

Contrast, thousands of pieces of opposite colors and shapes, a giant living, breathing Diego Riviera mural is how I understand Mexico. Everywhere there is a real, tangible visible contrast that does not exist in the United States. In one day, temperatures fall and rise from forty degrees to ninety, graffitied walls guard beautiful gardens and stately houses, girls in Armani glasses and Abercrombie shirts buy street tacos from dirty cooks and even dirtier stoves.

Last Saturday, 35,000 people waited for five hours to see “Ashes and Snow” an exhibit by French photographer Gregory Colbert. The next day, Spanish instructor Elena Gosalvez-Blanco and I went to the Zocalo, the ancient center of Mexico City to see the exhibit. In the middle of the Zocalo, the second largest plaza in the world, stands the Nomadic Museum, the home of “Ashes and Snow.” The museum, the largest bamboo structure ever constructed, is a combination of a barn and a tree house. Around it lay rings and rings of waiting families, teenagers, and tourists from the states outside the city. We made our way through this crowd of thousands as we prepared to meet our press contact. These people were standing, waiting in the baking sun in a noisy, dirty city for hours to see art. Would this ever happen in America? Why were they waiting?

The answer is inside. “Ashes and Snow” is at its most basic level pictures of humans in close contact with wild animals. For ten years, Colbert traveled to forty different countries and photographed humans sitting, playing, dancing, and living with cheetahs, elephants, whales, eagles and chimpanzees. The pictures have not been digitally collaged or superimposed. They are larger than man (8.25 by 11) and reflect, in sepia earth tones, a world where man is small and vulnerable.

The photos show us a world where civilization-that wall that separates us from natural roots- has been turned down, and in its ashes the natural order is reborn. The title of the exhibition “Ashes and Snow” recalls the two greatest threats to our world today-the scorch of global warming and the death of nuclear winter. The structures in some of the pictures are old ruins that are empty and being overtaken by the natural world. The middle aged in these photos are disfigured and dirty, and only the younger generation is clean and able to be part of this new world. Something in these pictures has changed; buildings are abandoned, books are aged and exhausted, distressed humans are taken care of by animals.

Colbert’s pictures recall ancient pasts and future possibilities. But these are pictures of the present- Colbert is not showing us what did or could happen, he is showing us a life, hidden in the secret places of the Third World, where humanity lives with wildlife. These pictures are not imaginative or idealistic, and they were not created on a computer or in a darkroom. They chronicle a world that does exist, a world that was once not so hidden, and may again come out from the dark places of the Earth. He clearly manipulates the setting, light and clothing in each photo to evoke the past and future, but these photos are firmly rooted in the present.

The contrast between the city and these photos is striking. In the capitol, whistles screech, cars crash and pollute and humans rob and kidnap. The air is dirty, the streets are paved and littered and beauty is found in buildings, museums and murals. In this 700 year old city, “Ashes and Snow” reminds those of us who have been separated from nature for too long that water is cleansing, and that nature is not wild but wise.

While the pictures are beautiful, they by themselves do not draw 35,000

thousand people. The lines are fully explained only by “The Nomadic Museum.” Designed by Columbian architect Simon Velez, the structure is made of bamboo and shipping crates and sits right next to the Catedral Metropolitana, Mexico’s 250-year-old mega church. This temporary museum is also a kind of temple, and on the Sunday I visited, more people were waiting in line for “Ashes and Snow” than were in the Cathedral.

Inside the museum it is dark and moist. High ceilings and long bamboo beams create a primitive, natural nave that’s simplicity contrasts with the heavily ordained one next door. Wooden docks carry you across shallow pools of water. Everything is hidden in a comfortable darkness except for the photographs, which are bathed in pools of light and float above the water. The Nomadic Museum, a completely environmentally sustainable structure, is an oasis of peaceful darkness in a city of light and waste.

In the center of Mexico City, a modern day Noah’s Ark has been constructed, a place where humans can escape from the world that they have created. In this museum, animals and humans take care of each other. My greatest shock in coming to Mexico has not been the language or cultural differences but rather the sensory experience of being in a city- of living in a place where there are no tall trees or giant fields or deer jumping into the road at night. In Mexico, the smell of pollen has been replaced by tortillas and food; instead of morning birds outside, I hear stray street dogs. Mexico is rich in fun, and in some places biodiversity. But the connection between man and nature in Cuernavaca and Mexico City has disappeared. Maybe that is why 35,000 people lined up in one day to see this exhibit. Colbert and Velez have built a modern day ark for a humanity tired of living without the monkeys and elephants and trees. As I looked at each picture, standing in the semi-darkness, watching the wisdom of the gigantic elephants, part of me was awakened- that part of all of us that yearns to live in the wild, free, cared for only by the chimpanzees and cheetahs of the world. In the glorious, noisy, rotting capitol of this land of contrasts, I have seen a world of natural silence, darkness and simplicity.

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