

## **“Latino Documentary Photography: Manuel Echavarria”**

By Analú María López

From its beginnings, the invention of the camera dramatically reinvented a new condition for creating an image on a social and cultural level.<sup>1</sup> As we enter the 21st century and witness the evolution of the photographic medium we can map out the medium as it was and continues to be practiced by the Latino communities in the United States.

Photographs being produced by Latinos of their respective communities bear a documentary/ photojournalistic style to them and their subject matter centers on their communities. Artist and art advocate during the sixties Chicano Visual Arts Movement, Gilbert "Magu" Lujan, stated: "Photography had an impact among our collective visions or information presented to portray us as never before; initially, with a journalistic approach then later followed by more serious efforts to make aesthetic statements." <sup>2</sup> At first, photography worked as an empowering agent to the Latino communities and the importance of portraying their communities was crucial to identifying themselves. American photographer Lewis Hine once said: "If I could tell the story in words, I wouldn't need to lug a camera."<sup>3</sup> The purpose of any type of documentary is to record and demonstrate what is important about any sort of event, people or place, enter the images of Manuel Echavarria.

Manuel Echavarria experienced the migrant farm worker's life first hand. Born in Lorraine, Texas, in 1940, and like many other Chicanos of this time, he was a child of the Mexican Revolution. His father, a former military cadet, had left his native Michoacán to escape one of the most destructive episodes in Mexican history. In about 1913, he met and married Manuel's mother and took to sharecropping cotton to feed his family. After the death of his mother, and the rise of cotton-picking machines, which triggered the migration of millions of African-Americans, Mexican-Americans and Mexicans throughout the southeastern and southwestern cotton-growing states, at the age of three his family took up residence in Guadalupe, California. It was here in California where Echavarria became inspired by the civil rights and anti-war movements. Buying a 35-millimeter Pentax camera to capture on film what was, for him, the history-making drama of his life.<sup>4</sup> Over the course of a decade, he shot hundreds of photographs, showing working conditions driving many Santa Maria Valley farm workers to support or join the United Farm Workers (UFW). Several photographs include famed UFW labor leaders and organizers César Chávez and Dolores Huerta.

His straight-forward, documentary/photojournalist approach is key to his work because prior images-with few exceptions-of Mexican-Americans were emotional ones depicting them in a time of struggle, as if all we knew was the experience of struggle. Hardly do we ever see empowering images of Mexican-Americans such as ones of Dolores Huerta speaking on a panel for the UFW. Images such as these are one of many examples existing where Echavarria shows Mexican-Americans outside the confines of the fields and entering and confronting the institutions that placed them there. "Far from being passive observers of the contemporary scene, documentary photographers were (are) active agents searching for the most effective way to communicate their views."<sup>5</sup> The importance of Manuel Echavarria's documentary photographs was to show a people, in this case Mexican-Americans, standing up for their basic human rights.

In a recent tape-recorded interview, Echavarria offered one of his reasons for taking his camera into the fields more than three decades ago: "You don't want history to say the Mexicano, the Chicano was... passive, [that] everything must have been okay with them. But we know that's not true. So, ultimately that's one of the reasons why I've been involved with this for so many years. It is to make sure that history doesn't say that, *que estamos todos contentos*, that we are happy, that we didn't exist."<sup>6</sup>

As we enter a new millennium, one of evolving consciousnesses, societies and identities the historical timeline of Latino Documentary photography continues to flourish alongside the very communities from which they come from.

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**ENDNOTES:**

1. Firstenberg, Lauri. "Autonomy and the Archive in America: Reexamining the Intersection of Photography and Stereotype." *Only Skin Deep: Changing Visions of the American Self*. Coco Fusco and Brian Wallis. Harry N. Abrams: 2003.
2. 2005 e-mail to artist
3. Quoting American Photographer Lewis Hine
4. 1999 interview per California Polytechnic State University 's Kennedy Library database
5. Curtis, James. "Making sense of Documentary Photography." From making sense of Evidence Series on History Matters: The U.S. Survey on the Web, located at <http://historymatters.gmu.edu>.
6. Ibid

**Special Collections:**

<http://lib.calpoly.edu/support/findingaids/ms098-farm-labor/>

<http://www.oac.cdlib.org/findaid/ark:/13030/kt3g50363t/>