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Macduff, the Maya, and 40 years of photographs

By Christopher Reynolds

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Macduff Everton is a Santa Barbara-based photographer with a wide reputation for wide pictures — often-staggering landscapes he creates using a panoramic camera in locations from Patagonia to Paris. (In fact, an [exhibition](#) of his Patagonia images will hang through Oct. 27 at the PYO Gallery LA in downtown Los Angeles.) But Everton's latest project is different. It's a set of intimate black-and-white images of Maya people on Mexico's Yucatán Peninsula. It's called "[The Modern Maya: Incidents of Travel and Friendship in Yucatán](#)" (University of Texas Press, 2012). And it's been gestating for four decades. In this edited email Q&A, Everton explains why ditched the big pictures for this project, offers shrewd advice on how to buy a Yucatecan hammock, and remembers what happened down there one time after a long night of drinking. Here is a gallery of photographs from the book.

Q: You're best known for panoramic images that verge on the epic. And the Maya are known for ruins that are fairly epic themselves. Yet your most recent Maya pictures are black and white, and much more intimate. Why?

It all began when I first visited Yucatán in 1967. At that time documentary photography was traditionally black and white. Since this book has always been about my Maya friends and their lives over time, I didn't want readers to be seduced and distracted by the vibrant colors of the tropics. I wanted the Maya to become real for the reader rather than pretty pictures.

As for my other work, I started using a panoramic camera when images with my regular camera weren't providing the viewer a sense of place. I could be off living in a *campamento* in the jungles of Quintana Roo and people would ask what hotel I stayed at. It would have been easy to blame the viewer for not "getting it," but I knew that it was up to me to rectify this. I bought a panoramic camera with a moving lens. It covers nearly 150 degrees — what the eye sees with peripheral vision. At that time, in order to support my Maya project, I was working as a muleskinner for a pack station in Golden Trout Wilderness [in California's Sierra Nevada] and then as a whitewater river guide in California and Oregon, living in the backcountry. I was using my peripheral vision, and when I picked up the camera there was no learning curve.

How did your relationship with the Maya and their territory start?

I took off for Yucatán when I was 19. I was hired by an educational film company to create anthropological and archaeological filmstrips for the college level and they put me in charge of their Latin American division. I was supposed to go to South America. We figured I could be through Mexico in a matter of weeks. I was so naïve. I fell in love with Mexico. It is an unbelievable country with nearly 300 languages and tens of thousands of archaeological sites. I couldn't leave... The Maya seduced me. Even though I was a stranger, the Maya invited me into their homes and made me comfortable and welcome. I felt that Yucatán's real treasure was its people. I decided I wanted to work on a book project portraying the living Maya. When I asked to photograph them they had no idea what I was talking about. No one in a village had a camera, so the few photographs that people had commemorated special events such as weddings and baptisms. Villagers went to the nearest city that had a photo studio. They stood at attention in front of the camera in their best clothes, stiff as soldiers with nary a smile nor a twinkle. No one owned snapshots. The idea of making a photographic recording of their lives didn't make sense to them on several levels. Not only had they not seen anything like this among their family and friends, they also

studio. They stood at attention in front of the camera in their best clothes, stiff as soldiers with nary a smile nor a twinkle. No one owned snapshots. The idea of making a photographic recording of their lives didn't make sense to them on several levels. Not only had they not seen anything like this among their family and friends, they also hadn't seen Maya appear in movies, commercials or advertisements.

At first, when I went around with my camera, they treated me as if I were the village idiot. Tolerated, indulged, and humored. But in many ways, being the village idiot was a great entrée into village life as no one considered me a threat. So they let me photograph them.

And I learned that asking people if I could photograph them often opened up so many unforeseen opportunities. The hard part was overcoming my shyness. It forced me to interact with my subjects.

Everything changed when I came back and gave them photos. Over the years my friends became increasingly sophisticated in their critical appreciation of photography and began to understand what I was doing. They started to suggest photos. They would invite me to photograph not only ceremonies or special occasions, but also daily occurrences. For my part, I learned that they were uncomfortable with silhouettes of themselves, or any photograph that made their skin color appear dark, so I tried to give them lighter prints.

What were you aiming for with the new book?

I wanted to tell my friends' stories. There aren't many documentary photography projects that span more than 40 years, especially working with the same individuals and their families. In fact, I felt that I'd finished our project in 1991 when the University of New Mexico Press published "The Modern Maya." However, since its publication, there have been so many significant events on the peninsula and in the lives of my friends that we need to add another two decades to their stories.

First, NAFTA put nearly 3 million Mexican farmers out of work. For the Maya, an agrarian culture, this had a devastating effect—so much of the knowledge that is in their culture is connected to the way that they farm. When they stop farming, they lose the understanding of their relationship with the land that's built into their farming system. If one generation isn't learning in the field with their parents, that information is lost. Then there are the evangelical sects who forbid their members from participating in most community activities where before the entire village took part. And tourism became the major industry, transforming the Caribbean coastline into some of the most valuable real estate in Mexico. Now the Maya are the masons who build the hotels, and the maids, gardeners, janitors, bellboys, drivers, bartenders, waiters and waitresses who serve the more than 10 million tourists who arrive each year to explore the Yucatán Peninsula, visit its archaeological sites and relax on the white sand beaches along the Riviera Maya.

What advice would you give to a non-photographer traveler headed to Yucatan for the first time?

Meet the Maya. Buy a hammock and ask where you could spend the night in a village. Ask where you could buy a home-cooked meal. If you don't speak Mayan or Spanish, talk like an Italian and use your hands. And a tip for buying a hammock—good ones are priced by weight—the more thread used, the bigger it is, and the higher the price. Ask to lie in it. You sleep diagonally in it so that you are almost level. Ask them to show you how to hang a hammock—you'll need two ropes for this—and there is a quick-release knot that makes it a lot easier. If you don't speak the language, use that to your advantage. Show interest and people will find a way to communicate.

And what about the serious photographer?

Same as above. Meet the Maya. And give photographs to the people that you work with. There are labs in most cities (and Costco in Cancún) where you can get prints almost immediately and then you can hand them out.

Is there a moment that stands out for you in this project?

I first photographed Fernando Puc Che in 1971. Several years later, in 1976, his mother died and was buried. In 1980, according to local custom, his family dug up her bones, freeing the cemetery plot for another burial—a common enough practice in areas of very rocky soil. The bones were put into a small white box to be kept in his father's house. That evening there was a service and celebration in her remembrance accompanied by ritual drinking. About 3 a.m. Nado (Fernando) and I were finishing off an umpteenth bottle of rum. He had been reluctant to let me photograph him years before. But as we drank in the jungle darkness outside of the house, he told me, "Macduff, you are one sumbitch." He passed me the bottle, and I waited to hear what he would say. "Today we dug up my mother," he continued, "and my children don't even remember her. But because of you, because of the photographs you took of me, my children—and their children, and their children's children—will know who I am, and what my life was like." He reached for the rum, took a swallow, and raised the bottle in a toast. "You've made me immortal. People will remember me."