

Martin Berg

For Court Outreach Coordinator, Bureaucracy Is a Work of Art



To most of us in the media, the courthouse is just a place we rush through on the way to some big story or celebrity circus.

Lawyers have to focus on their cases; they can't afford to spend time soaking in the atmosphere, even if they wanted to. We rarely pause to observe the anxious families waiting on benches, or jurors doing their best to survive the tedium.

These human beings, hallways and escalators are part of the drab backdrop we try to shut out while we're on our way to someplace important.

Not Camilo Cruz. By day he works as community relations administrator for Los Angeles County Superior Court. Nights and weekends Cruz toils as an artist, letting his imagination roam around the world in which he spends his days.

Cruz calls himself a "bureaucracy artist." Both of his pursuits take him to the same place: the corridors and courtrooms of the Stanley Mosk Civil Courthouse. In his day job he is the hardworking, earnest and charming organizer of high-profile diversity conferences and innovative teen justice programs. As an artist, he is an explorer, diving into the depths of how the system of justice affects our humanity.

But when Cruz goes prospecting with his 4x5 camera, he's not making docu-

mentaries. One aspect of his photography portrays his creative response to the sometimes tragic, dreary or just plain weird environment in which he works, through posed photographs, using as models his friends, relatives and court employees. Sometimes the photos appear to be nearly real scenes, familiar yet eerie, like the photograph of the man in a Marine uniform kneeling in front of a rest room sink; others are jarring, off-kilter dreamscapes, with a hint of sly commentary, like the one of the empty suit going up the courthouse elevator, briefcase in tow.

In another aspect of his work, Cruz offers compelling portraits of judges in a manner we're not used to seeing them. Judges might seem unlikely models for Cruz's sometimes unsettling art, preferring the remote formality of robe and bench. But those judges who got to know Camilo Cruz in his community outreach welcome the opportunity to participate.

For some the connection goes even deeper. Camilo's father was the legendary crusading Chicano lawyer Ricardo Cruz, who from the late 1960s through the early 1980s grappled with a variety of social issues: fighting the forced sterilization of low-income women at County-USC Hospital, protesting against the Catholic Church for its failure to embrace social justice movements and winning freedom for a man wrongly convicted of murder.

"I knew him when I was a law student," says Los Angeles Superior Court Judge Peter Espinoza, supervising judge of criminal courts. "We all wanted to grow

up to be him. So when I met Camilo there was an immediate bond."

That bond was only strengthened when the judge worked with Camilo on community outreach, especially the court's ambitious 2006 diversity summit.

"It's testimony to his credibility and his reputation around the court that so many well-placed judges agreed to participate," Espinoza says. "Everybody knows that he's a serious guy; when he's given an assignment he always does way beyond what's expected of him."

About Cruz's photography, Espinoza says, "I'm really drawn to it, I don't know if I can articulate why. But it's what he knows. All the great painters painted what they knew. I trust his instincts, I like his politics."

One of Espinoza's favorites is a somber photo of Judge David Wesley, a veteran of many criminal courtrooms as well as administration, standing in the corridor behind his courtroom, arms outstretched, fingertips touching the walls, eyes downcast. As in many of Cruz's photos, it conjures multiple, even contradictory meanings.

Superior Court Judge Beverly O'Connell got to know Camilo working on the court's "power lunch" program, in which judges have lunch with high school students in minority communities. "They've never met a judge," O'Connell says. "That's a program [Camilo] helped spearhead, and it's gotten rave reviews. He brings such energy and vibrancy to his work."

O'Connell posed in the Norwalk courthouse with two bench colleagues, Yvonne Sanchez and Margaret Bernal.

In the photo, O'Connell said, Cruz captured emotions judges don't usually display, "the seriousness and the weight of the decisions we make, the trust people place in us. He was asking us questions about our job," she recalls. "We always want to smile, and he didn't want us to smile."

Cruz, 37, has been taking photographs since eighth grade. Following his father's interests, he pursued a career in public policy. But five years ago he decided to devote more of his attention to art, pursuing a master's in fine art at California State University, Long Beach.

But he had no interest in going off to take photos of city streets or beautiful nature landscapes. He wanted to focus on creating art from the landscape he knew. "I just thought my environment would be my studio; there was a lot of interesting energy and imagery that I hadn't seen explored in art," Cruz says. "I want to look at how our bodies and our humanity survive in an institutional environment. I'm very curious about how we behave in this very structured environment."

Cruz says of his photographs, "They're mainly ambiguous images. You have to bring your own story." He's just as enthusiastic about his outreach job as he is about his art. "I have a high respect for the system of justice. We want to have real programs, not just court tours."

In his strong dual interests, Cruz credits the influence of his father Ricardo.



Superior Court Judge David Wesley

"He was interested in public policy, but he also had me thinking deeply, spiritually, philosophically, creatively."

Cruz obtained his MFA in December, and displayed his work at a CSULB gallery show.

For the future, Cruz plans to continue to throw himself into his community outreach right along with his art. He is

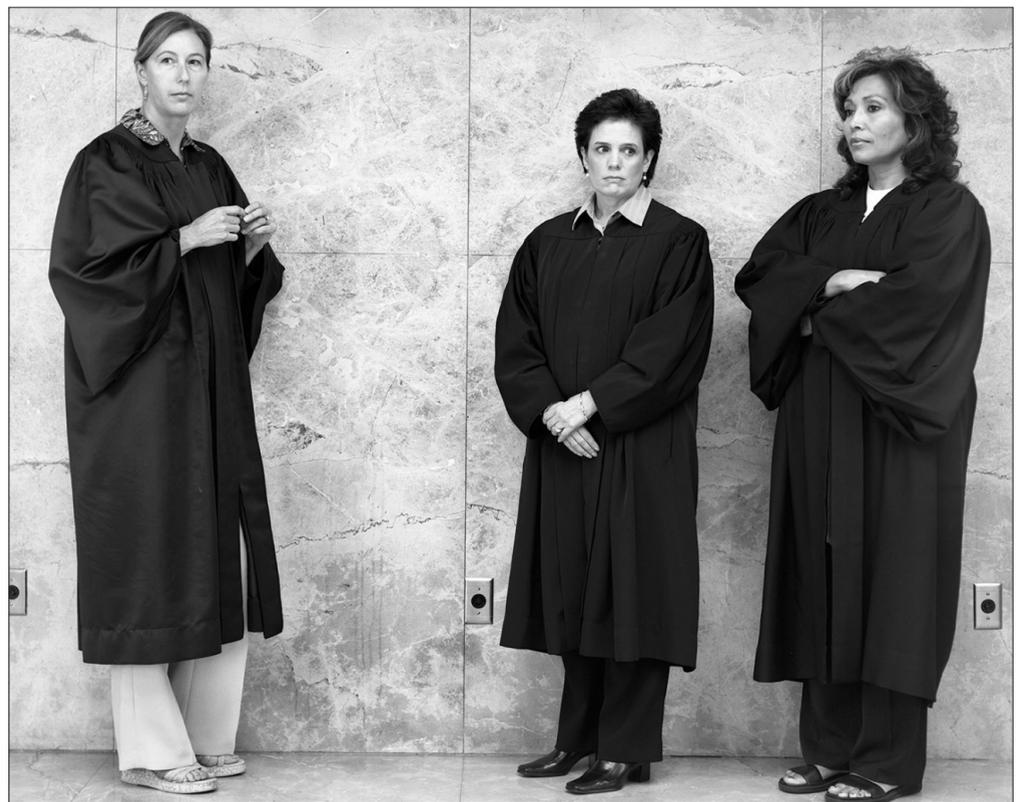
scheduled to have an exhibition of his work at the African-American Museum this summer at the Crenshaw Baldwin Halls Mall in Los Angeles.

martin_berg@dailyjournal.com

For more of Camilo Cruz's photos, please visit www.dailyjournal.com.



From left: Superior Court judges Dennis Landin, Peter Espinoza and Jose Sandoval



From left: Los Angeles Superior Court judges Yvonne Sanchez, Beverly O'Donnell and Margaret Bernal

CALIFORNIA'S BEST SOURCE FOR DAILY LEGAL NEWS

Keeping up-to-date on the courts, legal matters, government actions and business can pay off in time, opportunities and even money. Get your own copy of the Daily Journal – in print or digital edition.

CLIENT SERVICES >> 866 / 531-1492

Daily Journal

