



DISPLACED MEMORIES

The Society's 2014 postgraduate bursary recipient documents communities uprooted in the name of progress, explains Elizabeth Mistry



Antônio – Grief: the result of Ribeiro and the subject's collaborative working process, and Boçoroca village before the dam, below



The reservoir created by the Sobradinho Dam covers more than 1,600 square miles

When Marilene Ribeiro journeyed – sometimes by canoe – through the north-east of Brazil earlier this year she set out to capture a documentary project with a difference: a collaborative ‘photography-based inquiry on the impact of dams in Brazil’.

Amid spartan conditions, with the nearest camera shop more than 1,000 miles away, or several days’ journey, back to São Paulo, Ribeiro focused on a subject she had long wanted to explore: the impact of the giant Sobradinho Dam.

Begun in the 1970s, and billed by the authorities as a scheme that would bring prosperity and cheaper electricity to the region, the dam has forced thousands of poor families to leave their homes along the São Francisco River. So much land was flooded that the reservoir is one of the largest artificial lakes in the country. The dam does generate a significant amount of power, but the major beneficiaries are mining concerns and large-scale aluminium producers, with strong links to local politicians.

Growing up in Brazil, Ribeiro had long been aware of the devastating effects on those forced to leave their communities and livelihoods when the state built Sobradinho and a number of other controversial dams – one of which is the subject of an ongoing legal battle – as part of a massive infrastructure-boosting programme in the 1970s and 80s.

The concept of art as activism, which dovetails with the work of non-governmental organisations and other non-state actors, appealed to Ribeiro because of the potential to shine a light on what she feels is a grave injustice.

Rather than simply photographing her subjects, she aimed to establish a dialogue by seeking and incorporating her sitters’ responses to an initial shot in order to present a final portrait that would effectively be the work of both photographer and subject.

Almost four decades on from the original despejo (forced relocation), Ribeiro chose a community that had fought a spirited but eventually losing battle to move it 700 miles from the river to the semi-arid Caatinga area or to the already overpopulated shanty towns nearby.

The initial reaction from her subjects, however, ranged from unbridled support to suspicion over her motives.

‘There were some people who didn’t really want to participate at first,’ she says. But once they saw the first images and heard from neighbours who felt emboldened by taking part, she overcame even the most reluctant among them to produce a poignant series that captures the immense feeling of saudade – the Portuguese expression for a soul-consuming sadness and longing for someone or something left behind.

‘THERE WERE SOME WHO DID NOT WANT TO PARTICIPATE AT FIRST’





LOCATION



FIRST SHOT

After an initial interview the subject, in this case Maria Zilda, chose a location with a particular relevance



LAST SHOT

Maria Zilda – Sorrow: the final portrait produced by Ribeiro from the process of dialogue with the subject

'I WANTED THE PHOTOGRAPHS TO EMBODY THEIR FEELINGS'

'For many of the participants it was the first time anyone had ever sought their opinion, let alone taken their responses into account,' says Ribeiro.

'In every community I visited, I invited people for a semi-structured interview where every participant was able to tell his or her personal history regarding the move – and whatever else they thought was relevant in terms of the impact it had on them.'

Each sitter then chose a location with particular importance for them, as well as an object they valued because of its links to their narrative.

'After my first shot I invited every sitter to see the image and take the lead in directing the session until we had an image that they felt best represented the way they wanted to be seen. At the end I took a final shot from my perspective, but taking into consideration their previous comments.'

'The traditional "power" held by the photographer was shared, creating a dialogue that, in some cases, was the first opportunity the subject had ever had to exercise control over a process.'

'I wanted the photographs to embody their feelings, their environment and their collective and personal memories regarding the move and its consequences.'

Some individuals cried when recalling their relocation, although there is little evidence of this in the resulting body of work. The subjects, explains Ribeiro, were very keen not to be presented as victims. They wanted their stories told and wanted to be seen as strong, as survivors.

The themes chosen by several of her subjects – loss and lack – are all too clear in the final prints. Laudelina, who cited the lack of almost everything one might consider a basic necessity, spoke of the deficiency of work, food, water and familiar places – all of which had been within reach prior to her move.

Another sitter – Isabel – told Ribeiro that her approach to documenting their lives had been valuable to the community and that even after so many years, her unorthodox methods had affected the participants:

'She thanked me for helping them, for "redeeming our history, for empowering us and for lighting up things that were fading inside".'

The preservation of life

We speak to Alexandra Murphy, recipient of 2015's Society postgraduate bursary

Can you tell us about your award-winning pitch?

Part of my practice-led PhD at Middlesex University looks at the influence of Sigmund Freud and the "death drive", 'the task of which is to lead organic life back into the inanimate state,' he said.

I am interested in museum spaces, especially collections of preserved life. A previous project, the Spirit Collection, led me to look at other forms of preservation, such



An image from the Spirit Collection, by bursary winner Alexandra Murphy



as taxidermy. I will be working at the Natural History Museum, a Victorian institution with a marvellous collection, which I will photograph, then develop the images using the Victorian technique of salt printing.

Why the interest in an historical process?

It is more about the photographic representation – the result of a preservation process – and in this case the relationship between the subject and the photograph.

What will the bursary enable you to do?

To make a number of field visits then devote studio time to developing the salt prints. I hope eventually to have a photobook, a travelling exhibition and to offer salt-printing workshops to the public.