

Camilo José Vergara. *The New American Ghetto*

Dates of the exhibition: From March 24 to May 28, 2000.

Exhibition produced and organized by the MACBA

PRIMAVERA FOTOGRÁFICA

Camilo José Vergara, is, at present, considered one of the most important documentary photographers in the United States. In 1977, he started documenting the ghettos of the United States. Vergara has spent over fourteen years photographing certain neighbourhoods, and has documented parts of the South Bronx, Harlem, Central Brooklyn, Newark, Camden, Chicago, Gary, Detroit, and Los Angeles South Central. His photographs, which he grouped together under the title *The New American Ghetto Archive*, provide an analytical reading of a number of aspects of life in the ghettos, of their physical recognition and their relationship with their urban setting. These pictures, which have a great emotional impact, are vehicles of information which document the change in the urban layout and become a photographic record of American urban decay.

The exhibition shows us the dark side of the "American dream" with a selection from over 9,000 photographs taken by Vergara over the last twenty years. The exhibition is laid out in some sections which look at the core themes of his work. *The New American Ghetto* introduces and illustrates the characteristics and peculiarities of the present-day ghettos, and identifies the main typologies. *Not in my backyard* tells us about the methadone distribution centres, day centres and all the "spontaneous typologies" of the social-services buildings.

Fortifications illustrates, with bitter irony, the protective devices the ghetto builds in order to protect itself from itself. *Interiors* is a composition of images which show us home life in the ghetto and investigates the difficult relationship between inside and outside. *Expressions* brings together images which resist decay in this environment. *American ruins* is a desolate panorama of abandoned, ruined buildings in heavily built-up city centres, which are alarmingly empty, thus underlining the acceleration of decay in relatively new buildings. Finally, *Documenting urban mutations* shows the time-lapse sequences with which Vergara records the changes in one place over a certain period of time, revealing the radical changes in certain urban landscapes or the progressive and inexorable deterioration of others.

Camilo José Vergara (Chile, 1944). Bachelor of Arts, University of Notre Dame, and Master of Arts, Columbia University. He started his photographic career in 1977. He has won many prizes and works from his archive are part of the collections of the Avery Library at Columbia University, New York (www.columbia.edu), the Getty Center, Los Angeles and the New Museum of Contemporary Art, New York. His articles have been published in *The New York Times*, *The Nation*, *Metropolis*, *The Village Voice*, *The Atlantic*, *Columbia Journalism Review* and *Architectural Record*.

For further information and/or graphic material:
Nicola Wohlfarth (Press and PR Office of the MACBA)
Plaça dels Àngels, 1 - 08001 Barcelona
Tel. 93 412 08 10 - fax 93 412 46 02
e-mail: nwohlfar@macba.es

CAMILO JOSÉ VERGARA

THE NEW AMERICAN GHETTO

24th March - 28th May 2000

In 1977 Camilo José Vergara (Santiago, Chile, 1944) began to photograph the poor districts of some of the large American cities in order to register the transformations they were undergoing. He is currently regarded as one of the most significant documentary photographers of the American artistic scene. Vergara, who read Sociology at the universities of Notre Dame (Indiana) and Columbia, proposes in his work a reflection on the changes produced in urban forms and their social implications. His series are articulated as combinations of texts and sets of images, and constitute a testimony of the working classes in the United States.

Vergara partakes of the great tradition of American documentary photography initiated by Jacob Riis and Lewis Hine in the late 19th century, with their photographic series portraying the living and working conditions of the New York sub-proletariat, denoting a will to censure and to instigate social reforms. The *American Photographs* by Walker Evans, produced during the Great Depression of the thirties obeying the wish to construct an image of vernacular America, stand out as an emblematic moment within this tradition.

The New American Ghetto, the exhibition now presented at MACBA, displays a selection of more than 9,000 photographs taken by Vergara over the past twenty years in the same

places: South Bronx, Harlem and Central Brooklyn, in New York, South Central in Los Angeles and various areas of Chicago, Detroit, Newark (New Jersey) and Gary (Indiana).

Vergara attempts to show the other face of America, that of the working-class districts, the city centres suddenly deserted as a result of the middle-class "migrations" to the residential suburbs, images of neglect. *The New American Ghetto* exemplifies the particular features and characteristic traits of the ghettos of our day and age, identifying their main typologies. In his thorough exploration of the territory of the United States, Vergara distinguishes between three types of ghettos: *green ghettos*, *institutional ghettos* and *ghettos of new immigrants*.

The exhibition is organised in sections which are articulated around various themes. *Documenting Urban Decline* shows the changes suffered by certain places during specific periods of time (time lapses). This series of photographs bears witness to the processes of construction, the changes in use, the neglect and the replacement of urban structures, evincing the radical alterations suffered by some urban landscapes and the progressive deterioration undergone by others.

American Ruins documents the various stages of the deterioration of buildings and their transformation into urban ruins, deprived of all romantic connotations. These are wrecked

buildings, pieces of constructions now devoid of all practical use, at the mercy of inexorable processes of degradation.

The procedure of the time lapses is employed by Vergara in all the series presented here, with the exception of *Interiors* and *Fortifications*. *Fortifications* is an ironic gaze at the preventive measures taken by the ghetto to safeguard it from itself: sealed windows preventing the entry of light and ventilation, sheltered roofs and fenced access routes, elements that distort neighbourhood coherence, replacing it with a set of isolated bunkers in which the notion of domesticity gives way to that of protection. The series *Interiors*, on the other contrary, reveals the domestic privacy of the ghetto.

Institutions registers the buildings destined to social services, methadone dispensaries, day centres, etc., recently created in order to improve the living conditions of the underprivileged. These institutions, often not welcomed in neighbourhoods yet easily identified by users, have been erected in desolate areas that concentrate pockets of unemployment, illness, displacement and deprivation.

Expressions presents the ghetto's dreams of survival and self-assertion by means of graffiti and murals. The graffiti, revealing aspirations to acknowledgement, stresses certain themes: names, love, gangs and drugs. The expressiveness of the ghetto's inhabitants is materialised in its interiors, but above all in the exterior public spaces where walls, doors and windows are the elements employed for communication, dialogue or commentary. Special mention should be made of churches, as the total surface of their façades is often used as a medium for such expressions.

Admonitions records images of billboards, often sponsored by the Health Department, warning of the risks entailed by certain forms of behaviour such as the use of weapons, intolerant attitudes towards other racial groups, alcohol and drug abuse, sexual relations with minors or without protection, and domestic violence.

Ghetto Cityscapes displays general images of the different panoramas configuring the ghetto, while *Assorted Broken and Wasted Things*, as its title implies, focuses its attention on remains and waste materials that had previously been useful, meaningful objects.

Vergara has published articles on life in poor outlying communities in magazines such as *The New York Times*, *The Nation*, *Metropolis*, *The Village Voice*, *The Atlantic*, *Columbia Journalism* and *Architectural Record*, among others.

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THE NEW AMERICAN GHETTO

Urban ghettos, as intrinsic to the identity of the United States as picturesque New England villages, vast national parks and leafy suburbs, nevertheless remain unique in their social and physical isolation from the nation's mainstream. Semi-ruined, discarded and dangerous, our poor, minority communities are rarely visited by outsiders.

The New American Ghetto is an exploration conducted over nearly two decades, of some of the poorest and most segregated neighborhoods in New York, Newark, Los Angeles, Chicago, Detroit, and other smaller cities. Through photographs and text, I chronicle the profound transformation that these places have experienced since the riots of the 1960s. Included here are successive photographs of the same places that track change over time—the kind of changes that have made the conditions of today's ghetto profoundly different from those of an earlier era.

My examination of scores of ghettos across the nation reveals three types: *green ghettos*, characterized by depopulation and by vacant land and ruins overgrown by nature; *institutional ghettos*, publicly financed places of confinement designed mainly for American-born minorities; and *new immigrant ghettos*, deriving their character from an influx of immigrant, mainly Latin and West Indian.

The New American Ghetto illustrates the ongoing entropy and struggling reconstruction existing in our urban centers today. Some communities have continued to lose population; others have emerged from what were once ethnic blue-collar neighborhoods; some sections of older ghettos have remained stable, working neighborhoods or have been rebuilt.

Cityscapes that were once central to the life and identity of the nation are vanishing, raising fundamental questions: Do we need cities? Do we want cities? And how do we interpret what is left behind?

DOCUMENTING URBAN DECLINE

In 1977 I began photographing ghettos. My goal was to create a record of neighborhoods that were being destroyed at an unprecedented rate. I saw my documentation as a means for us to comprehend how ghettos evolve. Through my photos, I offer a visual journey through cityscapes: residential areas, vacant lots, institutions, factories, and always their surroundings.

Photographs function as containers of information from which to reconstruct lost neighborhoods. Just as oceanographers drop sensors into the water and then regularly monitor them, I take successive photographs of the same places—for example, buildings being abandoned, then razed, and sometimes replaced by new structures.

One can observe the transformation in context because the rest of the neighborhood has also been documented. I photograph from the rooftops of buildings and cars, elevated highways and subway lines, and the streets in order to produce an array of connected images that I call pictorial networks.

AMERICA'S RUINS

America leads the world in urban ruins—signs of failure, neglect, racism, and riots. Unlike the romantic ruins of a by-gone era, ours are familiar, dominating a still-urban landscape.

We find our ruins raw and unsettling, signaling things “ruined” more than ruins. They run for miles at a stretch amid streets, power lines, billboards, expressways, and derelict and semi-abandoned buildings, all these occasionally interrupted by a citadel-like edifice designed to resist a similar fate. Discarded buildings are sacked for anything of value; nature grows wildly on and around them; surfaces collect dirt; structures split into fragments.

Yet attitudes may change in less than a generation, as our urban remains lose their connection with a familiar past. Then, these ghetto cityscapes may nourish our imagination. We may find ourselves staring at throwaway structures with increasing fascination, being profoundly moved by them and asking, as the members of London’s Metaphysical Society did 120 years ago: “Are not ruins recognized and felt to be more beautiful than more perfect structures? Why are they so? Ought they to be so?”

INTERIORS

The interiors in ghettos represent the national taste of poor, minority people: American, Mexican and Puertorican flags, assorted souvenirs collected from visits to entertainment parks and objects symbolizing ethnic pride. Disney characters, religious images and assorted chinoiserie and diplomas are popular throughout the nation. Portraits made by professional photographers depicting brides and grooms, young men in service uniforms and graduations are more popular than family snapshots. In the New York City area landmarks such as the Statue of Liberty and the Empire State Building seen at night are popular.

Left behind on the walls of apartments in abandoned buildings one finds posters of political and religious leaders, sports events, and movie stars reminiscent of the recent past. Squatters furnish their living spaces with furniture collected from what others discard. On tables one frequently finds drug paraphernalia, liquor bottles, pornographic magazines and open copies of the Bible.

In the constant transformation of the domestic space, the traditions of the local population persist, reinforcing their identity.

178TH STREET I VYSE AVENUE, SOUTH BRONX, NOVA YORK, 1980-1999

When I first saw it in 1980, the building on 178th Street and Vyse Avenue seemed like a castle of brick and iron, filled with Puerto Rican and African American children. The late seventies and early eighties were times of pervasive destruction. Walking along the streets I had a sense of impending doom. Yet this particular building was so large, so useful, and seemed so solid that its abandonment and destruction were unthinkable.

Fires began in the fall of 1980, in top-floor apartment. (This is a telltale sign of arson, because when a fire is started on the top floor, it is understood that the residents will be able to flee, so that charges of murder will not be raised.) Then scavengers moved in to remove the pipes, radiators, and appliances, leaving the water running to flood the apartments below and force the tenants to move out. The building was completely abandoned in January 1983.

Continuity has been lost. In an extraordinary transformation taking place over thirteen years, a big, solid building with sixty-four apartments was replaced by four townhouses, built to accommodate eight families. Brick, iron, and stone was replaced by wood and plastic; dark brown gave way to light blue; and where a courtyard with two staircases and a balustrade ringed the entrance, there are small lawns and some pavement for the owner to park a car. Two Bronxes are visible in these photographs: one that died too soon and one too flimsy to last.

65 EAST 125TH STREET, HARLEM, NOVA YORK, 1977-1999

"The old Paris is no more (the shape of a city changes faster, alas! than the heart of a mortal)"

Le Cygne, Charles Baudelaire

When I first saw the one story building at 65 East 125th Street in 1977, it housed a Victorian bar called Purple Manor. The wooden facing had handsome moldings, there was a row of stained glass, and planters were hung inside some of the windows. It had tilted golden glasses painted against a background of stars, and faced a section of tiled sidewalk. It had a cheerful, whimsical aspect. But in 1977, after relative stability for nearly a century, 65 East 125th Street began a series of rapid transformations that have divided it in two, covered it with metal and signs, and left it unrecognizable.

I am amazed that people persist in seeking their fortune at this address, given the number of failed businesses it has rung up. Yet after every failure, new entrepreneurs paint it, bring in merchandise and equipment, and start again. The stores, services and businesses—variety stores, fish and chips, doctors offices, beauty salons, and even a gambling establishment—cater to a poor clientele. The most stable of all these businesses so far has been a twenty-four grocery store selling mostly malt liquor and cigarettes. Over the years, the store owners looked at me with distrust, and on two occasions asked me angrily why I was taking pictures.

At first I thought of 65 East 125th Street as a building devalued by the loss of its architectural integrity. Now after following it for twenty two years, I think of its stubborn energy, of its loud color, and its eagerness to sell. This lively but shabby structure, always reinventing itself, represents the New York of survival.

EXPRESSIONS

Ghettos are always reacting. Life in these communities achieves an intensity that is reflected visibly inside buildings and out in the open. Doors, walls, even ceilings become places for dialogue and commentary. Low, rectangular storefronts are often transformed into churches by the addition of crosses, lines from scripture, and bold graphics.

Graffiti reveals a desire to be recognized, to lay a claim to the neighborhood, and to leave everything behind and begin again. Writings and sketches on walls preserve Black Power themes from the 1960s, or memorialize the rise of Black Muslims in the 1970s. Some motifs remain permanently popular: names, love, gangs, and drugs. Upon entering a building that has been sealed, one gets a glimpse of the past—changing names, gang territories, and outmoded furnishings.

CAMILO IN CONVERSATION

Camilo José Vergara

in conversation with Michael J. Dear*

[...]

I've always been interested in places that enhance my sense of instability and the precariousness of my own existence. You don't experience the passage of time as much in yourself as you witness it in your surroundings, particularly in places of great poverty where change is much more evident. So there's a sense of instability, not just in the physical reality of one's surroundings, but also in one's own life. Living with decay and decline makes you aware of how important the present is. The changes taking place everywhere I photographed have added intensity and meaning to my own life.

How would you describe your overall project?

I search for value in what people discard. I often find myself going through rummage sales, or picking up objects that other people have thrown in the garbage. I feel that what is most precious about our society and our lives often gets discarded. I can understand how shoes or old clothing get discarded, but the scale of what gets thrown away in America—buildings, huge factories, entire neighborhoods—led me to question with my images why this is happening. Rather than searching for a logical explanation, I tried to live the decline by photographing it, and by talking to people in the affected neighborhoods. My projects become classifications, or some kind of taxonomy. I've often viewed my work along the lines of Audubon's *Birds of America*, or of collectors such as those who classify plants or butterflies. I am extremely interested, for instance, in wrecked cars, the states they are

in, the uses they're put to, and the meaning they have for their owners. The more devalued an object has become to society at large, the more important it becomes for me.

When did you first develop such concerns? And how has the focus of your work altered since those early days?

I was a dreamy kind of child who dug holes and collected worms and insects. Those things interested me more than the regular toys children play with. I was always drawn to the outside. When I turned to photography at the age of 21, I collected images instead of real objects. In one sense, this shift impoverished my search because I could not collect the buildings and city blocks I'd documented. But at the same time it gave me new wealth because I could collect images over time; I could see the diversity of types; and I was able to observe the direction in which they were changing. I began my career as a street photographer, doing work along the lines of Helen Levitt, or trying to emulate Cartier-Bresson, but then I realized that I had no interest in the decisive moment. I became obsessed with capturing a succession of moments that showed the passage of time.

After trying unsuccessfully to be a photojournalist, I mainly photographed the built environment in a straightforward and direct way: avoiding shadows, using even light, so that the images would be comparable with one another, and I could develop them into descriptive series over time. Later I tried to cover the entirety of the poorest urban areas in this country. My motto was: Go everywhere and photograph everything! This was obviously an impossibility, but the attempt allowed me to gather thousands of images from large sections of many cities. More recently, I have stopped looking for new places to document. My principal concern has been to trace the changes that take place in the streets, blocks, and buildings that I

previously photographed. So, my work today depends on work I have completed over the past 25 years.

You mentioned Helen Levitt and Henri Cartier-Bresson. Who else has influenced your work?

I would add Walker Evans and Eugene Atget to that list. Their photographs are cooler and more contemplative, contrasting with the more fleeting and muscular work of the searchers of the decisive moment. I've also been influenced by photographers with a morbid streak, including, for example, Diane Arbus, Robert Mapplethorpe, and Joel-Peter Witkin. In my work you can also see the legacy of countless postcard photographers, who knew the most revealing ways to photograph a city, street, or building, and who could depict buildings in ways that made civic pride visible. Sometimes I see, in a derelict state, the same buildings I have observed in vintage postcards, and the contrast is very striking. But I believe that the magnificence portrayed in the postcards is matched by that of the ruins that have replaced them.

You have traveled enormous distances during the past 25 years to capture these images. Tell us more about your method of working. For instance, how do you choose particular cities, streets, sites, and subjects for your photographs?

It depends partly on whether I'm driving or walking, which is to say it depends on whether I'm working in Los Angeles or New York and Newark. In LA, I try to cover a territory by driving through every street and alley. In Newark and New York, I walk everywhere. In both places I look for high points--roofs of tall buildings, elevated train stations, highways, places where I can get a bird's-eye view. I always return to places I have photographed previously. I try to talk with local residents, and these interviews

often lead me to other subjects to photograph. People are often surprised because they don't expect a stranger to know such small details about their neighborhood. I tell them, "That house used to be red," and ask, "Why is it green now?" Or "What ever happened to...?" So they know I have a serious interest, which leads them to give me accounts of what is happening in that neighborhood, and to explain the meaning that change has for their lives.

Your photographs engage an enormous variety of subject matter and emotions. How do you balance the purely 'aesthetic' with the purely 'documentary' content of your images?

I don't see this distinction, because a series of images produced as documents may end up with a powerful aesthetic quality. In a situation where urban change is very rapid, or where I can't select the weather, the shadows, the kind of light, or the type of clouds in the sky, it's all but impossible to predict what a succession of photographs assembled under such different conditions will look like. What seems to be purely documentary at the beginning may end up having a strong aesthetic content. On the other hand, I am confronted daily with landscapes or still lives that have an immediate aesthetic appeal simply by virtue of their colors, textures, and forms.

[...]

* **MICHAEL J. DEAR** is the Director of the Southern California Studies Center

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Poverty and Urban Decline

DISCUSSION SESSIONS

Within the framework of this exhibition, MACBA presents a series of debates on the conditions of urban transformations, placing the discussion in a local context. This series intends to examine the issue from a multidisciplinary perspective, comprising approaches from the fields of economics, anthropology, town planning and geography, as well as from the sphere of artistic practice.

Camilo José Vergara and

Josep Lluís Mateo

Ciudad y gueto (City and Ghetto)

FRIDAY, 24TH MARCH, 7:30 pm

José Iglesias

La pesadilla del "American Dream". La pobreza en Estados Unidos (The Nightmare of the "American Dream". Poverty in the United States)

MONDAY, 27TH MARCH, 7:30 pm

Joan Costa and Xavier Ribas

Procesos de periferización (Processes of Peripherality)

THURSDAY, 30TH MARCH, 7:30 pm

Claudio Zulián, Enric Canet and

Jordi Moreras

Integración y diferencia. Una mesa redonda sobre el Raval (Integration and Difference. Round Table on the Raval)

THURSDAY, 6TH APRIL, 7:30 pm

Paco Marín and Montserrat Pujol

La Mina, un gueto en Barcelona? (La Mina, a Ghetto in Barcelona?)

THURSDAY, 13TH APRIL, 7:30 pm

JUNE 25, 1999

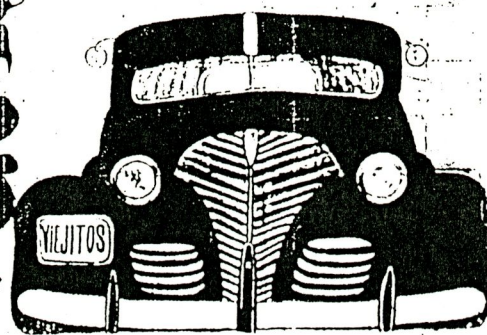
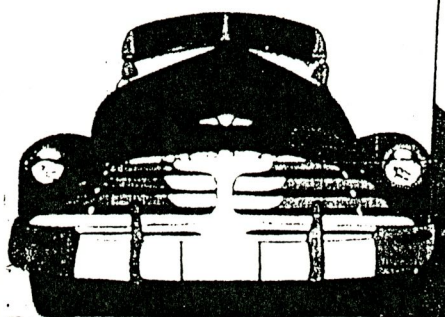
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Camilo José Vergara

PHOTOGRAPHY REVIEW

The Face and Soul of a Barrio

By HOLLAND COTTER

FOR more than two decades, the photographer Camilo José Vergara has been taking portraits of American cities, or rather of parts of American cities that almost nobody wants to see. The primary subjects of his 1995 book, "The New American Ghetto," were poor, gutted, socially roped-off neighborhoods in Newark, Detroit, the Bronx and elsewhere. The pictures, accompanied by a

diaristic text that read like a tolling of bells, constituted a bad-dream architectural saga of things falling down, walls mostly, in slow motion, brick by brick, or in one big, jolting, bulldozer-induced boom.

Mr. Vergara, who is 54 and trained as a sociologist, caught this process on film by showing up while it happened. Since the late 1970's, he has made repeated visits to specific places — a city block,

a housing project, a school — and photographed what he found. The pictures that resulted are technically straightforward, objective rather than expressive. But seen together and in sequence they add up to fever-chart narratives of disintegration.

Mr. Vergara's relationship to loss is a complicated one, at once hardheaded and romantic. (He traces it to his childhood in Chile, when the family wealth into which he was born evaporated before his eyes.) And he took some heat a while back for proposing that a cluster of empty skyscrapers in downtown Detroit be declared a ruins theme park where tourists could witness the grand, cautionary spectacle of a city moldering away from within.

Urban change can, of course, be viewed from many perspectives, some positive, even utopian. And it is this upbeat spirit that warms "El Nuevo Mundo: The Landscape of Latino Los Angeles," an exhibition of Mr. Vergara's most recent photographs that opens today at the Cooper-Hewitt, National Design Museum. The bulk of the work dates from 1994 to 1998, so the time-lapse format, which has always been Mr. Vergara's strong suit, isn't operative here (though he includes one beautiful 20-year sequence of shots of a Harlem

storefront to show how it works).

Instead, the 100 color pictures have semi-independent lives, making them feel closer to fine art photography than to field data. But they also collectively form a single giant snapshot of life in the present tense in a hard-scrabble urban environment where poverty is a constant but new cultural roots are in photogenic flower.

Over the last decade or so, Los Angeles has become home to the largest Hispanic population of any city in the United States; more than 40 percent of the city's 9.5 million people are Spanish-speaking. Many of the hundreds of thousands of new arrivals are Mexicans who have settled in areas that were once predominantly black. In

Continued on Page 31

"Western Mufflers," top, by the documentary photographer Camilo José Vergara, from "El Nuevo Mundo: The Landscape of Latino Los Angeles" at the Cooper-Hewitt museum.

The Face and Soul of a Mexican Barrio

Continued From Weekend Page 27

Mr. Vergara's view, they are different from earlier immigrants, who often moved over long distances to a foreign land, leaving old identities behind. Mexico is only a few hours' drive from Los Angeles, and Southern California, with its desert climate, was once Mexican territory, facts that encourage northbound immigrants to transport and sustain a familiar way of life.

The shoring up of identity is the focus of Mr. Vergara's show, and he illustrates it in a handful of introductory images. One is a tableau of waving palm trees lining a boulevard, a classic Hollywood logo. Beside it, however, are shots of a mariachi band playing in a Los Angeles street and of an elegant carved stone doorway plastered with advertisements, mostly in Spanish, including one for New Life Immigration Services.

Beyond this, the show is divided into a few thematic sections centering on home and work. Most of the buildings in the Mexican neighborhoods are one-story bungalows built in the 1920's and 30's. House pride is the rule. One man has framed his front door with decorative Mexican tiles. Another, who makes cast-cement architectural ornaments for a

living, has fitted his tiny, hacienda with baronial balustrades.

But space is scarce, and houses are often packed to overflowing. (One street address is divided into fractions: 823, 823 1/5, 823 2/5 and so on.) New shelters spring up in driveways and on empty lots. Old cars are preserved far beyond their active lives, and in Mr. Vergara's pictures they assume an animated presence, as if they had thoughts and memories of their own.

Home and workplace merge: a front yard in South-Central Los Angeles serves as a showroom for mattress sales. Certain businesses keep on the move (a barber makes house calls, grooming an entire family during one visit). Others appear to be traveling even when they are not, as in the case of a shoe repair shop that operates out of a long-immobilized truck painted fire-engine red.

Commercial architecture (which is what this ex-truck, by default, is) reflects its surroundings in all kinds of ways. A jewelry factory, for example, is given the blank, no-window look of a bank vault in response to local crime. But in terms of design, what clearly fascinates and delights Mr. Vergara most is the proliferation of a vivid public art.

Some of the work is please-pay-attention promotional. This is true of Maritza's Fashions shop, all scrumptious yellow and pink, with skirts and socks painted on the facade. And of the magnetic Ultra Tire Service, with its snazzy ribbons of tread patterns painted as trim on the roof.

Evidence of the Mexican community's ties to back-home rural roots is evident in paintings of farm animals, country churches and mountain vistas. And multicultural heroes have

their day in the sun. The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. is often depicted, in part, perhaps, as a diplomatic gesture in an area where population shifts have produced racial tensions. In some portraits he is given Latino features, and in one he is paired with Pancho Villa.

But no figure carries more emotional weight than the Virgin of Guadalupe, spiritual protector of Mexico and a potent nationalist symbol. She shows up everywhere in Mexican Los Angeles, in her blue veil and aureole of pointy flames, including on the wall of a muffler repair shop where she floats imperturbably between vintage cars.

She also rises over the skyline of the city itself in a gallery mural executed at the Cooper-Hewitt by the young Manhattan artist James De La Vega and his assistant Nelson Caban. Mr. De La Vega lives and works a few blocks north of the museum in Spanish Harlem, where he has enlivened neighborhood walls with a wealth of similar paintings. His work was spotted by Mr. Vergara and Jen Roos, the exhibition designer, and they invited him to take part in the show.

The geographic distance between Manhattan's Upper East Side and the barrio is just a few blocks, but the social divide can be as insurmountable as the towering steel barriers that seal the United States-Mexico border. Photographs of those barriers are the final pictures in the show, and they end things where they should end, after celebration, on a note of doubt.

How welcoming is the New World, after all, to its new settlers? What are the future implications of the insularity of the Mexican community



Please-pay-attention style: Camilo José Vergara's photo of a clothing shop in South-Central Los Angeles.

"El Nuevo Mundo: The Landscape of Latino Los Angeles" remains at the Cooper-Hewitt, National Design Museum, Smithsonian Institution, 2 East 91st Street, Manhattan, (212) 849-8400, through Sept. 5. It first appeared at the National Building Museum in Washington.

in Los Angeles? What does it mean that murals in Mr. Vergara's pictures project virtually none of the activist political fire of paintings done in the same city by members of the Chicano art movement starting in the 1960's? Does the Virgin of Guadalupe represent accommodation to realities — scant housing, poor working conditions — that should inspire vigilant resistance?

Whatever the answers, the photographs with their brief, personalized captions, are persuasive and moving, particularly when considered as part

of the larger visual and textual project that Mr. Vergara describes as an "uninterrupted dialogue with poor communities." (He has conducted hundreds of on-site interviews over the years; they are a crucial part of his work. Longer excerpts from some of them here would have been a good idea.)

And his images take on an extra measure of resonance at the Cooper-Hewitt. The museum's palatial Fifth Avenue building was built at the turn of the century by Andrew Carnegie as his New York home. The show is

installed in what were once family quarters. Mr. Vergara's loving portraits of immigrant houses hang in former Gilded Age bedrooms, dressing rooms and nurseries. His shots of the forbidding border walls appear in Carnegie's billiard room. The result is yet another architectural image of adaptation and change. El Nuevo Mundo, indeed.

SUMMERTIME IN THE COUNTRY:
GIVE TO THE FRESH AIR FUND

Style

SATURDAY, DECEMBER 12, 1998

Cityscape

A Slice of American Pie in Latino L.A.

By BENJAMIN FORGEY
Washington Post Staff Writer

When documentarian Camilo Jose Vergara ventured into the impoverished flatlands of Los Angeles County six years ago, camera always at the ready, he expected to see the kind of grim abandonment he had been cataloguing in American cities for a couple of decades.

Instead he found himself in the midst of a remarkable transformation. There were evacuated manufacturing plants, to be sure, and the landscape remained as "hot, flat and poor" as it had been for much of this century. But there were more people than ever, and streets and alleys reverberated with sounds and signs of a new vitality.

The language being spoken, sung and written throughout the sprawling terrain was, increasingly, Spanish. The colors and decoration of mile after mile of bungalows and storefronts were vividly reminiscent of Central America and Mexico. The Virgin of Guadalupe, that most Mexican of Catholic icons, adorned everything from front porches to the facades of auto repair shops.

Fascinated, Vergara returned to the area every chance he got. A result of his repeated visits is "El Nuevo Mundo: The Landscape of Latino Los Angeles," a compelling selection of his photographs on view at the National Building Museum.

Anyone familiar with the Mount Pleasant neighborhood in the District will recognize something of the changed cultural landscape, but there is a huge difference in scale. Recent estimates indicate that more than 40 percent of the nearly 10 million people in Los Angeles County are Latino in origin, a higher percentage than any other ethnic group. This makes it the largest Latino urban concentration north of Mexico.

Vergara's color photographs bring such sta-

See CITYSCAPE, B5, Col. 1



BY CAMILO JOSE VERGARA

Vergara's Vital 'Latino Los Angeles'

CITYSCAPE, From B1

tistical abstractions to life. Individually, each tells a little story. His habit of seeking responses from the subjects of his photographs—he was trained as a sociologist—contributes piquancy to such stories. Altogether, the images and words weave a multifaceted tale of change.

If there is a summarizing image in the show, it is that of a storefront on Alvarado Street in the Pico Union district. It shows an old stone building—there are classical columns and carefully carved whimsical details. But the prewar facade has been completely taken over by signs for the new businesses inside—passport applications, legal aid, work permit advice, insurance sales, instant photos, jewelry stores, weddings. A young man stands outside, contemplating these diverse offerings; centered in the old archway is a sign advertising the New Life Immigration Service.

The energy required to begin and sustain new lives is a leitmotif of the exhibition. It shows dozens of small-scale, low-capital businesses, operated out of houses and garages as well as commercial buildings. The decoration and advertising of these reclaimed spaces are forms of both advertising and cultural identification.

Murals of bucolic scenes, farmyards and rural churches often refer to specific places in the homeland, and possess the directness and vitality of folk art. They "place you in the middle of your dreams," one passerby said to Vergara. Or a simple coat of paint will work wonders. Esmeralda, the owner of a hair salon, explained that she likes "colores chillones y fosforescentes"—loud and phosphorescent colors. Her shop was painted a bouncy maroon, and the bar next door a stringing turquoise.

Similar transformations take



PHOTOS BY CAMILO JOSE VERGARA

In Camilo Jose Vergara's photographs of Los Angeles, the colors and decoration of bungalows and storefronts are reminiscent of Central America and Mexico.

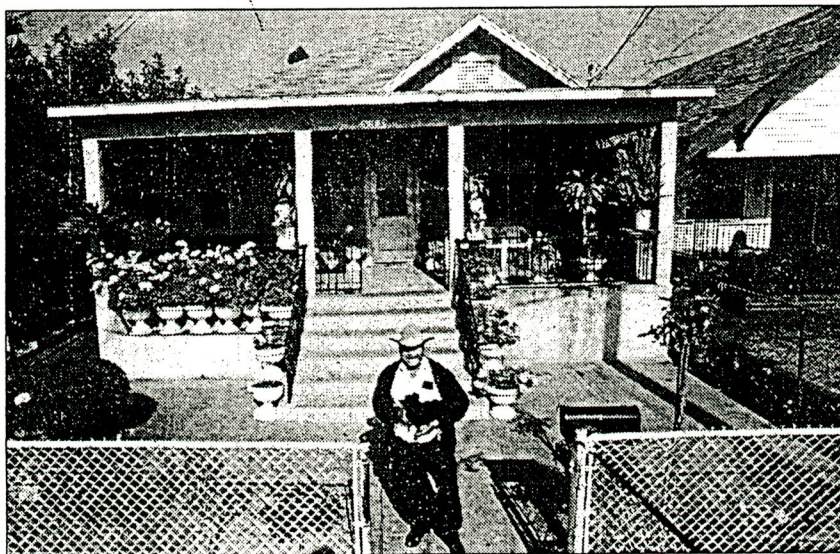
place in residential properties. The single-story bungalows of the L.A. flatlands, many of them vacant before the recent waves of immigration, remain relatively inexpensive. New owners waste little time making them comfortably Mexican, Salvadoran and such.

One family shrine to the Virgin of Guadalupe incorporates the coat of arms of the Mexican state of Jalisco. Another house with a flow-

er-bedecked porch has a front yard—formerly grass—of poured concrete. The new immigrants are challenging the old Angeleno "dream of the garden city," Vergara observes. He quotes a Mexican businessman from South-Central: "The more concrete the better. In Mexico, everything is dirt, and the rain turns it into mud. People want to get away from that."

These are, quite clearly, hard-

In Latino L.A.,
Vergara found
himself in the midst
of a remarkable
transformation,
where streets and
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vitality.



Paving the way: A concrete front yard was one man's way of making a congenial play area for his grandchildren.

scramble ways of life. Overcrowded quarters are common in the poorest neighborhoods—one photograph shows a board on which a single street number is subdivided into five fractional addresses. A neighboring resident told Vergara: "These are anthills full of people. They sleep standing up."

The economic realities are suggested in several chilling photographs of new, low-tech factories that have replaced big manufacturing plants as primary employers—they are windowless fortresses. There are about 600 such new factories in East Los Angeles, and Vergara says the workers receive about a third of the wages that unionized employees used to make, with few or no health benefits.

Ethnic and class tensions created by the new city-within-a-city are more political and verbal than visual and architectural. Consequently, they tend not to show up in Vergara's documentation, although he pointedly ends the exhibit with a prime result of such tensions. This is the long, high metal fence—a veritable iron curtain—that the United States has erected along much of the California-Mexico border.

A sequence of images of murals of the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. does touch poignantly on the subject of skewed communication. Created by Latino painters both as commercial signs and as symbols of community with African American neighbors, very few of them look at all like King. When Vergara showed one of



Vergara's photographs show dozens of small-scale, low-capital businesses, operated out of houses and garages as well as commercial buildings.

the images to a Latino friend, the response was apt: That is "a Tolteca Martin Luther King."

Implicitly, cultural self-containment and economic isolation are the major themes of the whole exhibition. Looking at one of the photographs—and it could have been selected at random—a Mexican ironworker told Vergara, "You see this, and you say you are in Mexico."

This has both bad and good effects. Insularity on both sides of the great Anglo-Latino divide is a great enemy of progress. On the other hand, to understand the benefits, one has only to refer back to

"The New American Ghetto," a show of Vergara's lifework that appeared at the Building Museum just two years ago.

This was a sad, provocative chronicle of desolation, depopulation and disinvestment in America's inner cities. How much more desirable is the strength and vitality Vergara has recorded in "El Nuevo Mundo."

The show continues through March 28 at the National Building Museum, 401 F St. NW, Monday through Saturday 10 a.m.-4 p.m., Sunday noon to 4. Suggested admission is \$3.

LA MOSTRA

Se questa è America Ecco il reportage che ha scosso gli Usa

LA REPUBBLICA

24 giugno 1999



DETROIT

Un vecchio, elegante teatro di Detroit, nel Michigan, capitale americana dell'industria automobilistica, trasformato in parcheggio



NEW YORK

Una famiglia di immigrati nel South Bronx, uno dei quartieri più poveri di New York. La scritta sul muro dice: 'Save the children', salvate i bambini



CHICAGO

Un palazzo abbandonato a Chicago, quartiere West Lake: lo scoppio delle tubature dell'acqua ha prodotto la cascata di ghiaccio sulle pareti

È l'America che i turisti non vedono, e che gli stessi americani della middle class preferiscono non guardare. L'ha ritratta Camilo José Vergara, 55 anni, cileno di New York, laurea in sociologia alla Columbia University, professione fotografo. *The New American Ghetto*, la sua ultima mostra itinerante, prodotta dal New York State Museum, ha sorpreso i critici («unforgettable», indimenticabile, ha scritto il Chicago Tribune), turbato i politici, scosso l'opinione pubblica. «Losers: l'America dei perdenti» è il titolo della sua prima esposizione in Italia (a cura di Fabrizio Lepore) che apre oggi alla Triennale (orario: 10-20, chiuso lunedì, fino al 31 luglio, ingresso gratuito). Circa centocinquanta immagini a colori, selezionate tra più di diecimila scattate in vent'anni di lavoro, illustrano con forza ma senza retorica, con grande passione civile e sorridente ironia, «il lato oscuro del sogno americano». Newark: una fabbrica abbandonata è diventata un rifugio di *homeless*, i senza casa. New York: un ufficio postale del South Bronx, quartiere sinónimo di violenza, è protetto dal filo spinato come un fortino del vecchio west. Detroit: un antico teatro è stato trasformato in garage. Vergara fotografa il vistoso de-

grado urbano (grattacieli abbandonati, fabbriche fantasma) e la nuova povertà sociale (le minoranze latino-americane, e indiane). Ritrae i malinconici santuari della vecchia e nuova emarginazione: centri per la distribuzione del metadone, consultori di quartiere, mense per barboni, mercati all'aperto di indumenti usati. Illustra l'ambiguo boom delle nuove religioni: ecco una catapecchia di Detroit che ospita la sala di culto della neonata, improbabile Refreshing Spring Church, la Chiesa della Primavera Rinfrescante. A Camden, nel New Jersey, la biblioteca comunale cade a pezzi, il soffitto è crollato, sul pavimento crescono arbusti. Ad Harlem, il ghetto nero di New York, le bande giovanili affidano a coloratissimi murales il ricordo degli amici morti: uccisi dalla droga, dagli incidenti stradali, dalla polizia. Ancora ad Harlem, ecco un negozio scelto come «simbolo del New York della sopravvivenza»: Vergara l'ha fotografato per vent'anni, documentandone, come in una sequenza cinematografica, le successive trasformazioni: bar, drogheria, rivendita di fish and chips (pesce fritto e patate), studio medico, salone di bellezza, casa da gioco. Oggi è uno smoke center. Domani chissà. (a.bes)

August 8, 1999

REPORTA (CIUDAD DE MEXICO)

Registran la mexicanidad

El sociólogo y fotógrafo José Vergara exhibe *El Nuevo Mundo*, más de 100 imágenes sobre la 'mexicanización' de Los Angeles

POR MAURICIO VELÁZQUEZ DE LEÓN

NUEVA YORK.- Encarar la dinámica social en los sitios del abandono, registrar la erosión de las construcciones, diseccionar con la lente de su cámara fotográfica aquellos lugares que alguna vez fueron motivo de orgullo y aspiración, y que hoy se reducen a desolados monumentos decadentes. Este ha sido durante 20 años el trabajo de Camilo José Vergara, sociólogo y fotógrafo chileno cuya poderosa leonografía se registra en las páginas de libros como *Silence City's: The Evolution of the American Cemetery*, *The New American Ghetto*, *American Ruins* (este último de próxima aparición), documentos visuales del abandono y la transformación arquitectónica en comunidades urbanas desde Nueva York hasta Detroit, de Chicago a Nueva Jersey. Como sociólogo de la lente, Vergara no es ajeno a la metamorfosis de comunidades que algún día fueron símbolo de progreso y que han sido reducidas a pueblos fantasmas.

Pero en su más reciente proyecto su lente lo llevó a las secciones de Compton y el Centro Sur de Los Angeles en California, donde encontró un universo que lejos de haber sido borrado por bulldozers o destinado al olvido, ha venido a ser reconstruido con brochazos de rosa mexicano, amarillo chillante y Virgenes de Guadalupe; un universo creado a imagen y semejanza de una tierra que se echa de menos y que nunca se olvida.

"Los Angeles me forzó a ver las cosas de manera distinta donde pensaba encontrar entropía, hallé todo este movimiento que es responsable de la creación de un nuevo mundo", comenta el fotógrafo de 54 años de edad.

La entrevista surge a raíz de la exposición *El Nuevo Mundo: The Landscape of Latino Los Angeles* en el Cooper-Hewitt, National Design Museum, Smithsonian Institution donde se exhiben más de 100 fotografías con las que Camilo José Vergara documentó el paisaje latino en Los Angeles entre 1992 y 1998.

"Mi interés siempre ha sido fotografiar las zonas pobres de Estados Unidos, y con esta idea me fui a California. En este sentido, me di cuenta que la situación de Los Angeles se comparaba a la de Chicago, pero que la historia principal era este 'Pueblo chico' que se estaba moviendo a la ciudad. Era como un pedazo de México que se había dejado caer ahí, adquiriendo día a día una densidad de símbolos, de gente, de sonidos, y del idioma mismo, que era más y más latino; mexicano. Entonces me di cuenta que esa era la historia que me interesaba; la historia de la 'mexicanización' de Los Angeles".

En números, la mexicanización a la que se refiere Vergara resulta apabullante; se calcula que desde finales de



Un negocio en el Central Ave. South Central de Los Angeles, obra de Camilo José Vergara

los años 70 han llegado a la ciudad cerca de 100 mil mexicanos anualmente, en la actualidad el 41 por ciento de los 9.5 millones de habitantes del Condado de Los Angeles son latinos, conformando la mayor comunidad hispanoparlante en territorio estadounidense y superando al sajón que constituye el segundo grupo más numeroso de la población.

Este dramático cambio en la población atrajo la atención de Vergara durante su primera visita en 1992. Afincados en lo que alguna vez fuera la mayor comunidad afroamericana al oeste de Chicago, los millones de mexicanos habían transformado el paisaje, los puestos de tacos reemplazaban a los que anteriormente vendían hamburguesas, los vendedores ambulantes ofrecían naranjas, cocos y maíz, los carteles y anuncios en las tiendas revelaban una cultura cambiante.

El fenómeno comenzó hace 40 ó 50 años cuando los protestantes blancos provenientes de la costa este llegaron a Los Angeles con la idea de realizar el sueño americano. Ha-

bitaron los bungalows de una sola planta, que habían sido construidos entre 1920 y 1930 bajo el concepto de Ciudad del Futuro, y trabajaban en las industrias de neumáticos y automóviles que pagaban 15 ó 20 dólares por hora. Pero para cuando los mexicanos llegaron su sueño era muy distinto, aquellas fábricas ya no existían y en su lugar se abrieron industrias de muebles y juguetes que no pagaban más de cinco dólares por hora, los bungalows estaban viejos y las condiciones de vida eran precarias".

Técnicamente sencillas, y palpablemente objetivas, las más de 2 mil fotografías realizadas por Vergara en este lapso de seis años, constituyen en conjunto una gigantesca instantánea de la yuxtaposición de dos culturas distintas y su adaptación a un entorno con enorme fuerza visual. Sus imágenes de la transformación demuestran que los latinos lejos de buscar un lugar para reinventarse a sí mismos, tratan desesperadamente de mantenerse en estrecho contacto con sus familias y su cultura.

"Existe la expectativa de que aquí la vida es mejor, pero por otra parte hay una gran añoranza que los lleva a reconstruir su entorno. Algunos llegan al punto de viajar 10 ó 12 horas en auto para traerse plantas de Jalisco y sembrarlas en sus jardines". Así se construye el Nuevo Mundo, que por una parte es definido por la idea del regreso a una antigua patria y no a un país extranjero, y por otra, por el hecho de que el destino queda relativamente cerca del punto de partida permitiendo un constante flujo de gente y posesiones, desde efectos personales, y electrodomésticos, hasta artefactos de cualquier dimensión, mundana o espiritual, que son transportados a lo largo de toda la costa oeste en una marea de cultura y comercio.

Al observar el trabajo de Vergara, es inevitable percibir las innumerables imágenes de la Virgen de Guadalupe, o la transposición de ideologías que emparejan en un mismo muro imágenes de Pancho Villa y de Martín Luther King Jr. Pero lo que llama poderosamente la atención es esa sublimación de colores, mensajes, textos y refranes que nos hablan de que este Nuevo Mundo es México, pero es otro México.

Sobre esto Vergara opina que muchos mexicanos me dicen que allá son más mexicanos porque tienen la necesidad de recordar. Pero también se da esta sublimación porque el mexicano que viaja al norte se topa con una resistencia muy fuerte que los pone en una actitud muy defensiva.

Defensiva pero también muy de pertenencia porque hay que recordar que California pertenecía a México, e incluso usted los califica en uno de los textos de la exposición como los nuevos conquistadores.

"Es cierto, y eso es lo que complica la situación. Incluso se hacen muchos comentarios sobre el hecho de que éste es un lugar que lo perdieron en la guerra y que ahora lo están ganando en la paz.

"Construido mediante excesos y confusiones, el Nuevo Mundo trabaja con maquinaria obsoleta y se transporta en autos de tres décadas, conserva un espíritu rural y la idiosincrasia mexicana. Un Nuevo Mundo limitado por una frontera de rejas, algunas obvias y materiales, otras sutiles e ideológicas que refuerzan la condición de extranjeros de sus habitantes sin importar su estatus legal o migratorio. Un Nuevo Mundo que tras la opulencia de sus colores, símbolos y texturas con la que ha sido recreado esconde la verdadera razón de su existencia; a pesar de los conflictos e injusticias que lo definen el Nuevo Mundo se ha construido sobre los cimientos de nuestra incapacidad de ofrecer a millones de mexicanos una oportunidad de crecimiento. Una oportunidad a imagen y semejanza de sus aspiraciones".

El Nuevo Mundo: The Landscape of Latino Los Angeles permanece en exhibición hasta el 5 de septiembre en el Cooper-Hewitt, National Design Museum, 2 East 91st, New York, NY 10128. Tel (212) 849-84-00.

Comentarios: mauch@compuserve.com

Camilo José Vergara's American Ruins



ALL PHOTOS © CAMILO JOSÉ VERGARA

Camilo José Vergara has a soft voice, a quiet manner, an ironic shrug and, inside, the courageous resolve of a pioneer taking on new terrain.

Over the past 20 years, Vergara has created a new photographic frontier located at an intersection of documentary photography, historical research, sociology and urban anthropology. He has done something very simple, yet radical: he has set out to document the environment called "the urban American ghetto." His purpose is to record for outsiders and for history the way it looks, the way people live in it, the way it changes with time and what it means.

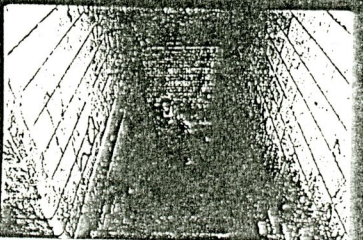
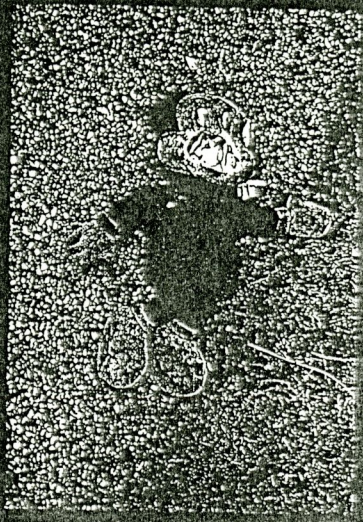
by Nancy Madlin

In Vergara's urban landscapes, everything has potential meaning. "Discarded Mickey Mouse found in an alley, Gary, 1997," says one caption in Vergara's latest book project, *American Ruins*, to be published by Monacelli Press this November. "Mickey Mouse is very popular in the ghettos of the United States. He is a life force, always on the move," continues the text. "In Gary, I was stopped by the sight of this eyeless, toothless Mickey lying in an alley. Edward Perry, a local resident, shared my curiosity and responded, 'A dead Mickey Mouse, that is unusual. You usually keep a Mickey Mouse all your life. . . .' Perry went on to explain

Top: Former city Methodist Church built in 1925 in Gary, Indiana. Above: One block in North Camden, New Jersey, photographed in 1979, 1988, 1996 and 1998.

Photo District News

SEPTEMBER 09 PM '81



Upper left: Gary, Indiana, January 1997. Lower left: Inside a housing project in Newark, New Jersey, 1987. Above: An old townhouse in Brush Park in Detroit, September 1998.

parenthetically, "Mickey does not represent one race. Walt Disney designed them so that they could be everybody. He understood the color of money."

No object is too small—or too large—to be included in Vergara's gaze. "American ghettos preserve the remains of a once powerful urban civilization, left behind when the previous residents, mostly white, moved outward. . . churches, statues and historic houses stand as isolated ghosts of the past," he writes in his first book, *The New American Ghetto*, published by Rutgers University Press in 1997. Among the examples shown are images from Newark: a towering statue of a Renaissance Italian man in armor and carrying a sword. (The original, by Verrocchio, is in Venice.)

It's the kind of thing we've all seen a million times in impoverished urban neighborhoods, but it's something Vergara helps us see in a new light. Suddenly, we realize the statue is literally out of place. Vergara tells us that the residents have noticed it, too. "We find the statue offensive," says a local in the book. "They should replace it with Marcus Garvey."

In essence, Vergara makes a point to see and photograph what others don't notice—the ways of abandoned dogs, in life and in death; the ways that buildings are boarded up and walled, and how these fortresses are changed over time; how old decorations on building facades are changed, covered over, destroyed, and how new decorations in local, indigenous styles take their place. Vergara spends time documenting these things, which most of us drive by without seeing. He also talks to and writes about people whose thoughts are not often heard by the outside world.

In this, he has challenged societal norms of journalism, historical documentation and communication. He has also flown in the face of photographic convention—and taken what has often seemed like the most difficult possible route to success.

"I did what photographers are not supposed to do," he says. "I dared to take dull pictures, and I did it obsessively and widely, all over the country, for a long period of time." His ex-wife used to call it "suicidal," implying that Vergara was consciously setting out to take pictures no one could ever want to purchase or publish.

In a sense, she was right, and Vergara takes some pride in the Quixotic nature of his quest to photograph the unwanted and the ignored. What inspired him to accept the challenge can be found in his childhood.

Vergara's grandfather owned what was perhaps the most prosperous farm in Chile he recounts in the introduction to *The New American Ghetto*. "The accumulated wealth of generations was visible in my early childhood in the form of beautiful houses, expensive cars, elegant furniture and precious jewelry, which I admired and assumed would be ours forever." During his childhood and adolescence, however, it vanished piece by piece, to the pawnshop, or purchased by relatives and friends. His father, an alcoholic, would disappear from the house for weeks at a time, and the economic situation always seemed to be getting worse. The young Vergara lived in fear of abject poverty, and it was only with the help of rich relatives, bringing food and clothing and amusements, that the family avoided destitution.

It was through their largess that Vergara landed in the U.S. in 1965 to attend Notre Dame University at the age of 21. He bought a camera and photographed campus life, eventually expanding his view to the town of South Bend, to the ghetto where blacks and Mexican families lived.

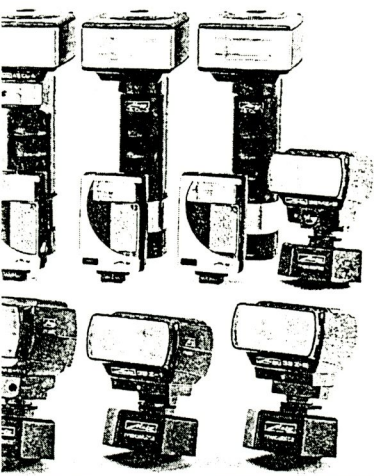
After college he moved to New York City, practicing a traditional form of street photography: images of "children cooling themselves off at fire hydrants, black girls amusing themselves with white dolls, Latino schoolboys cutting classes to watch dogs copulating," as he describes it. "I felt pleased with the liveliness of my pictures," he writes, "yet I saw myself at a dead end, retracing the steps of many others."

He returned to school, to Columbia, to study sociology and found that "the years as a graduate student gave me the ability to do academic research, to take a more detached view, and to have confidence in my vision."

It was there in the late Seventies that his vision came into complete focus. His mission, as he saw it, was to photograph a single area, block or building from a variety of points of view (street level to rooftop); to focus the same place over time; and strive for complete coverage (including interviews with residents).

And it had to be done in the ghetto. "Close, sustained encounters with poverty have shaped my character and driven me, perhaps obsessively, to the ghettos. . . . In the ghetto I saw the equivalent of houses I could have lived in, and I examined them almost as part of my own life," he writes. "Where wealth and elegance prevail, I feel out of place, nervous, and I long to leave. I am attracted to what is shunned, falling

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apart, changing. . . . Even though I live in stable middle-class neighborhoods, I feel that this comfortable existence is transitory, that my real home is in some ghetto."

Vergara has developed a deep connection to these neighborhoods. "For me, the story of these places is important; it's a story that has to come out—a whole set of stories, really, and a document of a time and place in history, a place that is usually overlooked," he says. "The meaning comes in relating to a certain, specific place, through a dialogue with the place—through the changes happening there—and with the people."

Over the past two decades, Vergara has returned again and again to document the transformations taking place in the poorest neighborhoods of New York, Chicago, Detroit, Gary, Camden, Newark and L.A. The result is a collection of more than 9,000 slides and negatives preserving the memory of America's poorest and most segregated urban communities. From one vantage point, Vergara may have been committing "career suicide." But from another, he became a photographic renegade in order to create something unique.

And in the last few years, the world has suddenly taken notice. Says Laura Kamedulski, exhibition developer for the Chicago Historical Society, where a show of Vergara's images ran this summer, "Beauty, decay, change, struggle and hope are all evident in his images. They illustrate the complexity and challenges of living in an urban environment, yet his photographs present 'urbaneness' in a manner that is humane and comprehensible." (The Historical Society also bought 200 of his images for its collection.)

In the past year, Vergara's work has been displayed, purchased and published by an amazing variety of institutions and organizations. From December through March, he had a show of his work from Latino Los Angeles at the National Building Museum in Washington, D.C. During the same time period, he had both text and photos published in *Harvard Design Magazine* and *Interiors*. And a group show at the Bronx Museum of the Arts resulted in a small piece on his work in *New York* magazine, an acquisition of four images by a corporate collector and the purchase of 300 prints by the New York Public Library's print and photography collection.

The latter came at the recommendation of the Bronx Borough president, who was eager to document "the Bronx Miracle;" positive changes which have happened in some of the borough's poorest areas. An article with a similar theme also resulted in Vergara's images being published in *The New York Times*.

In June, "El Nuevo Mundo: The Landscape of Latino Los Angeles," opened at the Cooper-Hewitt in New York, where the curator painted the walls of the old mansion in the bright colors favored in East L.A. The *Times* did an extensive article praising his work in July. And his work is currently on view at the Triennale in Milan.

On the one hand, Vergara admits that his sudden success is "scary" to someone used to seeing himself as an outsider. On the other, though, he's always suspected that when his work found an audience, people would see what it contains. "People are tired of empty images," he says. "They respond to this as real." □

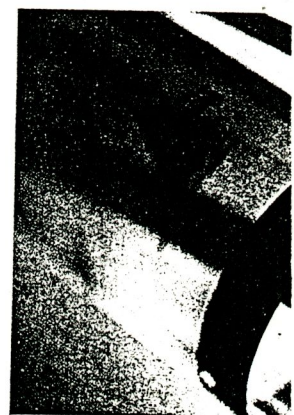
Consuming Passion

Pete

TUNGSTEN LIGHTS HELP

THE CONCEPT FOR A CAPABILITY printing industry was straight how an operator begins with a through the printing process. the plate-making apparatus, sl ing facility outside Chicago. Th art direction of Rich Nickel (himself posed as the operator.

The plate-making device printing machinery—a serious with. That obstacle was succu ting up a 9-foot-wide white s



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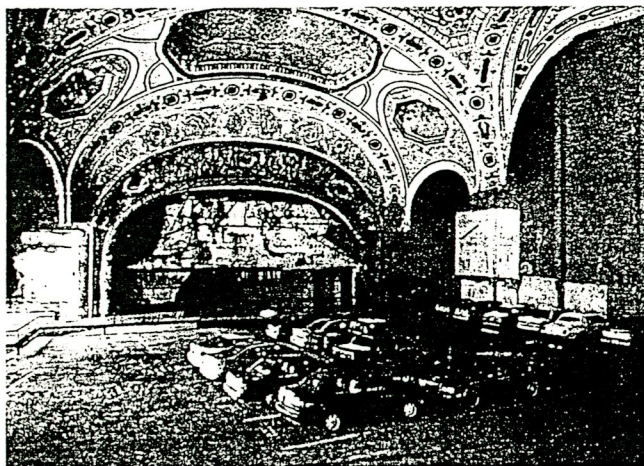
Because this would be a do x 12-inch brochure, we neede era suited to the task. I rented a f/4 lens, and shot tungsten. We be f/5.6 to 8 at one second, br The camera was positioned at a the machine. An acetate overla era ground glass, to indicate w

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Sogni su sogni, un po' in rovina

Non strazianti ritratti di povertà secondo cliché giornalistici degli anni Sessanta e Settanta, ma piuttosto una attenta fotografia del deterioramento archeologico urbano del Nord America: così, un antico teatro di Detroit si trasforma in un parcheggio; a Chicago un caseggiato abbandonato diventa un fantasma di ghiaccio per l'acqua fuoriusci-

ta dalle tubature rotte; un drugstore di New York cambia, nell'arco di dieci anni, proprietà, insegne, colori, anima, insomma. Sono le foto di Camilo José Vergara, considerato uno dei più significativi fotografi documentaristi degli Stati Uniti. Laureato in Sociologia alla Columbia University, ha catturato il lato oscuro del sogno americano creando immagini emblematiche di forte impatto emotivo. La mostra presentata alla Triennale di Milano



*«L'America dei perdenti»
alla Triennale di Milano:
in mostra le immagini
di Camilo José Vergara*



fino al 31 luglio, offre una selezione delle oltre 9 mila fotografie scattate da Vergara negli ultimi vent'anni.

Le immagini mostrano con grande intensità l'altra faccia dell'America, quella dei «projects», cioè dei quartieri a edilizia popolare, dei centri improvvisamente spopolati per effetto della migrazione della media borghesia verso i sobborghi, quella dei centri

di distribuzione del metadone per i tossicodipendenti: alla fine, l'America dell'abbandono, quella che per molti americani medi è solo un'astrazione di cui fanno volentieri a meno. Il luogo comune che vede gli Stati Uniti come una nazione, efficiente, grande e dorata si infrange sugli scatti di Camilo José Vergara, facendo diventare la mostra non una documentazione generica sulla margina-

lità, ma una lettura analitica dei diversi aspetti dei ghetti, della loro riconoscibilità fisica, del loro contesto urbano. L'analisi di Vergara ci conduce alla definizione di tre diverse tipologie urbane sparse negli Stati Uniti: ghetti verdi - spopolamento, rovine urbane divorate dal verde incolto, ghetti istituzionali - luoghi di confino sovvenzionati dallo Stato e progettati

*Il deterioramento
archeologico
delle città
degli Stati Uniti
visto da un fotografo
«dell'abbandono»,
già laureato
in sociologia
alla Columbia
University*

per minoranze americane, ghetti caratterizzati dall'influsso di abitanti provenienti dall'America latina. Un'altra mostra di Vergara sarà ospitata, fino alla fine di luglio, dal Cooper Hewitt Museum of Design di New York. ■

Nella foto a sinistra, il Michigan Theatre di Detroit, 1995; in mezzo e a destra, West Lake Chicago, 1995.

JUNE 25, 1999

Weekend FINE ARTS LEISURE

The New York Times

MUFFLERS



Camilo José Vergara

PHOTOGRAPHY REVIEW

The Face and Soul of a Barrio

By HOLLAND COTTER

FOR more than two decades, the photographer Camilo José Vergara has been taking portraits of American cities, or rather of parts of American cities that almost nobody wants to see. The primary subjects of his 1995 book, "The New American Ghetto," were poor, gutted, socially roped-off neighborhoods in Newark, Detroit, the Bronx and elsewhere. The pictures, accompanied by a diaristic text that read like a tolling of bells, constituted a bad-dream architectural saga of things falling down, walls mostly, in slow motion, brick by brick, or in one big, jolting, bulldozer-induced boom. Mr. Vergara, who is 54 and trained as a sociologist, caught this process on film by showing up while it happened. Since the late 1970's, he has made repeated visits to specific places — a city block,

a housing project, a school — and photographed what he found. The pictures that resulted are technically straightforward, objective rather than expressive. But seen together and in sequence they add up to fever-chart narratives of disintegration.

Mr. Vergara's relationship to loss is a complicated one, at once hardheaded and romantic. (He traces it to his childhood in Chile, when the family wealth into which he was born evaporated before his eyes.) And he took some heat a while back for proposing that a cluster of empty skyscrapers in downtown Detroit be declared a ruins theme park where tourists could witness the grand, cautionary spectacle of a city moldering away from within.

Urban change can, of course, be viewed from many perspectives, some positive, even utopian. And it is this upbeat spirit that warms "El Nuevo Mundo: The Landscape of Latino Los Angeles," an exhibition of Mr. Vergara's most recent photographs that opens today at the Cooper-Hewitt, National Design Museum. The bulk of the work dates from 1994 to 1998, so the time-lapse format, which has always been Mr. Vergara's strong suit, isn't operative here (though he includes one beautiful 20-year sequence of shots of a Harlem

storefront to show how it works).

Instead, the 100 color pictures have semi-independent lives, making them feel closer to fine art photography than to field data. But they also collectively form a single giant snapshot of life in the present tense in a hardscrabble urban environment where poverty is a constant but new cultural roots are in photogenic flower.

Over the last decade or so, Los Angeles has become home to the largest Hispanic population of any city in the United States; more than 40 percent of the city's 9.5 million people are Spanish-speaking. Many of the hundreds of thousands of new arrivals are Mexicans who have settled in areas that were once predominantly black. In

Continued on Page 31

"Western Mufflers," top, by the documentary photographer Camilo José Vergara, from "El Nuevo Mundo: The Landscape of Latino Los Angeles" at the Cooper-Hewitt museum.

The Face and Soul of a Mexican Barrio

Continued From Weekend Page 27

Mr. Vergara's view, they are different from earlier immigrants, who often moved over long distances to a foreign land, leaving old identities behind. Mexico is only a few hours' drive from Los Angeles, and Southern California, with its desert climate, was once Mexican territory, facts that encourage northbound immigrants to transport and sustain a familiar way of life.

The shoring up of identity is the focus of Mr. Vergara's show, and he illustrates it in a handful of introductory images. One is a tableau of waving palm trees lining a boulevard, a classic Hollywood logo. Beside it, however, are shots of a mariachi band playing in a Los Angeles street and of an elegant carved stone doorway plastered with advertisements, mostly in Spanish, including one for New Life Immigration Services.

Beyond this, the show is divided into a few thematic sections centering on home and work. Most of the buildings in the Mexican neighborhoods are one-story bungalows built in the 1920's and 30's. House pride is the rule. One man has framed his front door with decorative Mexican tiles. Another, who makes cast-cement architectural ornaments for a

"El Nuevo Mundo: The Landscape of Latino Los Angeles" remains at the Cooper-Hewitt, National Design Museum, Smithsonian Institution, 2 East 91st Street, Manhattan, (212) 849-8400, through Sept. 5. It first appeared at the National Building Museum in Washington.

living, has fitted his tiny hacienda with baronial balustrades.

But space is scarce, and houses are often packed to overflowing. (One street address is divided into fractions: 823, 823 1/5, 823 2/5 and so on.) New shelters spring up in driveways and on empty lots. Old cars are preserved far beyond their active lives, and in Mr. Vergara's pictures they assume an animated presence, as if they had thoughts and memories of their own.

Home and workplace merge: a front yard in South-Central Los Angeles serves as a showroom for mattress sales. Certain businesses keep on the move (a barber makes house calls, grooming an entire family during one visit). Others appear to be traveling even when they are not, as in the case of a shoe repair shop that operates out of a long-immobilized truck painted fire-engine red.

Commercial architecture (which is what this ex-truck, by default, is) reflects its surroundings in all kinds of ways. A jewelry factory, for example, is given the blank, no-window look of a bank vault in response to local crime. But in terms of design, what clearly fascinates and delights Mr. Vergara most is the proliferation of a vivid public art.

Some of the work is please-pay-attention promotional. This is true of Maritza's Fashions shop, all scrumptious yellow and pink, with skirts and socks painted on the facade. And of the magnetic Ultra Tire Service, with its snazzy ribbons of tread patterns painted as trim on the roof.

Evidence of the Mexican community's ties to back-home rural roots is evident in paintings of farm animals, country churches and mountain vistas. And multicultural heroes have

their day in the sun. The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. is often depicted, in part, perhaps, as a diplomatic gesture in an area where population shifts have produced racial tensions. In some portraits he is given Latino features, and in one he is paired with Pancho Villa.

But no figure carries more emotional weight than the Virgin of Guadalupe, spiritual protector of Mexico and a potent nationalist symbol. She shows up everywhere in Mexican Los Angeles, in her blue veil and aureole of pointy flames, including on the wall of a muffler repair shop where she floats imperturbably between vintage cars.

She also rises over the skyline of the city itself in a gallery mural executed at the Cooper-Hewitt by the young Manhattan artist James De La Vega and his assistant Nelson Caban. Mr. De La Vega lives and works a few blocks north of the museum in Spanish Harlem, where he has enlivened neighborhood walls with a wealth of similar paintings. His work was spotted by Mr. Vergara and Jen Roos, the exhibition designer, and they invited him to take part in the show.

The geographic distance between Manhattan's Upper East Side and the barrio is just a few blocks, but the social divide can be as insurmountable as the towering steel barriers that seal the United States-Mexico border. Photographs of those barriers are the final pictures in the show, and they end things where they should end, after celebration, on a note of doubt.

How welcoming is the New World, after all, to its new settlers? What are the future implications of the insularity of the Mexican community



Please-pay-attention style: Camilo José Vergara's photo of a clothing shop in South-Central Los Angeles.

in Los Angeles? What does it mean that murals in Mr. Vergara's pictures project virtually none of the activist political fire of paintings done in the same city by members of the Chicano art movement starting in the 1960's? Does the Virgin of Guadalupe represent accommodation to realities — scant housing, poor working conditions — that should inspire vigilant resistance?

Whatever the answers, the photographs with their brief, personalized captions, are persuasive and moving, particularly when considered as part

of the larger visual and textual project that Mr. Vergara describes as an "uninterrupted dialogue with poor communities." (He has conducted hundreds of on-site interviews over the years; they are a crucial part of his work. Longer excerpts from some of them here would have been a good idea.)

And his images take on an extra measure of resonance at the Cooper-Hewitt. The museum's palatial Fifth Avenue building was built at the turn of the century by Andrew Carnegie as his New York home. The show is

installed in what were once family quarters. Mr. Vergara's loving portraits of immigrant houses hang in former Gilded Age bedrooms, dressing rooms and nurseries. His shots of the forbidding border walls appear in Carnegie's billiard room. The result is yet another architectural image of adaptation and change. El Nuevo Mundo, indeed.

**SUMMERTIME IN THE COUNTRY:
GIVE TO THE FRESH AIR FUND**

Style

SATURDAY, DECEMBER 12, 1998

Cityscape

A Slice of American Pie in Latino L.A.

By BENJAMIN FORGEY
Washington Post Staff Writer

When documentarian Camilo Jose Vergara ventured into the impoverished flatlands of Los Angeles County six years ago, camera always at the ready, he expected to see the kind of grim abandonment he had been cataloging in American cities for a couple of decades.

Instead he found himself in the midst of a remarkable transformation. There were evacuated manufacturing plants, to be sure, and the landscape remained as "hot, flat and poor" as it had been for much of this century. But there were more people than ever, and streets and alleys reverberated with sounds and signs of a new vitality.

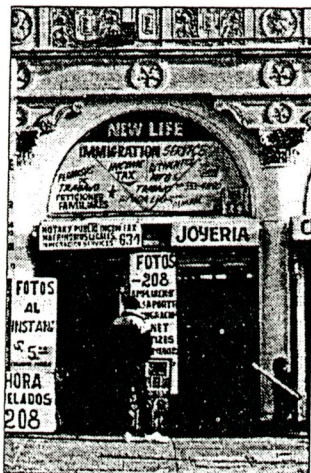
The language being spoken, sung and written throughout the sprawling terrain was, increasingly, Spanish. The colors and decoration of mile after mile of bungalows and storefronts were vividly reminiscent of Central America and Mexico. The Virgin of Guadalupe, that most Mexican of Catholic icons, adorned everything from front porches to the facades of auto repair shops.

Fascinated, Vergara returned to the area every chance he got. A result of his repeated visits is "El Nuevo Mundo: The Landscape of Latino Los Angeles," a compelling selection of his photographs on view at the National Building Museum.

Anyone familiar with the Mount Pleasant neighborhood in the District will recognize something of the changed cultural landscape, but there is a huge difference in scale. Recent estimates indicate that more than 40 percent of the nearly 10 million people in Los Angeles County are Latino in origin, a higher percentage than any other ethnic group. This makes it the largest Latino urban concentration north of Mexico.

Vergara's color photographs bring such sta-

See CITYSCAPE, B5, Col. 1



BY CAMILO JOSE VERGARA

Vergara's Vital 'Latino Los Angeles'

CITYSCAPE, From B1

tistical abstractions to life. Individually, each tells a little story. His habit of seeking responses from the subjects of his photographs—he was trained as a sociologist—contributes piquancy to such stories. Altogether, the images and words weave a multifaceted tale of change.

If there is a summarizing image in the show, it is that of a storefront on Alvarado Street in the Pico Union district. It shows an old stone building—there are classical columns and carefully carved whimsical details. But the prewar facade has been completely taken over by signs for the new businesses inside—passport applications, legal aid, work permit advice, insurance sales, instant photos, jewelry stores, weddings. A young man stands outside, contemplating these diverse offerings; centered in the old archway is a sign advertising the New Life Immigration Service.

The energy required to begin and sustain new lives is a leitmotif of the exhibition. It shows dozens of small-scale, low-capital businesses, operated out of houses and garages as well as commercial buildings. The decoration and advertising of these reclaimed spaces are forms of both advertising and cultural identification.

Murals of bucolic scenes, farmyards and rural churches often refer to specific places in the homeland, and possess the directness and vitality of folk art. They "place you in the middle of your dreams," one passerby said to Vergara. Or a simple coat of paint will work wonders. Esmeralda, the owner of a hair salon, explained that she likes "colores chillones y fosforescentes"—loud and phosphorescent colors. Her shop was painted a bouncy maroon, and the bar next door a stringing turquoise.

Similar transformations take



PHOTOS BY CAMILO JOSE VERGARA

In Camilo Jose Vergara's photographs of Los Angeles, the colors and decoration of bungalows and storefronts are reminiscent of Central America and Mexico.

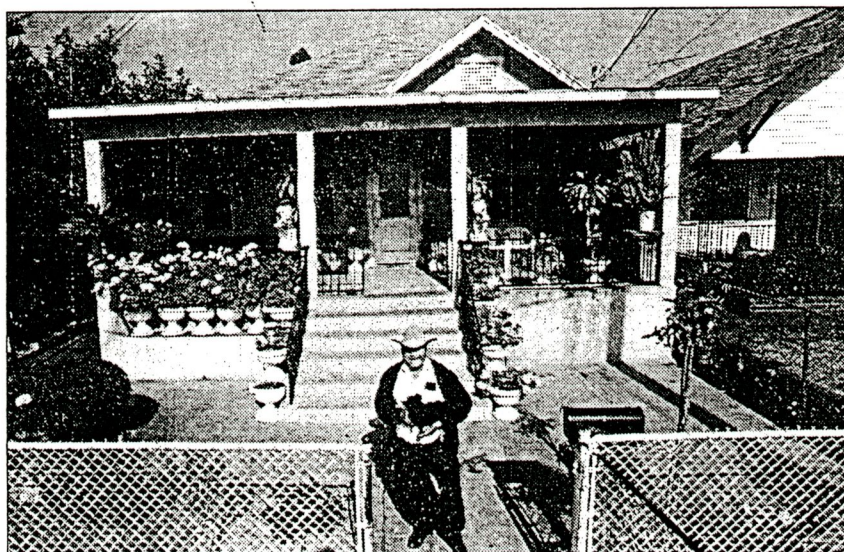
place in residential properties. The single-story bungalows of the L.A. flatlands, many of them vacant before the recent waves of immigration, remain relatively inexpensive. New owners waste little time making them comfortably Mexican, Salvadoran and such.

One family shrine to the Virgin of Guadalupe incorporates the coat of arms of the Mexican state of Jalisco. Another house with a flow-

er-bedecked porch has a front yard—formerly grass—of poured concrete. The new immigrants are challenging the old Angeleno "dream of the garden city," Vergara observes. He quotes a Mexican businessman from South-Central: "The more concrete the better. In Mexico, everything is dirt, and the rain turns it into mud. People want to get away from that."

These are, quite clearly, hard-

In Latino L.A.,
Vergara found
himself in the midst
of a remarkable
transformation,
where streets and
alleys reverberated
with sounds and
signs of a new
vitality.



Paving the way: A concrete front yard was one man's way of making a congenial play area for his grandchildren.

scramble ways of life. Overcrowded quarters are common in the poorest neighborhoods—one photograph shows a board on which a single street number is subdivided into five fractional addresses. A neighboring resident told Vergara: "These are anthills full of people. They sleep standing up."

The economic realities are suggested in several chilling photographs of new, low-tech factories that have replaced big manufacturing plants as primary employers—they are windowless fortresses. There are about 600 such new factories in East Los Angeles, and Vergara says the workers receive about a third of the wages that unionized employees used to make, with few or no health benefits.

Ethnic and class tensions created by the new city-within-a-city are more political and verbal than visual and architectural. Consequently, they tend not to show up in Vergara's documentation, although he pointedly ends the exhibit with a prime result of such tensions. This is the long, high metal fence—a veritable iron curtain—that the United States has erected along much of the California-Mexico border.

A sequence of images of murals of the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. does touch poignantly on the subject of skewed communication. Created by Latino painters both as commercial signs and as symbols of community with African American neighbors, very few of them look at all like King. When Vergara showed one of



Vergara's photographs show dozens of small-scale, low-capital businesses, operated out of houses and garages as well as commercial buildings.

the images to a Latino friend, the response was apt: That is "a Tolteca Martin Luther King."

Implicitly, cultural self-containment and economic isolation are the major themes of the whole exhibition. Looking at one of the photographs—and it could have been selected at random—a Mexican ironworker told Vergara, "You see this, and you say you are in Mexico."

This has both bad and good effects. Insularity on both sides of the great Anglo-Latino divide is a great enemy of progress. On the other hand, to understand the benefits, one has only to refer back to

"The New American Ghetto," a show of Vergara's lifework that appeared at the Building Museum just two years ago.

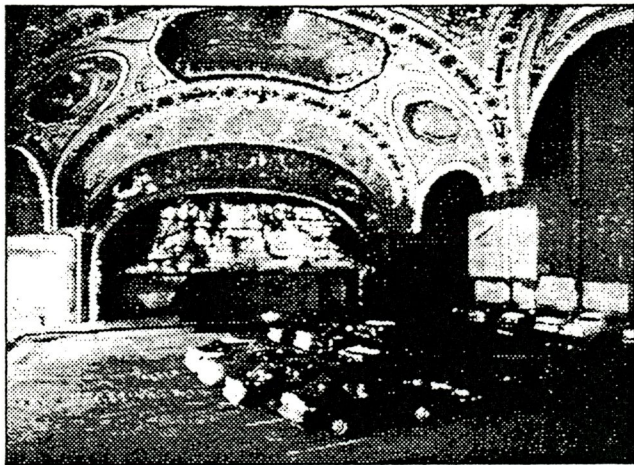
This was a sad, provocative chronicle of desolation, depopulation and disinvestment in America's inner cities. How much more desirable is the strength and vitality Vergara has recorded in "El Nuevo Mundo."

The show continues through March 28 at the National Building Museum, 401 F St. NW, Monday through Saturday 10 a.m.-4 p.m., Sunday noon to 4. Suggested admission is \$3.

Se questa è America Ecco il reportage che ha scosso gli Usa

LA REPUBBLICA

24 giugno 1999



DETROIT

Un vecchio, elegante teatro di Detroit, nel Michigan, capitale americana dell'industria automobilistica, trasformato in parcheggio



NEW YORK

Una famiglia di immigrati nel South Bronx, uno dei quartieri più poveri di New York. La scritta sul muro dice: 'Save the children', salvate i bambini



CHICAGO

Un palazzo abbandonato a Chicago, quartiere West Lake: lo scoppio delle tubature dell'acqua ha prodotto la cascata di ghiaccio sulle pareti

È l'America che i turisti non vedono, e che gli stessi americani della middle class preferiscono non guardare. L'ha ritratta Camilo José Vergara, 55 anni, cileno di New York, laurea in sociologia alla Columbia University, professione fotografo. *The New American Ghetto*, la sua ultima mostra itinerante, prodotta dal New York State Museum, ha sorpreso i critici («unforgettable», indimenticabile, ha scritto il Chicago Tribune), turbato i politici, scosso l'opinione pubblica. «Losers: l'America dei perdenti» è il titolo della sua prima esposizione in Italia (a cura di Fabrizio Lepore) che apre oggi alla Triennale (orario: 10-20, chiuso lunedì, fino al 31 luglio, ingresso gratuito). Circa centocinquanta immagini a colori, selezionate tra più di diecimila scattate in vent'anni di lavoro, illustrano con forza ma senza retorica, con grande passione civile e sorridente ironia, «il lato oscuro del sogno americano». Newark: una fabbrica abbandonata è diventata un rifugio di *homeless*, i senza casa. New York: un ufficio postale del South Bronx, quartiere sinonimo di violenza, è protetto dal filo spinato come un fortino del vecchio west. Detroit: un antico teatro è stato trasformato in garage. Vergara fotografa il vistoso de-

grado urbano (grattacieli abbandonati, fabbriche fantasma) e la nuova povertà sociale (le minoranze latino americane, e indiane). Ritrae i malinconici santuari della vecchia e nuova emarginazione: centri per la distribuzione del metadone, consultori di quartiere, mense per barboni, mercati all'aperto di indumenti usati. Illustra l'ambiguo boom delle nuove religioni: ecco una catapecchia di Detroit che ospita la sala di culto della neonata, improbabile Refreshing Spring Church, la Chiesa della Primavera Rinfrescante. A Camden, nel New Jersey, la biblioteca comunale cade a pezzi, il soffitto è crollato, sul pavimento crescono arbusti. Ad Harlem, il ghetto nero di New York, le bande giovanili affidano a coloratissimi murales il ricordo degli amici morti: uccisi dalla droga, dagli incidenti stradali, dalla polizia. Ancora ad Harlem, ecco un negozio scelto come «simbolo del New York della sopravvivenza»: Vergara l'ha fotografato per vent'anni, documentandone, come in una sequenza cinematografica, le successive trasformazioni: bar, drogheria, rivendita fish and chips (pesce fritto e patate), studio medico, salone di bellezza, casa da gioco. Oggi è uno smoke center. Domani chissà. (a.bes)

Registran la mexicanidad

El sociólogo y fotógrafo José Vergara exhibe *El Nuevo Mundo*, más de 100 imágenes sobre la 'mexicanización' de Los Angeles

POR MAURICIO VELÁZQUEZ DE LEÓN

NUEVA YORK.- Encarar la dinámica social en los sitios del abandono, registrar la erosión de las construcciones, diseccionar con la lente de su cámara fotográfica aquellos lugares que alguna vez fueron motivo de orgullo y aspiración, y que hoy se reducen a desolados monumentos decadentes. Este ha sido durante 20 años el trabajo de Camilo José Vergara, sociólogo y fotógrafo chileno cuya poderosa iconografía se registra en las páginas de libros como *Silence City's: The Evolution of the American Cemetery*, *The New American Ghetto*, *American Ruins* (este último de próxima aparición), documentos visuales del abandono y la transformación arquitectónica en comunidades urbanas desde Nueva York hasta Detroit, de Chicago a Nueva Jersey. Como sociólogo de la lente, Vergara no es ajeno a la metamorfosis de comunidades que algún día fueron símbolo de progreso y que han sido reducidas a pueblos fantasma.

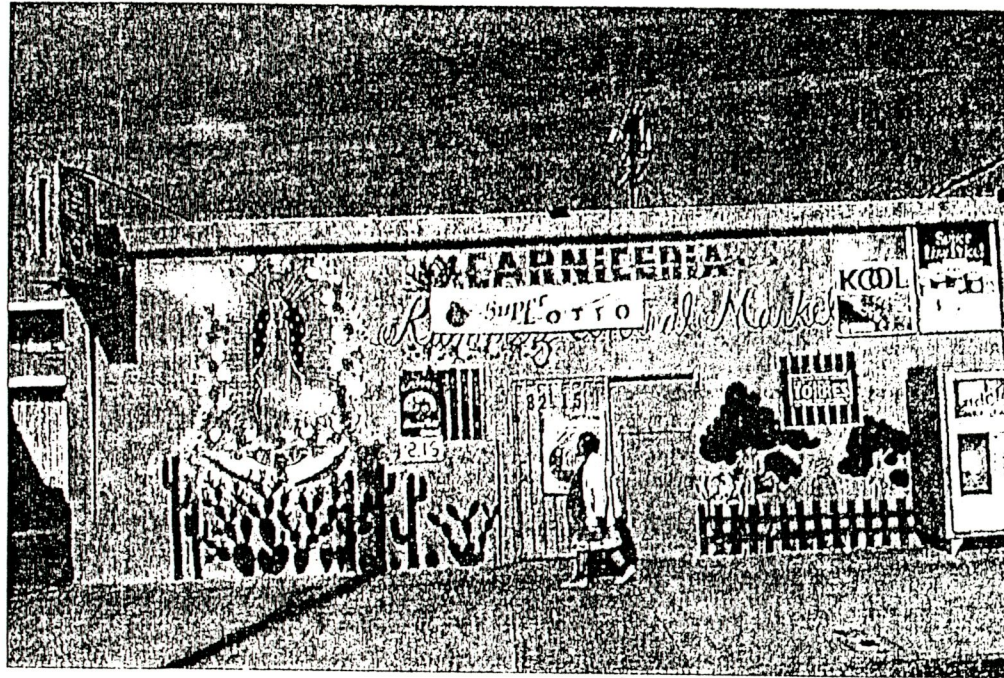
Pero en su más reciente proyecto su lente lo llevó a las secciones de Compton y el Centro Sur de Los Angeles en California, donde encontró un universo que lejos de haber sido borrado por bulldozers o destinado al olvido, ha venido a ser reconstruido con brochazos de rosa mexicano, amarillo chillante y Virgenes de Guadalupe; un universo creado a imagen y semejanza de una tierra que se echa de menos y que nunca se olvida.

"Los Angeles me forzó a ver las cosas de manera distinta donde pensaba encontrar entropía, hallé todo este movimiento que es responsable de la creación de un nuevo mundo", comenta el fotógrafo de 54 años de edad.

La entrevista surge a raíz de la exposición *El Nuevo Mundo: The Landscape of Latino Los Angeles* en el Cooper-Hewitt, National Design Museum, Smithsonian Institution donde se exhiben más de 100 fotografías con las que Camilo José Vergara documentó el paisaje latino en Los Angeles entre 1992 y 1998.

"Mi interés siempre ha sido fotografiar las zonas pobres de Estados Unidos, y con esta idea me fui a California. En este sentido, me di cuenta que la situación de Los Angeles se comparaba a la de Chicago, pero que la historia principal era este 'Pueblo chico' que se estaba moviendo a la ciudad. Era como un pedazo de México que se había dejado caer ahí, adquiriendo día a día una densidad de símbolos, de gente, de sonidos, y del idioma mismo, que era más y más latino; mexicano. Entonces me di cuenta que ésa era la historia que me interesaba; la historia de la 'mexicanización' de Los Angeles".

En números, la mexicanización a la que se refiere Vergara resulta apabullante; se calcula que desde finales de



Un negocio en el Central Ave. South Central de Los Angeles, obra de Camilo José Vergara

los años 70 han llegado a la ciudad cerca de 100 mil mexicanos anualmente, en la actualidad el 41 por ciento de los 9.5 millones de habitantes del Condado de Los Angeles son latinos, conformando la mayor comunidad hispanoparlante en territorio estadounidense y superando al sajón que constituye el segundo grupo más numeroso de la población.

Este dramático cambio en la población atrajo la atención de Vergara durante su primera visita en 1992. Afincados en lo que alguna vez fuera la mayor comunidad afroamericana al oeste de Chicago, los millones de mexicanos habían transformado el paisaje, los puestos de tacos reemplazaban a los que anteriormente vendían hamburguesas, los vendedores ambulantes ofrecían naranjas, cocos y maíz, los carteles y anuncios en las tiendas revelaban una cultura cambiante.

El fenómeno comenzó hace 40 ó 50 años cuando los protestantes blancos provenientes de la costa este llegaron a Los Angeles con la idea de realizar el sueño americano. Ha-

bitaron los bungalows de una sola planta, que habían sido construidos entre 1920 y 1930 bajo el concepto de Ciudad del Futuro, y trabajaban en las industrias de neumáticos y automóviles que pagaban 15 ó 20 dólares por hora. Pero para cuando los mexicanos llegaron su sueño era muy distinto, aquellas fábricas ya no existían y en su lugar se abrieron industrias de muebles y juguetes que no pagaban más de cinco dólares por hora, los bungalows estaban viejos y las condiciones de vida eran precarias".

Técnicamente sencillas, y palpablemente objetivas, las más de 2 mil fotografías realizadas por Vergara en este lapso de seis años, constituyen en conjunto una gigantesca instantánea de la yuxtaposición de dos culturas distintas y su adaptación a un entorno con enorme fuerza visual. Sus imágenes de la transformación demuestran que los latinos lejos de buscar un lugar para reinventarse a sí mismos, tratan desesperadamente de mantenerse en estrecho contacto con sus familias y su cultura.

"Existe la expectativa de que aquí la vida es mejor, pero por otra parte hay una gran añoranza que los lleva a reconstruir su entorno. Algunos llegan al punto de viajar 10 ó 12 horas en auto para traerse plantas de Jalisco y sembrarlas en sus jardines". Así se construye el Nuevo Mundo, que por una parte es definido por la idea del regreso a una antigua patria y no a un país extranjero, y por otra, por el hecho de que el destino queda relativamente cerca del punto de partida permitiendo un constante flujo de gente y posesiones, desde efectos personales, y electrodomésticos, hasta artefactos de cualquier dimensión, mundana o espiritual, que son transportados a lo largo de toda la costa oeste en una marca de cultura y comercio.

Al observar el trabajo de Vergara, es inevitable percibir las innumerables imágenes de la Virgen de Guadalupe, o la transposición de ideologías que emparejan en un mismo muro imágenes de Pancho Villa y de Martín Luther King Jr. Pero lo que llama poderosamente la atención es esa sublimación de colores, mensajes, textos y refranes que nos hablan de que este Nuevo Mundo es México, pero es otro México.

Sobre esto Vergara opina que muchos mexicanos me dicen que allá son más mexicanos porque tienen la necesidad de recordar. Pero también se da esta sublimación porque el mexicano que viaja al norte se topa con una resistencia muy fuerte que los pone en una actitud muy defensiva.

Defensiva pero también muy de pertenencia porque hay que recordar que California pertenecía a México, e incluso usted los califica en uno de los textos de la exposición como los nuevos conquistadores.

"Es cierto, y eso es lo que complica la situación. Incluso se hacen muchos comentarios sobre el hecho de que éste es un lugar que lo perdieron en la guerra y que ahora lo están ganando en la paz.

"Construido mediante excesos y confusiones, el Nuevo Mundo trabaja con maquinaria obsoleta y se transporta en autos de tres décadas, conserva un espíritu rural y la idiosincrasia mexicana. Un Nuevo Mundo limitado por una frontera de rejas, algunas obvias y materiales, otra sutiles e ideológicas que refuerzan la condición de extranjeros de sus habitantes sin importar su estatus legal o migratorio. Un Nuevo Mundo que tras la opulencia de sus colores, símbolos y texturas con la que ha sido recreado esconde la verdadera razón de su existencia; a pesar de los conflictos e injusticias que lo definen el Nuevo Mundo se ha construido sobre los cimientos de nuestra incapacidad de ofrecer a millones de mexicanos una oportunidad de crecimiento. Una oportunidad a imagen y semejanza de sus aspiraciones".

El Nuevo Mundo: The Landscape of Latino Los Angeles permanece en exhibición hasta el 5 de septiembre en el Cooper-Hewitt, National Design Museum, 2 East 91st, New York, NY 10128. Tel (212) 849-84-00.

Camilo José Vergara's American Ruins



ALL PHOTOS © CAMILO JOSÉ VERGARA

Camilo José Vergara has a soft voice, a quiet manner, an ironic shrug and, inside, the courageous resolve of a pioneer taking on new terrain.

Over the past 20 years, Vergara has created a new photographic frontier located at an intersection of documentary photography, historical research, sociology and urban anthropology. He has done something very simple, yet radical: he has set out to document the environment called "the urban American ghetto." His purpose is to record for outsiders and for history the way it looks, the way people live in it, the way it changes with time and what it means.

by Nancy Madlin

In Vergara's urban landscapes, everything has potential meaning. "Discarded Mickey Mouse found in an alley, Gary, 1997," says one caption in Vergara's latest book project, *American Ruins*, to be published by Monacelli Press this November. "Mickey Mouse is very popular in the ghettos of the United States. He is a life force, always on the move," continues the text. "In Gary, I was stopped by the sight of this eyeless, toothless Mickey lying in an alley. Edward Perry, a local resident, shared my curiosity and responded, 'A dead Mickey Mouse, that is unusual. You usually keep a Mickey Mouse all your life. . . .' Perry went on to explain

Top: Former city Methodist Church built in 1925 in Gary, Indiana. Above: One block in North Camden, New Jersey, photographed in 1979, 1988, 1996 and 1998.

Photo District News

Consuming Passion



Upper left: Gary, Indiana, January 1997. Lower left: Inside a housing project in Newark, New Jersey, 1987. Above: An old townhouse in Brush Park in Detroit, September 1998.

parenthetically, 'Mickey does not represent one race. Walt Disney designed them so that they could be everybody. He understood the color of money.'

No object is too small—or too large—to be included in Vergara's gaze. "American ghettos preserve the remains of a once powerful urban civilization, left behind when the previous residents, mostly white, moved outward. . . churches, statues and historic houses stand as isolated ghosts of the past," he writes in his first book, *The New American Ghetto*, published by Rutgers University Press in 1997. Among the examples shown are images from Newark: a towering statue of a Renaissance Italian man in armor and carrying a sword. (The original, by Verrocchio, is in Venice.)

It's the kind of thing we've all seen a million times in impoverished urban neighborhoods, but it's something Vergara helps us see in a new light. Suddenly, we realize the statue is literally out of place. Vergara tells us that the residents have noticed it, too. "We find the statue offensive," says a local in the book. "They should replace it with Marcus Garvey."

In essence, Vergara makes a point to see and photograph what others don't notice—the ways of abandoned dogs, in life and in death; the ways that buildings are boarded up and walled, and how these fortresses are changed over time; how old decorations on building facades are changed, covered over, destroyed, and how new decorations in local, indigenous styles take their place. Vergara spends time documenting these things, which most of us drive by without seeing. He also talks to and writes about people whose thoughts are not often heard by the outside world.

In this, he has challenged societal norms of journalism, historical documentation and communication. He has also flown in the face of photographic convention—and taken what has often seemed like the most difficult possible route to success.

"I did what photographers are not supposed to do," he says. "I dared to take dull pictures, and I did it obsessively and widely, all over the country, for a long period of time." His ex-wife used to call it "suicidal," implying that Vergara was consciously setting out to take pictures no one could ever want to purchase or publish.

In a sense, she was right, and Vergara takes some pride in the Quixotic nature of his quest to photograph the unwanted and the ignored. What inspired him to accept the challenge can be found in his childhood.

Vergara's grandfather owned what was perhaps the most prosperous farm in Chile, he recounts in the introduction to *The New American Ghetto*. "The accumulated wealth of generations was visible in my early childhood in the form of beautiful houses, expensive cars, elegant furniture and precious jewelry, which I admired and assumed would be ours forever." During his childhood and adolescence, however, it vanished piece by piece, to the pawnshop, or purchased by relatives and friends. His father, an alcoholic, would disappear from the house for weeks at a time, and the economic situation always seemed to be getting worse. The young Vergara lived in fear of abject poverty, and it was only with the help of rich relatives, bringing food and clothing and amusements, that the family avoided destitution.

It was through their largess that Vergara landed in the U.S. in 1965 to attend Notre Dame University at the age of 21. He bought a camera and photographed campus life, eventually expanding his view to the town of South Bend, to the ghetto where blacks and Mexican families lived.

After college he moved to New York City, practicing a traditional form of street photography: images of "children cooling themselves off at fire hydrants, black girls amusing themselves with white dolls, Latino schoolboys cutting classes to watch dogs copulating," as he describes it. "I felt pleased with the liveliness of my pictures," he writes, "yet I saw myself at a dead end, retracing the steps of many others."

He returned to school, to Columbia, to study sociology and found that "the years as a graduate student gave me the ability to do academic research, to take a more detached view, and to have confidence in my vision."

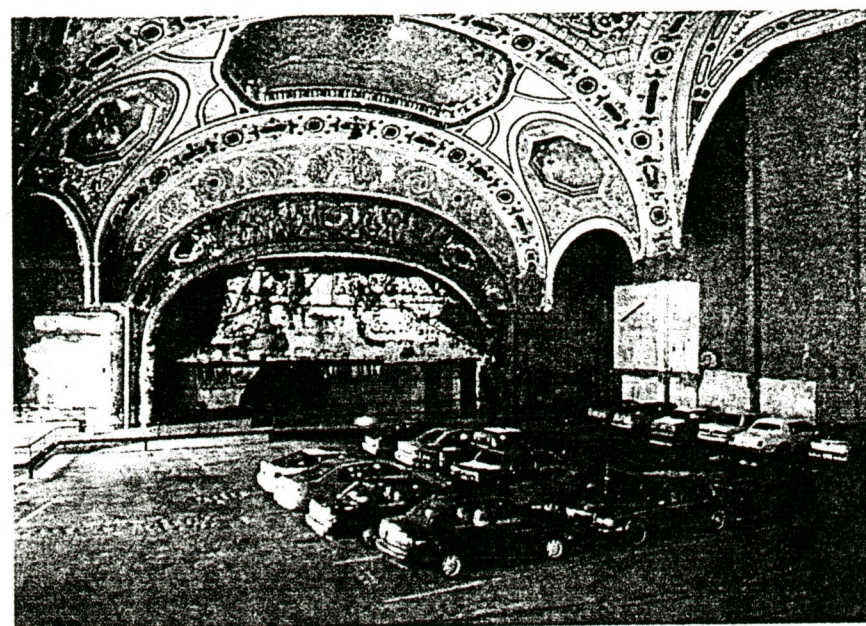
It was there in the late Seventies that his vision came into complete focus. His mission, as he saw it, was to photograph a single area, block or building from a variety of points of view (street level to rooftop); to focus the same place over time; and strive for complete coverage (including interviews with residents).

And it had to be done in the ghetto. "Close, sustained encounters with poverty have shaped my character and driven me, perhaps obsessively, to the ghettos. . . . In the ghetto I saw the equivalent of houses I could have lived in, and I examined them almost as part of my own life," he writes. "Where wealth and elegance prevail, I feel out of place, nervous, and I long to leave. I am attracted to what is shunned, falling

Sogni su sogni, un po' in rovina

Non strazianti ritratti di povertà secondo cliché giornalistici degli anni Sessanta e Settanta, ma piuttosto una attenta fotografia del deterioramento archeologico urbano del Nord America: così, un antico teatro di Detroit si trasforma in un parcheggio; a Chicago un caseggiato abbandonato diventa un fantasma di ghiaccio per l'acqua fuoriusci-

ta dalle tubature rotte; un drugstore di New York cambia, nell'arco di dieci anni, proprietà, insegne, colori, anima, insomma. Sono le foto di Camilo José Vergara, considerato uno dei più significativi fotografi documentaristi degli Stati Uniti. Laureato in Sociologia alla Columbia University, ha catturato il lato oscuro del sogno americano creando immagini emblematiche di forte impatto emotivo. La mostra presentata alla Triennale di Milano



*«L'America dei perdenti»
alla Triennale di Milano:
in mostra le immagini
di Camilo José Vergara*



fino al 31 luglio, offre una selezione delle oltre 9 mila fotografie scattate da Vergara negli ultimi vent'anni.

Le immagini mostrano con grande intensità l'altra faccia dell'America, quella dei «projects», cioè dei quartieri a edilizia popolare, dei centri improvvisamente spopolati per effetto della migrazione della media borghesia verso i sobborghi, quella dei centri

di distribuzione del metadone per i tossicodipendenti: alla fine, l'America dell'abbandono, quella che per molti americani medi è solo un'astrazione di cui fanno volentieri a meno. Il luogo comune che vede gli Stati Uniti come una nazione, efficiente, grande e dorata si infrange sugli scatti di Camilo José Vergara, facendo diventare la mostra non una documentazione generica sulla margina-

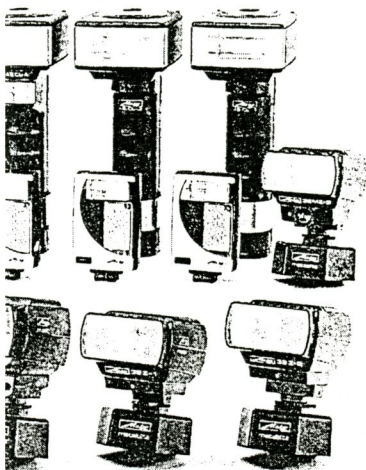
lità, ma una lettura analitica dei diversi aspetti dei ghetti, della loro riconoscibilità fisica, del loro contesto urbano. L'analisi di Vergara ci conduce alla definizione di tre diverse tipologie urbane sparse negli Stati Uniti: ghetti verdi - spopolamento, rovine urbane divorate dal verde incolto, ghetti istituzionali - luoghi di confino sovvenzionati dallo Stato e progettati

*Il deterioramento
archeologico
delle città
degli Stati Uniti
visto da un fotografo
«dell'abbandono»,
già laureato
in sociologia
alla Columbia
University*

per minoranze americane, ghetti caratterizzati dall'influsso di abitanti provenienti dall'America latina. Un'altra mostra di Vergara sarà ospitata, fino alla fine di luglio, dal Cooper Hewitt Museum of Design di New York. ■

Nella foto a sinistra, il Michigan Theatre di Detroit, 1995; in mezzo e a destra, West Lake Chicago, 1995.

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apart, changing. . . . Even though I live in stable middle-class neighborhoods, I feel that this comfortable existence is transitory, that my real home is in some ghetto."

Vergara has developed a deep connection to these neighborhoods. "For me, the story of these places is important; it's a story that has to come out—a whole set of stories, really, and a document of a time and place in history, a place that is usually overlooked," he says. "The meaning comes in relating to a certain, specific place, through a dialogue with the place—through the changes happening there—and with the people."

Over the past two decades, Vergara has returned again and again to document the transformations taking place in the poorest neighborhoods of New York, Chicago, Detroit, Gary, Camden, Newark and L.A. The result is a collection of more than 9,000 slides and negatives preserving the memory of America's poorest and most segregated urban communities. From one vantage point, Vergara may have been committing "career suicide." But from another, he became a photographic renegade in order to create something unique.

And in the last few years, the world has suddenly taken notice. Says Laura Kamedulski, exhibition developer for the Chicago Historical Society, where a show of Vergara's images ran this summer, "Beauty, decay, change, struggle and hope are all evident in his images. They illustrate the complexity and challenges of living in an urban environment, yet his photographs present 'urbaneness' in a manner that is humane and comprehensible." (The Historical Society also bought 200 of his images for its collection.)

In the past year, Vergara's work has been displayed, purchased and published by an amazing variety of institutions and organizations. From December through March, he had a show of his work from Latino Los Angeles at the National Building Museum in Washington, D.C. During the same time period, he had both text and photos published in *Harvard Design Magazine* and *Interiors*. And a group show at the Bronx Museum of the Arts resulted in a small piece on his work in *New York* magazine, an acquisition of four images by a corporate collector and the purchase of 300 prints by the New York Public Library's print and photography collection.

The latter came at the recommendation of the Bronx Borough president, who was eager to document "the Bronx Miracle," positive changes which have happened in some of the borough's poorest areas. An article with a similar theme also resulted in Vergara's images being published in *The New York Times*.

In June, "El Nuevo Mundo: The Landscape of Latino Los Angeles," opened at the Cooper-Hewitt in New York, where the curator painted the walls of the old mansion in the bright colors favored in East L.A. The *Times* did an extensive article praising his work in July. And his work is currently on view at the Triennale in Milan.

On the one hand, Vergara admits that his sudden success is "scary" to someone used to seeing himself as an outsider. On the other, though, he's always suspected that when his work found an audience, people would see what it contains. "People are tired of empty images," he says. "They respond to this as real." □

Consuming Passion

Pete

TUNGSTEN LIGHTS HELP

THE CONCEPT FOR A CAPABILITY

printing industry was straight how an operator begins with a through the printing process. the plate-making apparatus, sl the facility outside Chicago. Th art direction of Rich Nickel (himself posed as the operator.

The plate-making device printing machinery—a serious with. That obstacle was succu ting up a 9-foot-wide white s



feet behind the plate-maker. S care of other distracting elem of what the machine does, we image side up, on the bed of t erator held a second plate, re as if preparing it for the secur

Because this would be a do x 12-inch brochure, we neede era suited to the task. I rented a f/4 lens, and shot tungsten. We be f/5.6 to 8 at one second, br The camera was positioned at a the machine. An acetate overla era ground glass, to indicate w

When I was sho

purpl

tungsten, and te