Mexico of his time, about the immigrant Tina Modotti and the American Edward Weston. About the political uproar and the active participation of the artists, the extreme, genius mural painters. Mexico was in turmoil and artists played a major role.

When I came across the work of Pedro Meyer in Sweden, it was easy to understand him because he was Mexican. Later on I identified with his boldness. I really enjoyed looking at a Mexican re-invent his work in the digital age. With Meyer, I truly conquered more space and flew higher.

- The Quest -

After a long, long quest -since I never had a teacher- I understood what I was lacking. I perceived that all art forms and expressions are intertwined. The world in which these photographers dwelled was full of diverse arts. They were friends with great painters, literary geniuses, composers, revolutionaries, celebrities and many more. I didn't fancy being friends with that kind of people, but at least I could work on my own appreciation of the arts to understand its creators and their message.

After that, it all became easier. I simply mixed my own experience with the human being --which I deem to be the best school of all- a bit of general culture, a camera and a great dissatisfaction with the oppression of the ruling classes over the majority that is in disadvantage in every aspect of the social landscape. These are the elements that drive my work.

When I think about photography , I don't think about photo in newspapers --which has great importance and should be governed by ethics, like everything we do in life-, what interests me about it is not just the habit of documenting. I don't photograph everyday or every week or every month. I just do it when I've got something to say, and that only happens after a long reflection. The images become a graphic interpretation of reality that I want to transmit.

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