

Look the other way

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This text was published originally in Spanish in the photo book PRELUDIO.

<https://www.armando-salazar.com/preludio>

PRELUDIO is the path from the empty classroom to the tunnel before going on stage. A photographic path made of 148 rolls of black and white film, 5180 shots and a final selection of 55 photographs that give shape to this book.

I started photographing the National Conservatory of Music in February 2004 and finished the project in August 2009. To enter the old Conservatorio de Música de La Floresta was to enter a very particular world. A dilapidated building that had the structure of an old public office in an old neighborhood where one could listen to Bach sonatas, percussion solos, horn tuning or vocal exercises of the choir. It was (and still is in its current location) a space of a special youthful energy.

I walked through its corridors for six years, sometimes with a very clear idea of what I was looking for, sometimes just to listen to music or to try to understand the ins and outs of creation. That was the initial idea: to photograph the musical creation and its components such as the studio, the composition, the nerves, the waiting, the concentration, the patience, the friendship, the solitude and the maturity. A kind of portrait of a world with its own rules, discipline, difficulty and dedication.

That's where I started, because of the need to photograph the dedication to something that moves us; maybe it moves me and moves me to see human beings who are dedicated only to something because I move on more than one front; that one-dimensionality and its consequent depth still seems to me a unique feature and a constant aspiration.

To be a musician is to bet on invisibility, to hide behind the note, the academic musician does not perform, does not pose, sometimes repeats learned behaviors but does not use them in a practical sense. Fame, posing, beauty, spectacle and haste do not pass this way. Being behind the curtain or behind the lectern is his natural posture.

In the new conservatory, modern and functional, there are isolated cubicles that clearly evidence the attitude that is promoted: to be seen in front of the music and not necessarily in front of others.

Being behind the camera is also being behind the curtain. It is a way of hiding oneself, of concealing one's shyness. It is also a pretext to enter an alien world.

After six years of work, this feeling settled, it became an attitude towards life. That relationship with photography is my relationship with myself and my life, I photograph at the pace I live and at the rhythm of my feelings.

Like Eduardo Countinho, a Brazilian documentary filmmaker, or Bruce Davidson, a New York photographer, I need a space to contextualize my work, physical boundaries that force me to look more closely. Without limits there is no creation. It gave me peace of mind to go to the same place every so often with the hope of the possibility of an image.

During that time my photographic aesthetics and my relationship with that world were mutating. Just as in fiction the goal is to prove an idea, in documentary work the goal is to discover an idea. At the beginning the idea was simply to see, by the end I had found links, emotions and pauses.

When reviewing the 148 contact sheets of the project and the different work diaries, the creative process I have gone through appears.

April 24, 2004, first rolls. I see a teacher who reminds me of my attempt to study music in my childhood: seriousness and hardness. On neither side was the music, there was the need of rigor, of the teacher as someone unfathomable. I see that first contact sheet and I am with a wide-angle lens, the lens you have to use if you want to do documentary photography, I see my intention of wanting to put everything in the image: the classroom, the student, the guitar, the dirty walls. Ten years after these shots, I see these photos as a trace of a way of photographing that has changed.

From that first roll of film no photo has made it into this book, something is missing, it is noticeable that I am wandering around looking for a frame, a distance, a place to look from. I remember that after that day, I was talking to my friend Daniel Andrade, photographer and director of film photography and I told him, naively, that I had some very good photos. When he saw them he told me: "when you told me about this, I saw other things, I thought they were better". Silence.

Understanding the complex difference between photographing and seeing. The emotional charge of being in a different place from the routine makes us load the images with contents that they do not have. It is necessary to see three times. The first is to know how to see life, the second is to know how to see through the camera, and the third, the most difficult, is to know how to see the image, or what is the same, to allow the image to be seen. In each of these ways of seeing, we see differently.

My path with photography has been to ask myself what it is that allows an image to exist. I am convinced that it is not only the intention of the photographer and that the world presented in front of the camera is not enough. Over the years I have realized that the image is somewhere in between the shooter and the observed world.

I like that idea, it frees me from the obligation of being an author or an artist. Of course my work is creative but knowing that I don't control all the variables gives me harmony and certainty. It allows me to continue wandering with the camera in the territories of the uncertain, of the permanent need to continue discovering.

Four days later, April 28, 2004, I am at the Teatro Politécnico in Quito in a presentation of the musicians of the conservatory. A boy concentrating on his violin, there are three close-up shots and the fourth one becomes an image. When this photo was once in an exhibition, someone said that he was deeply moved by it and elaborated an interpretation of which I have little

memory, but I have the memory of having thought how distant are the world of the one who sees and feels the image and the world of the banal actions that photography contains: looking, framing, exposing, focusing, waiting, shooting.

This profession is rudimentary, it needs a certain mental and physical agility but it doesn't need much more, the proof of this is that today it is as common as changing clothes or having a beer, nothing extraordinary accompanies this task. That's why I ask myself, where did all that interpretation of the image that the spectator of that exhibition got from, I still don't have an answer.

Two pictures from that contact sheet are part of the selection of this book. They show ways of photographing in which I feel comfortable and confident.

In my notebook from those years I find a note, it says "I am missing portraits and atmospheres". Little did I understand then that the project was going to last five more years, maybe I perceived that there were already enough photos for a series and I began to look for new ways of seeing.

May 4, 2004. I enter the conservatory, I always went there in the afternoon when there was more activity and behind a door I hear the music of Astor Piazzolla's Four Seasons of Buenos Aires, fascinated by the sound I start shooting and looking for frames of the different musicians: piano, violin, viola. I look for a portrait. I feel good, energetic, the chords reach me and fill me; they do their thing and I do mine. The practice is intense and I let myself go. When I develop the rolls, I hope to find the photos that give an account of the lived experience, the ones that reveal the energy of that afternoon in that small rehearsal room.

There is nothing. Piazzolla does not sound in my photos.

Today I see my urgency to give meaning to several images, you can see in my marks on the leaves that I am waiting intensely for these photos to say something else. But no, the music stayed in my ears and on my skin but did not reach my eyes and my camera.

At that time I took a course with Julio Mitchel, a Cuban-New York photographer. When he saw the photos he told me "the photos don't sound, the best photographer is the one who doesn't speak or hear, only sees". Mitchel is implacable and studying with him at the beginning of PRELUDIO set a tone and rigor in my work that still remains. He also said "What is important is the image that communicates, that 'comments' and also 'the best tool of the photographer is the trash can', 'the faster you eliminate, the better you will be'. His way of teaching was firm, without concessions; an image is strong or it is not. With him I learned to see. His book Do you love me? remains for me a textbook on the craft of photography. To photograph is to speak aloud about what surrounds us, "to record the theater of life," he also used to say.

In short, to photograph is to express an opinion.

The Floresta conservatory was very small, corridors and stairs dark and narrow. I looked for my photos in the safety of the classrooms, where there

was a teacher, a student, a lectern and a blackboard; I was afraid to be in the corridors, where life, friendship and love flowed; where young people are more fragile and, like me with the camera, they are not protected by their instrument. May 14, 2004. I find myself next to a guitarist concentrating on his lesson, several frames show a search, a distance or a right moment. Nothing appears. I leave the classroom and in the corridor in front of me a unique scene opens: three musicians together in practice but separated by a staircase. The scene is perfect, I raise the camera and shoot. One image.



2004-15-14

Chance had made its appearance; next to this image there is another similar one, a second shot with a change in the composition. It was not necessary. The first shot is the right one. Two new aspects appear: the first one, to understand that even if we look for something, it may not appear but something different and more powerful will replace it, and the second one: the corridors could be photographed.

June 12, 2004. I photograph the choir rehearsal; the scene is clear. In the center a concentrated teacher giving orders and directing, to one side a piano and in the background lined up at the foot of a curtain is the choir, about fifteen boys. I don't remember what they were singing, I had already stopped concentrating on the music to concentrate on the image. The selected photo (page xx) is at the beginning of the roll; it is clear that when I took it I did not realize its strength and continued photographing until the end of the rehearsal. Something particular happened at the end of the rehearsal; when the rehearsal was over, the young people began to talk to each other, put away their scores and some of them gathered around the piano to continue making music. I loved those moments, the feeling of the classroom at the end of the practice, the feeling of having learned, of having closed something. I felt part of that closure because, although it wasn't always obvious, I believed that some image must exist between my rolls. Towards the end of the contact sheet, I am at the foot of the piano, a couple of young people are making music, the teacher is there and in the last three shots two girls take the place.

The framing is the same and in the last picture of the roll, one of them looks the other way. The out-of-field appears, there is something behind the camera that attracts her attention and the image is charged with a unique energy. I like this photo very much. It represents the value of the last photo in the roll.



2004-06-12

This is something that has been recurrent in my practice. That is one of the many reasons why I do not abandon analog photography despite the digital gale. Knowing that one is approaching the end of the roll, that photo 30 has been taken, then 31, 32, etc, makes the concentration or some kind of particular force appear and the final image, the one that says "it's over, you have to stop, change the roll, stop", is often strong and clear. It seems to sum up the photographic attempt: it is a kind of signal that one is on the right path.

July, 2004. I continue to work. By now I have photographed about 40 rolls of the project. A body of work is emerging. At that time the goal was to understand the ins and outs of creation. The portrait of a world with its own rules. In a contest (an exam with an audience) I focus on a disparate group: a flute player, her friend and on one side a mother waiting for the event. No one hears anyone, everyone is on their own, just like the violinists on the stairs, the conservatory is this space of solitary encounters. Formal musical learning requires a lot of work and concentration. Few activities are like it.

From this image some similar ones start to appear in the viewfinder. I want to photograph not only people but what is among people. I seek to portray human relationships. To find the intimate in the public or friendship in fragility.



I can't understand photography without an extra-photographic objective. When I am interested in a project, I begin to be interested in what happens there, in this case music, in another case sports, or family. But through the record I begin to understand what really moves me to make those images, I begin to discover the particularity of that universe.

I don't do photography about life, that's too broad, but about how to live. About absences, presences, intimacies, urgencies, humanisms, etc. My subject is not the narrative or aesthetic frontier but the human frontier, the human being in front of himself and in front of me as well.

Photographing helps me to discover the particular dynamics of life. It helps me to see myself and to live.

Ten years after the beginning of PRELUDIO I have placed this way of photographing under the umbrella of humanism and realism, aesthetic currents of the twentieth century that I feel are current and urgently needed.

I am a film professor and in my documentary film and film aesthetics classes I always talk about two thinkers who have marked my relationship with the documentary image: Andre Bazin and Sigfried Kracauer. Bazin says: "the realist filmmaker brings us closer to the filmed facts, searching in the marks of the visible, the authentic meaning of the scenes". Kracauer, for his part, speaks of realism as a way of "redemption of reality", of putting the referent back in its rightful place. Faced with the threat of the mediatized, digitally altered or hyper-realized image, these bases of thought are increasingly necessary and urgent.

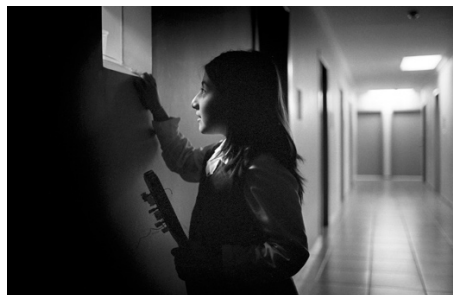
They are a refuge to find lucidity.

To rescue physical reality, to put into consideration the values of everyday life, to speak of the common that by being ordinary becomes extraordinary are the objectives of the redemption Kracauer speaks of. That is why to remain in the ideas of margin, frontier, convergence, technology, etc. is always to remain outside the essential, what matters. What surrounds us, the spaces, the people who occupy them and how they shape each other.

I started working with different optics and discovered that the use of optics is a way of looking. The 50 mm lens is for intimacy



35 mm is for intimacy in the middle of some context.

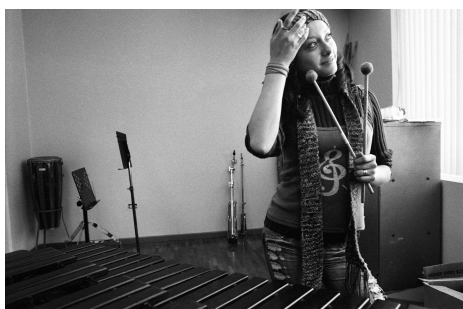


and the 28 mm is for loneliness and isolation



A lens is also a way of feeling.

Having photographed in a small space (the Conservatory of La Floresta) and in a very large one (the new location in the Batán) also motivated a change in my way of seeing. In the old place, the reduced spaces made me use wide-angle lenses most of the time; in the new place, the same lenses started to draw a greater distance between the characters in the frame. More than once I tried to put together stories with several characters in one space but the images fell apart, so I tried to portray single characters.



Sandra, september 2006

This is the last portrait I took with the 28mm. When I showed her the picture, the girl said something like "I don't even remember when I was going to take the picture". I had been in that rehearsal room all afternoon and felt like I was just another part of that world. But I wasn't. I had disappeared, I was invisible and I didn't need to provoke anything for the image to appear.

After this photo I started to close the lens and stay with the 35mm, which is the lens I use now. It marks a distance from the world that I feel good with. A fair distance from which to shoot. It is the optic of the dialogue between the image and the world, I feel that there is a conversation between the one who sees and what is seen.

Around 2010 I contacted José Avilés, the curator of this series and designer of the book. For about six months we saw the contacts and impressions. HIS look as a curator embraced mine. There were many photos that I valued that did not make it into the book. Little matter. The story is finally told. To edit is to see again and to feel the tranquility of having finished.

To finish, two images, the first one is the lectern and the desk (page xx); it appeared like others by chance. One afternoon in 2004 I went to the

Conservatory with my niece Manuela, she was 11 years old and at some point she disappeared from my sight, I started looking for her and entered an empty classroom. Until then I had only looked for places where there were people. There she was, the lectern and the desk. She asked me for the camera and photographed herself in the mirror. Before leaving I photographed the lectern and the desk. Nothing special. When I developed the film, the world I was discovering was revealed to me.

The world of teaching.

On that music stand and desk are marked the traces of what I still am. If musical learning goes hand in hand with photographic learning, the music teacher is also the film teacher. I teach film and I do photography, in this project my two worlds meet. The insecurity to find the right note and the insecurity to find the right image come together.

The second image is the photo that was not. At the entrance to the conservatory there was a small shop selling musical accessories, attended by a lady and around her there was always her little son. A small world parallel to the rigor of musical learning.



2004-07-01

The photo does not belong to this story but from the beginning I knew that it marked a way of seeing. Everything is here: the human relationship, looking inward, the lack of communication and tranquility. These are the coordinates of what I have done as a photographer since I finished PRELUDIO.

Ten years later I still need the image, it helps me to be part of something external to me. It is the result of a contact that places me in the world. A world where I always look elsewhere, where few see, where only life and living remain.

I am an imager of what is close to me. That is what helps me to continue.

Armando Salazar Larrea - Quito, January 2015