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Photo exhibit brings out humanity in court system

By Amy Schellenbaum Staff Writer

Thursday, July 15, 2010

When people think of the judicial courts, order and sterility tend to coat every image.

They may think of glossy floors and crisp suits; guilt and innocence decided by a set of rules meant to be strictly followed; decisions derived by factual evidence.

Photographer Camilo Cruz is looking to change that perception.

An employee of Los Angeles Superior Court, Cruz demonstrates the humanity of the justice system through his work, a stark and revealing contrast to the detached perception of law.

"I want to say that we're all just a bunch of humans," Cruz said. "I'm trying to question the perfection of the system by highlighting people's humanity, their awkwardness ... and suffering."

His seven portraits on exhibit through Aug. 29 at Angels Gate Cultural Center in San Pedro are meant to show how the complexity of humanness - the inherent subjectivity of individual personalities - permeates the court system.

"I can't even talk about how excited I am. I show a lot of artists and I'm rarely this excited about a new artist's work," said Marshall Astor, visual arts director for Angels Gate.

Cruz's show is about remembering that every individual has a swelling, colorful life and a background that detracts from the concept of objective justice. The subject matter strays from the idea of decisions being based on fundamental absolutes such as guilt and innocence.

"There's a depth to everybody in the system. ... They're an individual and they're a being outside that role they're playing," Astor said. "His work doesn't seem an attempt to capture a stereotype. It's about capturing an individual."

The exhibition is called "Theater of Souls," a title meant to contradict common views of the judicial system.

Cruz depicts art in his surroundings and spectacle beneath the uniformity and formality of the judges, lawyers and litigants that are the subjects of his portraits. Generally speaking, his work makes positive and negative statements about the way the court system is run, he said.

The dreamlike quality of his portraits twists his subjects into curious performers, like sideshow acts at a carnival. His exhibition at Angels Gate is darker and more surreal than his other shows, he said, and his photographs evoke a mixture of emotions, depending on the onlooker.

"The viewer brings their own background to the photo ... which is what pleases me, because people are looking at it differently," Cruz said. "I'm not interested in criticizing the judges, I'm really not. I'm just interested in showing the truth about the people here."

Cruz is the community relations director at the Stanley Mosk Courthouse in Los Angeles. He works with judges and other employees to increase their visibility in the community in a positive way.

The theatricality suggested in the exhibition's title is also a nod to how Cruz photographs his subjects. Because photographs are not allowed to be taken when the courthouse is open, Cruz must re-create a scene or mood after hours. His photographs are taken in the evenings and on weekends, based on a memory of a sight, mood or environment.

There are three primary ways Cruz re-creates his inspiration for a photograph. The most direct is a strict revival of a scene or collection of objects he encounters while at work. Cruz also will create a scene based on what he encounters at the courthouse, even if he did not see it directly.

The third way he creates a photograph is by asking professionals and other courthouse regulars to be subjects of portraits. These people often do something Cruz doesn't expect, he said, and that deviation from the stereotype is what makes for a compelling image.

"The more you look at (a portrait) the more it pins down more of their personality," Astor said.

Other photographs on display at Angels Gate include Slobodan Dimitrov's portraits of influential people in the art scene of the Harbor Area and Nicholas Grider's images of U.S. military personnel.

Dimitrov's and Cruz's work are similar in that they both feature people who are not often celebrated. Yet, while Dimitrov is an established photographer of laborers, Cruz is just emerging. In this way, the works complement each other.

A separate collection of Cruz's work is on display at the Museum of African American Art in Los Angeles. The pieces displayed there focus on the power and lives of Latinos and African-Americans he has encountered at the courthouse. The exhibit also runs through Aug. 29.

Cruz said when choosing the pieces for his showcase at Angels Gate he wanted to display portraits of a great variety of people because, more than race and surface differences, he looks to highlight a common thread in the subjects' humanity.

"I wanted to make sure it was not just fitting within a theme," Cruz said. "It's about humans."

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URL: <http://www.dailybreeze.com/general-news/20100715/photo-exhibit-brings-out-humanity-in-court-system>

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