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Posted on Sat, Oct. 23, 2004

'Mexihcah' lets subjects speak for themselves

By HESSE MCGRAW Special to the Star

"The Mexihcah: Keepers of the Fire" is the first major art exhibit at the Guadalupe Center Cultural Arts Center since its recent \$8 million renovation project. The photographs by Weslea Billingslea document the lives of indigenous cultures on their own terms.

Billingslea, who works in Mexico City and San Jose, Calif., conceived this project in collaboration with Mexihcah (better known here as Aztec) elder and teacher Maestro Sergio Ocelocoatl Ramirez. It's a timely show, tapping into a larger, national discussion of Native American culture stimulated by the recent opening of the Smithsonian's National Museum of the American Indian.

It also coincides with local events surrounding National Hispanic Heritage Month and the National Association of Latino Arts and Culture's recent national conference in Kansas City.

Guadalupe Center, one of the longest continually operating organizations serving Latinos in the United States, provides an apt conduit for truth about native people. (Although it has no dedicated gallery space, the center has mounted an impressive array of public outreach programs in conjunction with the one-month exhibit.)

A second series, "The Indigenous Council of

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Courtesy of Weslea Billingslea

"Acatzin Ollinca," a silver gelatin print by Weslea Billingslea, is part of the exhibit "The Mexihcah: Keepers of the Fire."

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Oaxaca," focuses on one of the very first public demonstrations by the native people of Oaxaca demanding acceptance by their government as equal-rights citizens of Mexico.

In a recent interview the Maestro discussed the collaboration: "Many organizations have approached us without respect. Weslea has an authentic vision that does not do harm to us, a code of communication that reflects who we are."



Courtesy of Weslea Billingslea

"Gerardo Soto Soto" by Weslea Billingslea

The images are intended to awaken an interest in people; to brace against racism and poverty; and to provide an accurate image of a culture assumed dead since the Spanish-inflicted genocide of the early 1500s.

Billingslea said his aim was to "document their way of life in a manner that enables them to tell their own story." By depicting Mexihcah daily life, he wants his images to offer viewers insight into how this historic culture lives today.

Many of his photographs show traditional ceremonies and ceremonial costumes. Billingslea happened to catch one of their most revered ceremonies on his first visit.

In 1521 conquistadors murdered Cuauhtemoc, the last governor of the Aztec people. Each year thousands of Mexihcahs gather to commemorate his birth as a symbol of defense and resistance. Billingslea referred to this transformative experience as a rupture with time: "I could not tell what century we were in ... this 500-year-old tradition was alive." Billingslea emerged determined to show how tradition continues to play a vital role in the lives of today's Mexihcahs.

Billingslea's images include richly detailed, cinematic depictions of ceremonies, along with portraits of single warriors in elaborate costumes and headdresses and simple, soft-focused portraits of children and young women. All of the images are suffused with a spirit of survival, a sensibility equally apparent on the faces of proud, defiant warriors and yearning children.

Billingslea, who cites aesthetic influences such as Walker Evans and Dorothea Lange, was mentored by Don Cameron, one of the masters of the West Coast school of photography. Cameron instilled in him a strong commitment to the technical art of black and white printing that shows here. There is a grace and assuredness to his work; the images seem familiar, with traditionally rooted compositions.

One may make an immediate connection to the work of Edward Curtis, whose 40,000 images of Native Americans established a record of their culture. Yet Curtis' work has been re-evaluated, sullied by his fictionalized staging.

Curtis was making images for a Western audience, in many ways reinforcing damaging stereotypes. Although Curtis' intentions may have been noble, his work exemplifies the Western trend to colonize the exotic — first through conflicts and later through crafting its own, often distorted images and history of a culture.

Speaking of the rift between preservation and assimilation, the Maestro explained indigenous people have the dual struggle of trying to survive within society and preserve their heritage.



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"To be indigenous is to be marginalized," he said, especially in Mexico, where racism is severe, akin to the up-front discrimination of the 1950s South.

Given this ongoing condition, this exhibit is refreshingly devoid of style, self-consciousness and aesthetic posturing. The artist's interest is rather to achieve a much-belated communication in a manner that is accessible and relevant to a wide community.

His work acknowledges the need for multiple histories and calls for sensitive perspectives. Even as he laments "official history's denial of our existence," the Maestro sees promise in Billingslea's sensitive approach, proclaiming, "Here, even the dead have a voice."

'The Mexihcah: Keepers of the Fire'

Review

- **Where:** *Guadalupe Center Cultural Arts Center, 1015 Avenida Cesar E. Chavez*
- **When:** *9 a.m. to 4 p.m. Monday-Friday through Nov. 7.*
- **How much:** *Free*
- **Call:** *(816) 421-1015*



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