

The Capital City Arts Initiative [CCAI] is delighted to present, Selected Works: Maya of Guatemala, and Western Landscapes, an exhibition by Michael Plyler, at the Courthouse Gallery from February 2 – May 24, 2023. CCAI extends its sincere appreciation to the artist, the city courthouse, and to all those involved with the exhibition. In addition, CCAI thanks our commissioned writer, Logan Hebner, who provided the following essay.

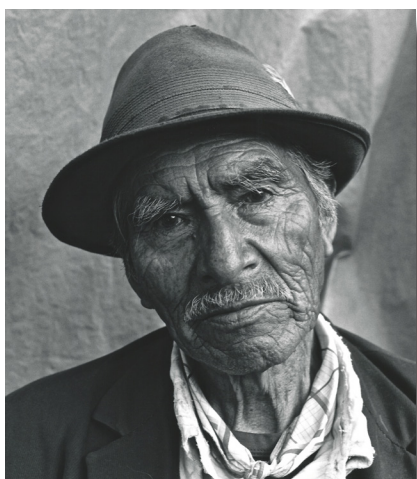
Dignity and Beauty

The personalities from Michael Plyler's portraits engage immediately, achieving a "living quality."

According to photographer, Paul Strand: "... a portrait in the sense that a person completely unknown to the world at large ... has a living quality ... In short there is no necessity to be acquainted with the subject in order to have ... complete esthetic and human satisfaction."

For his "Maya of Guatemala" portraits, Plyler crossed racial, cultural and economic lines, in a land torn by decades of civil war, to capture these compelling images. He rarely employs Cartier-Bresson's "Decisive Moment," where the photographer seeks to capture a spontaneous moment, often anonymously. Michael prefers to introduce himself to his subjects, then build a relationship where the subject is fully engaged with what is unfolding. His empathy and ability to connect is a human gift that adds to his artistic one.

Michael explains why he didn't record the horrific atrocities of those times, where during the Guatemala Civil War from 1960 to 1996, up to 50,000 people disappeared and 200,000 were killed: "The reason my Mayan images didn't focus on the civil war aspect and carnage, besides the fact that there were no shortage of photographers doing that, is I didn't want to portray these people only as victims. I wanted to celebrate their dignity and their beauty. To look into their faces and not have fear be the only emotion present. To capture their essence, not their circumstance."



Fortune Teller, Chichicastenango, 16"x20", 2000.

You can feel the depth and weight of life in "El Adivinador," the shy ebullience of "La Chica del Gallo," the attentiveness and care by the barber in "El Corte del Pello." Only later do you notice the photographic techniques, how the contrasts push and pull you through the image, the work accomplished by the touch of white in their eyes.

Michael's admiration for the Maya is apparent, and when asked about them, he unspooled these remarkable facts: "Two thousand years ago the Maya developed the mathematical concept of zero, which was not used in Europe until 1200 A.D. They calculated the path of Venus with an error of only 14 seconds a year, their lunar cycle was accurate to within 24 seconds of today's atomic clocks, and their calendar, projected 30,000 years into

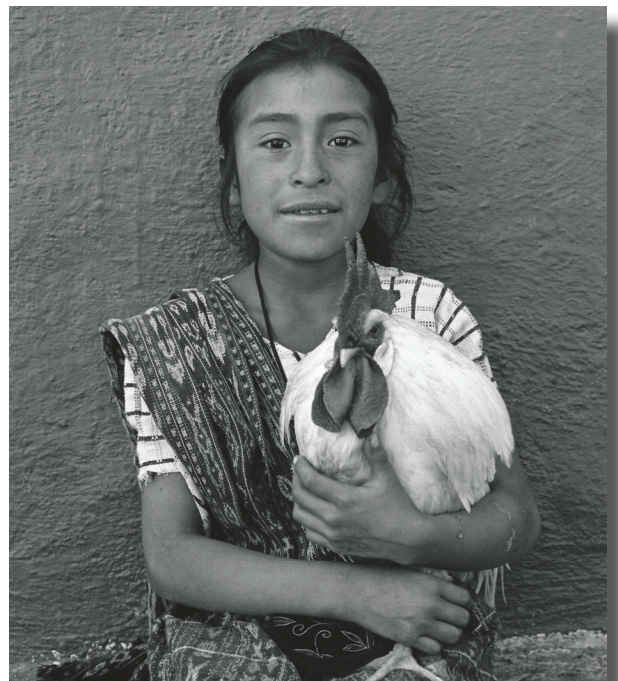
the future, has an error of less than three minutes. They had an empire that lasted roughly six times as long as the Roman Empire. They were the only fully literate society in the New World. In the 16th century Diego de Landa destroyed Mayan codices because he considered them tools of the devil. Thousands of books were burned; only four partial codices remain. By the 18th century none of the living Maya could write their own hieroglyphic language.”

I have had the pleasure of collaborating with Michael for almost twenty years through several projects: I would interview the subjects and write about them, and Michael would take their portraits. I watched him perform his interpersonal alchemy time and again.

While the cultural gulf between Michael and the Maya was wide, it was emotionally neutral. For our book *Southern Paiute: A Portrait*, where we interviewed and photographed thirty-two Southern Paiute elders, both Michael and I had to traverse a cultural chasm heavily but understandably freighted with pain, anger, bitterness, and mistrust.

Michael brought two distinct traits to our effort which drove it from just an idea into a book. First, his humor. While first pitching the idea to the Paiute Indian Tribe of Utah Tribal Council, Michael broke the ice by saying; “well, here we are, two more white guys saying we’re here to help.” They all laughed and then gave us permission to proceed. Second, his professionalism. The crux problem for both of us was to earn trust, almost immediately, to ensure that something genuine transpired across this vast cultural chasm. I demonstrated my intent via intensive research, evident in my questions. Conversely, Michael established his by focusing not on them but on being an excellent photographer.

We split the interviews in half with his portrait process. As each interview began, I could feel them wondering; “how much am I really going to tell this white guy?” But when we’d break for Michael’s portrait, they observed his excellent equipment, meticulously staged. Michael almost ignored them at first. He would level up the camera, then get very close to them, their face, but solely focused on his light meter. Next, he issued polite but firm instructions on exactly where to stand, not to move forward or back even an inch. Finally, nearing the shutter moment, Michael flashed a smile and would find something in the moment to engage them. He’d connect, then click. As it turned out, when I sat them back down for the second half of the interview, the elder was much more ready to talk. Michael’s expertise convinced them that indeed he was a professional, and by extension, so was I.



Rooster Girl, Santiago Atitlan, 14x17, 2001.



Lola's Neighborhood: El Camino a Todos Santos, 8"x"10", 1992.

The Mayan backgrounds, their homes, byways and villages: these reveal what Wallace Stegner observed as "deeply lived in places." Indeed the Maya have lived in harmony with their surrounding jungles and highlands for millennia; these photos reveal that timeless, ever sustainable balance.

This stands in stark contrast to several of his Great Basin images such as "Stamp Mill," "Safety First," "Wheels, Sand & Water Towers" and "127 Pleistocene Place." It's not just that we've moved from densely vegetated highlands to immense wide-open deserts. Michael's photographic eye harnesses the human elements here to inject a sense of disconnect, of emptiness, evoking the exact opposite

of the Maya's enduring relationship with the land. These images reveal an ephemeral, transactional habitation, driven by extractive economics, ultimately abandoned. The trailer at "127 Pleistocene Place" has no relationship to the space it inhabits. Even "Reville, Nevada," with its organic pile of rocks, speaks to dereliction and desertion. Both his Highland Maya and Nevada desert images hold equal power. But the message they send couldn't be more opposite. That they sit in direct creative tension with each other speaks to Michael's depth of vision and range of sensitivity.

A quick note about "Jay Hick's Place;" which feels lived in. Jay was well into his nineties, but still ran his ranch and served as the district Brand Inspector. He insisted on cooking breakfast for us, and while hopping around his wood cookstove he talked about his grandmother, who settled there after walking across the plains with the Mormon Handcart pioneers. Jay himself planted that visible line of mature Black Willow trees. His grandmother's Christmas parties were legendary; it wasn't until after she died that he learned it was because she spiked the punch with vodka.

Michael's landscape and detail images speak to his technical expertise as he honors his two chosen homescapes; Nevada's Great Basin and the canyons of Utah's Markagunt Plateau, which includes Zion National Park. Michael intensively studied the Ansel Adams Zone System, which creates the best tonal range possible between open shadows and delicate



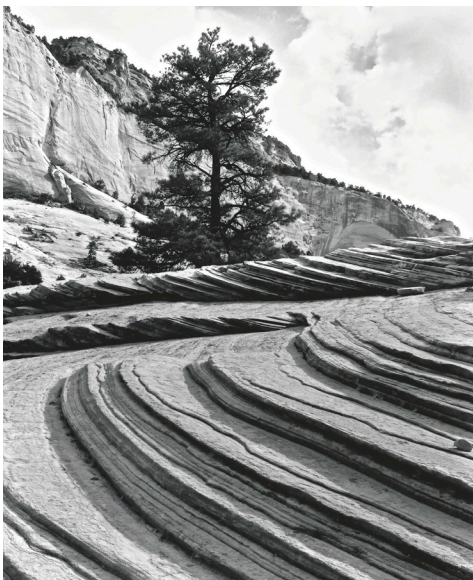
127 Pleistocene Place - Mojave, each 16"x20", 2020.

highlight details. Adams' method encompasses the entire photographic process, from light-metering through the final print. It's a complex and intensive darkroom procedure combining development times, developer dilutions, selective burning and dodging techniques, all accompanied by careful note taking. One can see and feel the results in these images ranging from the broad sweeps of "Hoodoos at Last Light" and "Cross-Bedded Ponderosa," to the mid-field portraits of "Potato Granite" and "Mojave Stonehenge," and finally the lush details of "Ice" and "Striations."

Both Zion National Park and the Maya are known for their colors, but Michael chose black and white: "Color is a great aid in explaining the outward appearance of things and how they work, while black and white can have greater sensitivity to their inner significance. In color, the viewer is immediately and foremost drawn to the color itself, and can rarely see past it to composition, form, positive and negative space. Especially with regards to the Mayan portraits. Because their clothing is so colorful, the viewer would be hard-pressed to look beyond all that to see the person within."

Michael expressed his concern for the future of black and white photography: "With the current state of digital b/w photography being what it is and analog being what it is, my personal view is the future of b/w photography is by no means secure. By this I am referring to archival stability. When my work was placed in the National Museum of the American Indian, the photo archivist there and I had this long conversation about a conference she attended with other curators and archivists addressing this very notion. Is digital photography in its current state geared for archival longevity? The consensus was an emphatic no."

Michael lived just outside Zion National Park for thirty years with his wife, graphic designer Sandy Bell. In 1983 he received a commission from Instituto Guatemalteco de Turismo to support his work in Guatemala which also culminated in his first international exhibition in Guatemala City that year. In 1993 he



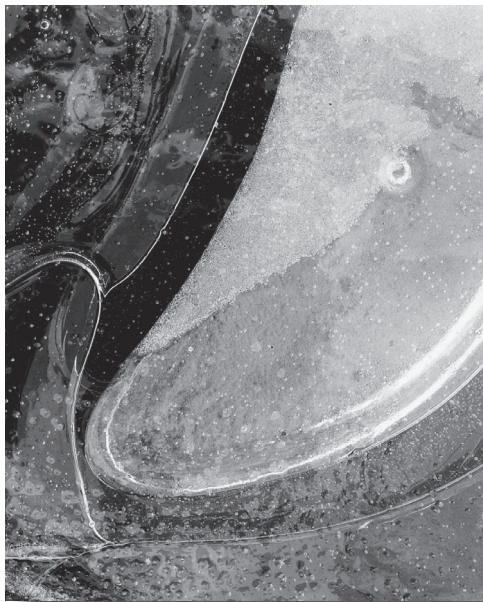
Cross-bedded Ponderosa, 11"x14", 2015.



Potato Granite - Mojave, 20"x24", 2016.

received a Visual Artist Fellowship from the Utah Arts Council. He became the Director of the Zion Canyon Field Institute in 2005. His award-winning book with this writer, *Southern Paiute: A Portrait*, was published by Utah State University Press in 2010. Fifty-six pieces of his work were accepted into the permanent collection of the Smithsonian's National Museum of the American Indian in 2013. Plyler's photographs are held in numerous collections including the Heard Museum, the San Diego Museum of Man, The Museum of the American Indian, the Museo Ixchel in Guatemala City, and the Centro de Investigaciones Regionales de Mesoamerica in Antigua, Guatemala. He and Sandy moved to Carson City, Nevada, in 2021.

Logan Hebner
Rockville, UT
January, 2023



Ice - Zion, 15"x18", 2003.



Striations - Zion, 15"x18", 1999.



Michael Plyler

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