

Cuba, mon Amour

From 1992 to 2006, Ernesto Bazan shared the life, loves and suffering of Cuban locals, before he was obliged to leave the country. Fourteen intense years gave rise to an extensive body of work, where the photographer avoids all clichés to reveal the soul of the country. Ten years after leaving the place he loves so much we talked about hope and feelings, memories and patience.

ERNESTO BAZAN

PHOTOGRAPHED WITH A LEICA M6





"I made my first trip to Cuba on a cheap week-long package tour bought in Mérida, Mexico. For many years I had strongly desired Cuba, as if longing for a woman that you meet only once and can't get out of your mind. I'm almost certain I lived there in another life."

Havana, fall of 1992





"I never get tired of walking. I gaze at the constantly changing reality that unfolds slowly and incessantly before my eyes. Havana is in a state of physical and mental decomposition, in distress and falling apart. Degradation is vast. Everywhere traces of broken dreams and desolation."

Havana, November 14th, 1992













"Sometimes I'm asked when I'll be finishing my work in Cuba. Usually, I don't know what to answer. The only thing certain is that I'll continue to photograph, to roam the island in no specific direction, simply driven by my irrational instinct."

Camaguey, April 3rd, 1998











“Every time I left, my only certainty was that ...
I wanted to return. Yesterday, walking on the Malecón,
breathing the fresh sea breeze, it dawned upon me
that I had found my roots right here, unconsciously
sought after for so long.”

Havana, November 18th, 1995



“After so many years of wandering, I felt the search was over. Sicily and Cuba seem to interlock like two pieces of a puzzle. In my daily sauntering along the streets of this island my soul is finally at peace. Now I know why.”

Havana, November 18th, 1995

White sandy beaches, colourful rows of houses, racy rumba rhythms and the legendary mojito – these make up the carousel of classic clichés that seem to define Cuba. Bazan’s pictures allow us to get off that merry-go-round. The photographer has dedicated his life and soul to the island state in the Gulf of Mexico. Between 1992 and 2006, he spent what he considers was the most important time of his life there. Thanks to his Cuban wife, her family and his particular sensitivity, he gained an intimate glimpse into the world of the locals – their daily lives, their sorrows, their joys, their efforts. The photographer reveals the action in the streets and the country’s agricultural industry up close, unadorned and from unusual angles.

With great sensitivity, Ernesto Bazan reveals what life in the towns and the countryside is all about, placing his patiently collected reflections on the essence of human existence at the heart of his black and white photography. Bazan was a part of Cuba. He remains so today, thanks to a conviction flavoured with spirituality. With his kaleidoscope of light and shadow, and every shade in between, he has created a unique landscape of the soul, that is effortlessly elevated beyond all space and time.

The series presented here is an excerpt from *Bazan Cuba*, the first part of a trilogy about the island state, which is self-published. After ten years absence, the photographer was able to return to this location. Now he offers insight into how this work came about.

When it comes to Cuba, you get very emotional. You call your longterm project a “love affair”. In *Bazan Cuba*, there is a quote saying “I had strongly desired Cuba, as if longing for a woman that you meet only once and can’t get out of your mind.” Isn’t your wife jealous? (Laughs) She is very generous! I was living there for fourteen years and couldn’t get back for another ten. The connection is still strong. I felt at home the moment I got to Cuba for the first time. Cuba is home to me. It’s the place where we raised our children and started a new life. I’m sure I must have lived there in another life!

You returned from your visit just a couple of weeks ago. How was it?

It was difficult for me to return. I was there for twelve days, after more than ten years. It was a very spiritual experience – it has to do with why I became a photographer. It’s like a dream: who is the voice behind it? It’s all connected. As I grow older, I’m becoming more spiritual.

What has changed during your absence?

Outside the bubble very little has changed, but yet the country is different in terms of the economy: it is easier to set

up your own business. In former times you couldn’t be a taxi driver, your car would have been confiscated and you would have had to pay high fees. The culture has become more pragmatic. That made things slightly better. It’s a step into the right direction.

How did it all start? What does *Bazan Cuba*, which was published in 2008, and what does the country itself mean to you? You lived there from 1992 until 2006.

The book represents the first part of what has become my Cuban trilogy, which also includes *Al Campo*, an in-depth poetic view of my Cuban farmer friends’ simple and hard life, that I shot in colour, and *Isla*, a more metaphysical and subtle vision of the island I love so much, where I used a panoramic format. While living and photographing in Cuba I had no idea that I was creating a photographic trilogy. I slowly started realizing that after we left the island in 2006. Because Cuba means such a lot to me, I always wanted to spend time there, not only as a photographer but also as a human being.

Why is this Cuban series still so special to you?

It’s a combination of three things. First: me being a hunter, looking for something to capture, which sounds a little violent, but I definitely don’t kill (laughs). I’m even more like a fisherman. You don’t know what you’re getting. Second: I photographed my family; it’s a very delicate thing to take pictures of people you know. And third: the book has chapters. One of them is about the country side. I was concentrating on the farmers once we became close. I feel blessed to have been given access. We had a good ritual: I’d bring a bottle of rum, some food and clothing. I wouldn’t just take pictures, but give something back.

Please describe your visual approach. How do you develop your visual language? Does it change?

My work method is simple: when I find a place that resonates within me, I begin to work there for a very long time. In Cuba I spent more than a decade. Thanks to my own workshops that I created in Cuba in 2002, I’ve been able to return to the same exact locations for seventeen years, such as the Sacred Valley in Peru, the Day of Dead celebrations in Oaxaca, Mexico, the State of Bahia in Brazil, and the Easter celebrations in Sicily, among many others. Being able to return to each of these places to teach my students, year after year, has given me the unique and priceless opportunity to probe these soulful microcosmos. My visual language develops at its own pace, with no set agenda. I simply get to a place and slowly my sensibility learns to adapt and respond to the stimuli my internal eye receives and responds to. →

How do you adapt to the environment? Is it easy for you to get close to people, or are you shy?

Not shy at all. I think photographers are like vultures. I like to say that I'm a "delicate" vulture. Along with my students during the workshops, we try our best to give something back to our subjects whenever we can, by bringing back pictures, buying food, giving a bit of money. The relationship becomes more equal and people are appreciative of what we give back.

Your images offer beautiful insight into the life and living, not only of people in Cuba. Your work is more universal. How do you manage to do that?

The only rational answer I can give is that, since my wife is Cuban, I started by being there from the inside. Becoming an insider allowed me to see a Cuba that only a few photographers were allowed to see. I spent fourteen years there! This work is not about strangers, some people are part of my family, others are farmers I became friends with.

Even though the pictures qualify as street photography, they are intimate pictures, "soulful microcosms", is how you like to call what you capture in them.

This might be what makes the difference to the myriads of other photographers. I need to get under the skin and capture the essence of a place or a people. This is why I like Robert Frank's work. When he takes pictures, he is not only photographing. His work is also a protocol of his inner view. It's a reflection and a mirror at the same time.

Do you link your photographs to political statements? Do you think of a certain message in your images?

I don't take pictures consciously thinking of this. Some images become interlaced with political undertones naturally. No preparation. I only carry my camera when I'm taking pictures. I normally just go out and get lost in the place I want to take pictures of.

You photographed this series in black and white. It's a good way to avoid clichés that are connected with Cuba. What does black and white photography mean to you?

I feel it's more congenial to my way of looking at life, but I also love colour and plan to shoot more in the future. Once I started shooting in colour, I started acting and reacting in a different way: I was able to do more close-ups or still lifes. All of a sudden, I realized I needed to combine them together to produce a poetic thread. It's clear that the black and white work is more gutsy, it comes from the inside. The use of colour taught me something important: there is poetry everywhere around us. The difficult thing is to become aware of that.

Speaking of poetry, in the preface of *Bazan Cuba* there is a quote by Rainer Maria Rilke, taken from his writings *Briefe an einen jungen Dichter* (Letters to a Young Poet) from 1903, where the poet describes the beginning of a creative process as being patient.

I believe that the key to a meaningful existence is to be able to be patient, to wait, if you are lucky, for the good moments that life might bestow upon you. I dedicated fourteen years of my life living and photographing in Cuba with no other intention than to follow my destiny. It's a great gift that the work is slowly spreading around the world. The publication in your magazine is part of this new 'journey'. Patience is truly everything!

In *Bazan Cuba* you make use of handwritten diary pages and also contact sheets – this is very artistic and innovative. You developed the layout for the book together with your students.

Once we left Cuba for good in 2006, I knew that a big chapter of my life was closing and a new one was opening up. I realized the time had come to self-publish the images taken over fourteen years going around the island mostly for myself. I wrote a letter to all my students asking them to help me not only to raise the money to self-publish with BazanPhotos Publishing, but also to help me with the creation of the entire layout and sequence of the book, the cover and all the different aspects involved in making a book. It's what I like to describe as "choral editing."

How did you compose the series for *Bazan Cuba*? Please tell us something about the edit.

I like to say that editing your own work is each photographer's Achilles' heel, in the sense that we are too close to be able to do a tough edit, because we are too emotionally attached to our images. Once I feel that I've got the foundation of a book, I begin sequencing the images on a magnetic board using magnets to hold the pictures in place. It takes me two years to come up with the sequence. I compare it to composing a music score in which different tempos play a role in the making of the whole piece.

What is your favourite picture from *Bazan Cuba*?

The cover image of the book! (see page 144) I was able to capture three different things in it. First: the sense of movement. Many Cubans are forced to move out of or within their country. Second: this ten year old boy could be me. I like that I can see myself and also the Cubans. Third: I can see how the boy feels about himself. I can see the boy I was and I continue to be.

Interview: Carla Susanne Erdmann