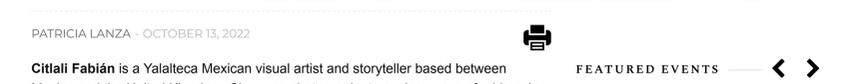


THE EYE OF PHOTOGRAPHY

Close UP : Citlali Fabián by Patricia Lanza



Im from Yalalag - My cousins and I at our grandparents house - Digital collage 2020 © Citlali Fabián My cousins and I at our grandparent's home in Yalalag, our community of origin in the Oaxacan Sierra around 20 years ago, my dad took the color photo. I took the black and white photo in the background. In a way is a reminder of the places we inhabited, the pass of time, but also my decision to revitalize my memories.



PATRICIA LANZA - OCTOBER 13, 2022

Citlali Fabián is a Yalalteca Mexican visual artist and storyteller based between Mexico and the United Kingdom. She uses photography to explore ways of addressing identity and its connections with territory, migration, and community bonds.

Fabián is a [2020 Visura mentee](#), [Magnum fellow](#), and National Geographic Society explorer, with the project *"I'm from Yalalag, a photo essay to explore the development of our Zapotec identity."* Her work has been shown in solo and collective exhibitions around the world and is part of Mexico's National Institute of Fine Arts Toledo Collection, the Patricia Conde Collection, and the Wittliff Collections at Texas State University.

A member of the [Women Photograph](#) and [Indigenous Photograph](#) collectives, Fabián was selected to participate in the seventh annual New York Portfolio Review. Her Mestiza series was selected as one of the *New York Times* Lens blog's "13 Stories That Captured Photography in 2018."

<http://www.citalifabian.com>

Q: Lanza

How did your family history, born in Yalalag, Oaxaca, Mexico from an indigenous ancient culture, the Zapotec, influence your photographic journey and work?

A: Fabián

I'm a Yalalteca descendant, a first generation born outside of our homeland in the Oaxacan North mountains. My parents migrated to the city when they were young to have access to education, but that didn't mean they lost contact with their roots when they moved. The migrant members of our community established different associations in the places where large communities had settled.

Nowadays, the biggest Yalalteca communities outside of Yalalag are in Oaxaca City, Mexico City, Soteapan, Veracruz and Los Angeles, USA. In each of them, we replicate our traditions, cultural and communal practices. In this sense, the feelings of identity, of belonging are always there, constantly reminded by our family members during our celebrations and meetings. I didn't realize how special was my relationship with my identity till I was an adult, over my childhood I really didn't or need to question it. It was in my early 20's when I became fascinated by the way our identity was developed in relation to our migrant community bonds. At that time my grandmother moved to live with us at my parents' house. She was a Zapotec speaker and at that time I only spoke Spanish, it was through photography that we shared time and dialogues, assisted by my mom. She shared with me photos of our relatives in different parts of Mexico, and I brought back to her photos of the various members of our family. I started without knowing a big family album, documenting my Yalalteca diaspora. In this sense the beginning of my photography journey started with that "discovery," but I wasn't able to realize it till a few years later.

Q: Lanza

Discuss the effects of colonization on the indigenous people of Oaxaca and your findings?

A: Fabián

I am not able to speak for all the indigenous people from Oaxaca as each of us had different stories and experiences to share. We definitely have common ground, like the structural violence we suffer from the Mexican government. Their actions affected each differently among indigenous groups but also among the members of the same community.

I think personally the one that affected me the most, was the repression my parents suffered while they were kids that made them think that Zapotec, their native language was irrelevant. The violent acts they suffered while speaking it in school, included cruel punishments and shame. Unfortunately, their case is not isolated, it happened in all of Mexico, supported by a government campaign to "educate and clean" the indigenous people, and create the false idea of *mestizaje*. This is evident in the main repercussions by Mexican state policies which reduced the number of people speaking their native languages. Today only 6% of the total population speaks an indigenous language, while over the 19th century, 70% of the total Mexican population spoke them. Language is a big reinforcement in the recognition of indigenous identity in Mexico, like the blood quantum (Indian blood laws) within the USA, most indigenous people in Mexico have been suffering a process of de-indigenization, this is a non-recognized cultural genocide by the Mexican state.

I understand now that my parent's fears and love for us were what made them not teach us Zapotec, to protect and not expose us. Like me and my sister, there is an entire generation who lost their native indigenous language, who weren't able to have a normal conversation with their grandparents. That doesn't mean everything is lost, from the collective and communal practices there are rising massive efforts to teach, heal and reinforce the language of our ancestors, to fight back to recover from our colonization wounds.

I feel lucky because even when I grew up not speaking Zapotec, I was surrounded by an environment where I was able to absorb and experience the pride of being Yalalteca, to learn about our traditions, textile history and communal practices. That's how resilient are indigenous cultures.

Q: Lanza

What was your process & production in developing the series, inclusive of research, and the photographic process?

A: Fabián

My process with my Ben'n Yalhalhj series started when I was around 19 years old, back then my grandma started to live at my parents' home. My grandma suffered from health conditions that didn't allow her to live alone, she spend most of her last years living between my mom's and auntie's homes, which means each travel we took her back to her home in Yalalag was a time for mental and emotional relief. Those were opportunities for me to connect with her and my mom, as she was always our bridge to communicate.

I started to build a family album without noticing it, even after she passed away I kept photographing my family members. My interest to meet my extended family grew, even more.

I guess in a way it has been also a grieving process. Curiously I didn't realize that I was documenting my family and diaspora until 2017. When I started a more conscious process, and to produce images not only on film but also using alternative processes such as wet plate collodion, instant film and hand manipulating photos with different techniques. I think in this sense this also mirrors how I see the stories of my community, the evident parts and the hidden sides.

To me, photography has been a medium to awake, an organic movement, from exploring my grandma's photo archives to travelling around different Yalalteca locations in Mexico and Los Angeles, to embroider and explore my thoughts and feelings of home.

Q: Lanza

Discuss the importance and significance of the traditional costume, inclusive of the embroidery, that is incorporated into your work?

A: Fabián

In 2019, I started a new chapter, mixing photos from my family archive with embroidery, specifically with two photos that my dad kept and forgot for years in a drawer, the photos were from my childhood, from a time when we visited my grandparents in Yalalag. My mom dressed us in our traditional outfits for the occasion, and there were the two photos that witnessed a moment, one for each of us. They were very damaged, with folds in the corners and watermarks, but not on our bodies. The shy smiles from the girls in the photos made me remember that day and the experience of getting dressed, of using the clothes my mom and grandma prepared for us.

A lot of feelings emerged with them, I decided to stitch them together. I felt that was how the photo was meant to be, my sister and me together in the Oaxacan Sierra, in our ancestral home. I embroidered the landscape and motifs, as my grandma used to do. My relationship with embroidery comes from her and my mom, they both taught me in the beginning. The embroidery practice reinforced my connection with my roots and my textiles. For me, it is to show the thread that united us with our heritage.

There are elements that represent aspects of my culture as well, for example in that first piece, Sisterhood. I used red and gold beads, to represent our traditional necklaces, but now distributed to the horizons as we are migrant children, part of a generation of Yalaltecos who were born away from our motherland. In this piece, we come back and at the same time we fly away, our souls will be forever interconnected, even in our migration distances.

Q: Lanza

You are presently working and living between Mexico and the United Kingdom. How has living in these two cultures influenced your work?

A: Fabián

I moved to London in the middle of the pandemic last year, and at the beginning, I wasn't able to see and explore the city and culture, with all the restrictions feeling the usual hustle of the city came back slowly, or that's what I heard. I'm still feeling like the new kid on the block.

At this very moment, I don't feel an influence in my photographic work from the UK culture, but I confess I have been exposed to a vibrant art scene, that has encouraged me to explore different media. Currently, I'm working as well making ceramics, and with the England Art Council, I'm working on a project to combine it with my photography, to produce art in the public space. I feel very excited about it. I guess once I finished this project I'll be able to tell how my practice has changed. But for now, I can say it has been a big emotional challenge, to move far away from my family and culture. I'm excited to see where this roller coaster called life will take me.

f SHARE TWEET in SHARE @ PIN IT

POST ID: 160169210

Subscribe now for full access to The Eye of Photography!
That's thousands of images and articles, documenting the history of the medium of photography and its evolution during the last decades, through a unique daily journal.

[Subscribe now / Login](#)

TODAY'S HEADLINES

- Festival du Regard 2022 : Hello Night!
OCTOBER 25, 2022
- La Belle Étoile* : Riego van Wersch : Photography
OCTOBER 25, 2022
- Photography in Capri: Villa San Michele in the Charterhouse of San Giacomo and more
OCTOBER 25, 2022

- Phot'Aubrac 2022 : Valerie Leonard : Black Hell
OCTOBER 25, 2022
- Galerie Julian Sander : Sean Hemmerle : Mid Career Retrospective
OCTOBER 25, 2022
- MFA Boston : The Stillness of Things : Photographs from the Lane Collection
OCTOBER 25, 2022

[MORE ARTICLES](#) [ENTER THE TIMEMACHINE](#)

LATEST ARTICLES OF THE CATEGORY "NOT CLASSIFIED"

- Patrick Bastide
OCTOBER 22, 2022
- Vito Renò
OCTOBER 22, 2022
- Jean-Flavien Piquernal
OCTOBER 22, 2022

- Paolo Pelosi Bonini
OCTOBER 22, 2022
- Ian McFarlane
OCTOBER 22, 2022
- Stefano Gili
OCTOBER 22, 2022

Keep an eye out for the latest photography news! Join our Newsletter

Every morning, receive the latest world photography news and events. And it's free!

[JOIN →](#)