

## MISTY KEASLER

### *Guatemala City Dump: Life on the Rim*

*Life* Magazine photographer Margaret Bourke-White once wrote that with the camera in front of her face she would forget that the rest of her body was exposed to the artillery destroying the terrain. Later, if they took the time to think about it, her audiences would realize that she had been standing dangerously close to bullets, and this impression would become part of their appreciation of her work. She was caught up in the experience of transforming action into memorable stillness; the viewer had the contemplative distance to admire her success and wonder at the risks.

Misty Keasler's pictures in the Guatemala City Dump compel us to wonder both about the people who live in this hellish site and how this photographer could willingly and repeatedly tread in the filth and reeking smell of a vast refuse dump to complete her self-assigned project. This is not Paris or Machu Picchu or Easter Island or any other such romantically exotic location that we can easily understand would attract a photographer. Her subject is not war, an unexpected disaster, or any other subject that is newsworthy in a time-critical way. This dump is a place I don't want to know exists on this scale, much less that people live and work here. Most of us successfully strive to forget that each day, we wear or consume what we need (or simply want), and we also discard pounds of packaging, broken objects, tattered clothes, and spoiled food. We don't want to know in clear detail where that debris and spoilage goes or what it amounts to when piled and left by the ton. We don't want to know that somewhere, anywhere, in the world, people live and work amidst these piles with the fetid smells and the constant sounds of

trucks, bulldozers, and cawing birds in order to support themselves and their families. Or, that some of these families have lived there for generations. Keasler wants us to know this, and she has developed a distinct personal approach to capture our attention.

Choosing this subject presents her with two vital dilemmas. One, these are politically and socially motivated pictures that raise issues about poverty, child welfare, and consumer waste. How does one make



*Kids On Couch.* 2004, Type-C Print.

politically oriented pictures that also transcend the political issues embedded within to become memorable images? And two, as she said, "How do I find the moments of beauty in these lives while documenting the harsh realities and their struggles?"<sup>1</sup>

Her solutions arise from her earlier works. Although Keasler is only 26 years old, the Guatemala City Dump is her sixth photographic project. She had worked in Guatemala before, photographing orphanages, a subject she'd also covered in Russia,

Romania and Kenya. She began with a trip to Russia in 1999 when she was still in college, but was working with assistance from Buckner Orphan Care International. She was motivated, she wrote, "by wanting to describe an emotionally charged, dramatic subject through subtle, understated photographs."<sup>2</sup> Although she doesn't speak Russian, she stayed in the orphanages for extended amounts of time, getting to know the spaces as well as the staff and the children. Ultimately it was the institutional activity and qualities in the rooms as much as the children that became her subject.

Her style is to let the spaces speak for themselves. She pulls back physically and emotionally, revealing each room in rich detail: the rows of head-to-foot beds, colorful reproductions pasted over wall cracks, missing floor tiles, and stained sinks. The rich wall colors and other endearing attempts for light and cheer contrast with rigid orderliness, easy-to-maintain furniture,

and multiples of everything (diapers, hot plates, sinks, and lockers.) Keasler's approach is not directive. She doesn't overtly seek the viewers' sympathy, disapproval or corrective action. "I haven't edited the images in a way to evoke any particular emotion from the viewer," wrote Keasler. "These images make up a more holistic view of the rooms and how the orphans moving in and out of them affect the spaces."<sup>3</sup> Some children pose stiffly; others turn cartwheels. One might look at the pictures and question why such large

orphanages still need to exist and yet, simultaneously relish the human impulse to personalize and humanize one's environment. The unregulated acts of human intervention within codified spaces manifest the complex and, at times, conflicting needs of public institutions and the individuals they serve.

Moving forward, how does Keasler transplant a style formulated in large institutional rooms to the vast, open, chaotic spaces of a city dump and to the small, makeshift rooms built out of scrap material by the trash pickers? As before, she simultaneously defuses and maintains the political and social content. She uses formal composition skills to give structure, but the hellish conditions abound. For instance, a scruffy boy in diapers is clearly where a child ought not to be. Dirty and centrally placed in the picture amid ash and refuse, he seems both curious and defiant. The potential dangers from heavy moving equipment pale compared to the toxicity of the site. Keasler reports that infant mortality is high and children under five are constantly ill. If they survive to five, they seem to have a sufficiently fortified immune system.

Pattern and color are also commonalities within all of Keasler's projects. The photographers she most admires are contemporary men and women working with large-scale color images, such as Joel Sternfeld, Richard Misrach, and the team Virginia Beahan and Laura McPhee. In Russia, Keasler worked with the rich, red, middle-Eastern patterns in rugs and fabrics and the offbeat placement of wall decorations, such as white wall tiles haphazardly glued to replace fallen blue ones. The colors in the dump are a paler hue: white, gray and brown predominate, the sources being plastic, ash, and unspeakables. But Coke cans, McDonald's

wrappers, and blue labels on water bottles add distinctive accents. It is a garbage dump, but as critic Janet Kutner observed, "Early morning fog masks the horror of the same, transforming it into ephemeral abstraction."<sup>4</sup> Her image in which this disgusting chaos almost fills the frame is simultaneously appealing and repulsive.

Beyond the dump, Keasler has photographed both the people who live inside its boundaries (approximately 50–100 individuals) and the 10,000 who squat on land fill on the rim. The latter are called "invaders" because they have established colonies on public land. Those inside are the poorest inhabitants, but oddly, they face less harassment from the authorities. Both groups earn their living recycling. Often each person specializes, hunting only glass, cans, or plastic. At the end of the day, dealers purchase the pickers' hauls by weight at 30 to 40 cents a kilo. The pickers' homes are built from what they find: corrugated tin, cardboard, discarded furniture and barrels. Keasler pays



*Dump In Midday Sun.* 2004, Type-C Print.

attention to "the uses made of wreckage, the way lives are crafted out of ruin."<sup>5</sup> Her fine eye for ironic detail and the human need to decorate prevail. Like others worldwide, these children collect teddy bears. Here too, decorated Christmas trees denote the season. Snapshots get pinned to walls or propped on furniture that sits on dirt floors. These are quiet pictures. She loves soft light and the charm of idiosyncratic, still lives. What she saw while working haunted her long after her return to the US, but the pictures are respectful of the pickers. Keasler's respect affirms the pickers' efforts to transcend the horror and danger in their lives and in so doing, she has made me aware and thoughtful about a condition that I would otherwise have avoided ever considering.

Anne Wilkes Tucker  
Gus and Lyndall Wortham Curator  
Museum of Fine Arts, Houston

## MISTY KEASLER

*Resides in Dallas, TX.*

### EDUCATION

2001 Bachelor of Arts with Honors, Columbia College, Chicago, IL.

### SOLO EXHIBITIONS

2005 *Women & Their Work, Guatemala City Dump: Life on the Rim*, Austin, TX.

Houston Center for Photography, *Guatemala City Dump: Life on the Rim*, Houston, TX.

2004 *Photographs Do Not Bend* Gallery, Dallas, TX.

Galveston Arts Center, *Deep East Texas*, Galveston, TX. (In conjunction with FotoFest, Houston, TX)

Roger Williams Metro Gallery, *Orphans' Space*, Providence, RI. (In conjunction with SPE National Conference, Newport, RI)

2002 *Photographs Do Not Bend* Gallery, Dallas, TX.

2001 The Bill Wright Gallery, Abilene, TX.

1999 Turley Gallery, Dallas, TX.

### GROUP EXHIBITIONS

2004 KMOPA, Japan, Spring. *Young Portfolio: Photographs by the Next Generation.*

2003 Tisch School of the Arts Gallery, NYU, New York, NY. *25 & Under 25.*

*New American Talent 18*, Juried exhibition by Dominic Molon, Curator of Contemporary Art, MCA Chicago.

*Women & Their Work*, Austin, TX. *Inside/Outside*, Co-curated by Anne Tucker, Gus and Lyndall Wortham Curator, Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, and Clint Willour, Director, Galveston Arts Center. *This exhibit toured to the Galveston Arts Center, The Houston Center for Photography and the Grace Museum, Abilene, TX.*

KMOPA, Japan, Spring. *Young Portfolio: Photographs by the Next Generation.*

### GRANTS/AWARDS

2003 Lange-Taylor Prize, The Center for Documentary Studies, Duke University.

Dallas Museum of Art DeGolyer Award.

*Photo District News*; Selected one of the top 30 young photographers in the world.

2001 Weisman Grant for continuing art projects.

2000 Jack Jaffe Documentary Scholarship, Columbia College, Chicago, IL.

### REVIEWS / PUBLICATIONS

2004 *PDN Photo Annual, Photo District News*, June.

*25 & Under 25*, published by the Center for Documentary Studies, Duke University. Fall.

Review by Atteqa Ali, *Arthies Magazine*, Spring. Deep East Texas, *Tokion*, March.

*Harper's*, March.

2003 *PDN's 30: Emerging Talent for 2003, Photo District News*, March.

Who's Next, *Texas Monthly*, February.

2002 Review by Charles Dee Mitchell, *Art in America*, December.

Russian Orphanage, *NEST*, Fall.

Review by Janet Tyson, *Arthies Magazine*, Summer.

Silent Ghetto, *Doubletake Magazine*, Spring.

### MUSEUM COLLECTIONS

Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, TX.

Museum of Contemporary Photography, Chicago, IL.

Kiyosato Museum of Photographic Arts, Japan.

<sup>1</sup> Phone conversation with Anne Tucker, February 9, 2005

<sup>2</sup> Unpublished artist statement

<sup>3</sup> Ibid

<sup>4</sup> Janet Kutner, "When Home is a Harsh Place," Dallas Morning News, November 10, 2004

<sup>5</sup> Press release quoting Keasler and writer Charles D'Ambrosio application to the Dorothea Lange – Paul Taylor Prize, which they were awarded in 2003, to collaborate on the City Dump project.