

aperture



**SIXTY YEARS OF
MAGNUM BY
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ROBERTO HUARCAYA THE SHIP SAILS ON

Fate is one of the most confining ideas unless you are destined to be free. Peruvian photographer Roberto Huarcaya may think like a psychologist because of his training, or perhaps he trained to be a psychologist because of the way he thinks. In either case, his psychological thinking has a deep impact upon his photographic work.

Psychologists—in spite of their mission to coin knowledge as language—often have to deal with images: they have to understand the intricacies of both the right and the left sides of the human brain, including perception, cognition, emotion, fixation, delusion, and memory. Early in his career, Huarcaya used strategies similar to those of Duane Michals—staging, acting, sequencing, nudity, long exposures and double-exposures—to express mental states through photographs. In spite of the inconvenience of backlighting, for these early projects Huarcaya often chose background windows (or, as fate would have it, windows were in place) as sources of light. One can read them as symbols of the entrenched “inner/outer” metaphor representing the self (mind) and the external world. In *Desencuentro* (Misencounter, 1989) a nude man and woman in an interior take turns before a window, never touching

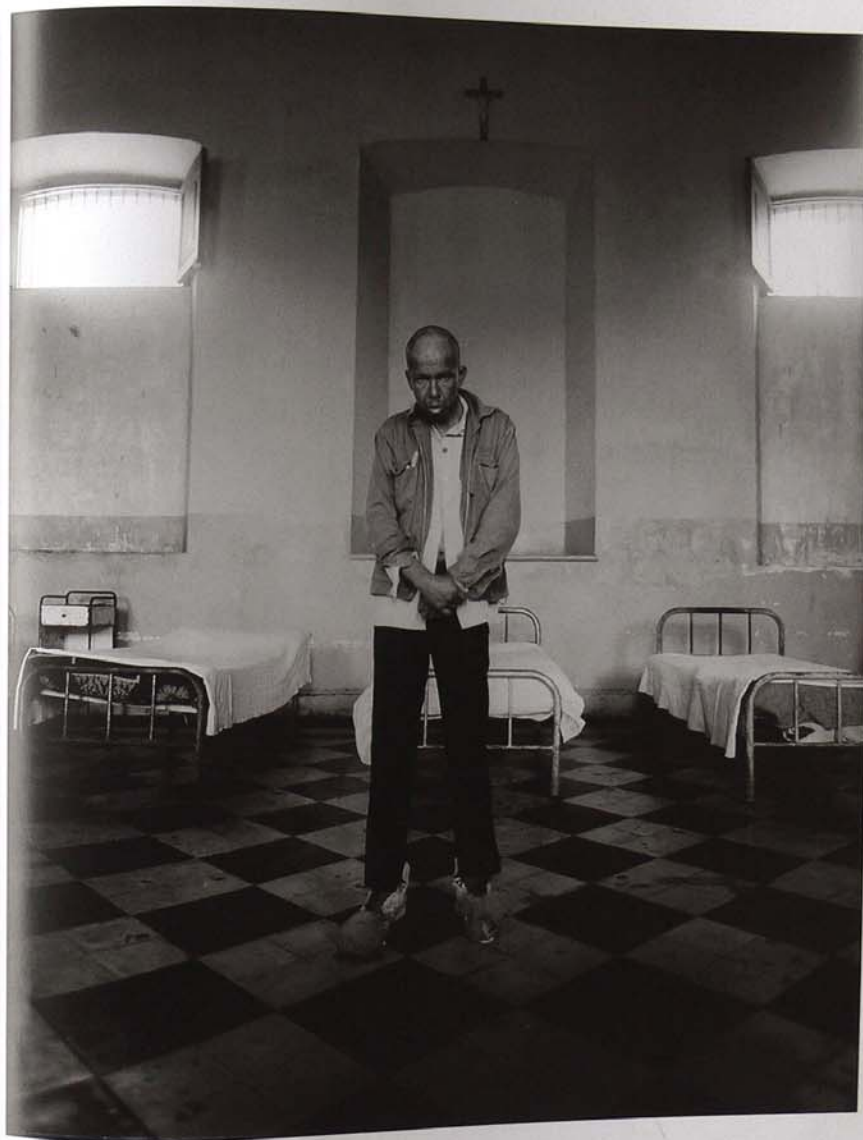


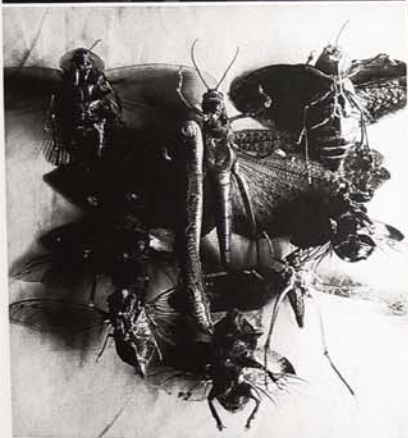
BY FERNANDO CASTRO R.

each other. Childhood memories and adult obsessions play out on and around the couch and psychoanalyst's armchair before two large windows in the series “*Deseos, Temores, y Divanes*” (Desires, fears, and couches, 1990). A number of four-image grids, *Untitled* (1992), show a naked woman who sleeps, turns, and—we presume—associates her fears with dreams of bats, worms, insects, spiders.

In 1993 Huarcaya started a project titled “*La Nave del Olvido*” (The ship of oblivion), about the inmates of the Hospital Psiquiátrico Victor Larco Herrera in Lima. The title alludes to Michel Foucault's “ship of fools” (first discussed in his 1961 *Folie et déraison*—misleadingly translated as *Madness and Civilization*). The term refers to a purported practice in Renaissance Europe of sending mad people and fools away, out of sight, abandoning them to their own fate. Huarcaya's twist on the title underscores the idea that institutionalizing the mentally ill may be tantamount to forgetting about them.

For this project, Huarcaya started off in a straightforward documentary mode. After familiarizing himself with the hospital's environs and allowing the patients to interact with his conspicuous 4-by-5 camera (at times





PAGE 38: From the series "Deseos, Temores, y Divanes" (Desires, fears, and couches), 1990;
 PAGE 39: From the series "La Nave del Olvido" (The ship of oblivion), 1994;
 ABOVE: Untitled, 1992; OPPOSITE: Installation view of *El Retorno del Olvido* (The return of oblivion), 1997.

allowing them to take pictures), he made portraits of them. Two of the backdrops—chosen by the inmates themselves—are particularly telling: the spacious common rooms with checkered floors, and an outdoor corner with a tower crowned by an enormous pigeon shelter. In one portrait from this series, Huarcaya applies a formula that was frequently used by his countryman Martín Chambi: the subject in the foreground is nuanced by a "chance" appearance of a secondary subject in the background. In Huarcaya's image, we see a disheveled inmate in a tight gray jacket, standing like a chess piece on the checkered floor, while in the background another man appears to be relieving himself at the urinals. The neat and rational pattern of the floor tiles contrasts markedly with the unkempt presence of the two inmates, echoing the rift that we—the "sane"—place between ourselves and these subjects.

According to one pop-psychology platitude, there are no accidents. As Huarcaya explored the different corners of the hospital, shooting architectural details of the 1920s building, he came upon a neglected room where specimens of human brains and fetuses were stored in dusty jars. This chance discovery gave rise to Huarcaya's most compelling series of works, "Continuum" (1994). He moved to color film to photograph these fetuses—including a pair of twins that seem strangely to cuddle together—suspended in yellowish formaldehyde, with unexpected reflections of the purplish hues of Lima's perpetually overcast skies.

At this stage of Huarcaya's project, he made a quantum leap. Partially filling enormous glass containers with water, he submerged and photographed members of four generations of his own family: his father, grandfather, twin nephews, and himself. The living twins establish a visual and existential link with the unborn twins in the hospital's storage room; indeed, there are as many continua as there are marked departures between the two types of "specimen." Their juxtaposition and the size

distortion—as Huarcaya's living relatives are photographically shrunk and the fetuses blown up—add a level of bewilderment to images that are already very peculiar.

Since the early 1990s Huarcaya has toyed with the idea of treating his photographic images as objects that are isolated in space—mimicking a kind of "mental space." He developed this idea in the installation *Nacimiento/Muerte* (Birth/Death, 1994), a series of ten portraits of newborn babies and of recently deceased people, young and old: an exploration of the peripheries of life. At the 1997



Havana Biennial, Huarcaya's idea of images occurring in a "mental space" took an interesting shape in the installation *El Retorno del Olvido* (The return of oblivion). Oversized prints of the fresh eyes of children, the intense eyes of the young, the troubled eyes of adults, and the drooping eyes of the old hang around a spiral staircase together with some images of a jar containing a brain (from "Continuum") and newly deceased babies (from *Nacimiento/Muerte*). The viewer is prompted to travel twice along the spiraling space of the work: once on the way up the staircase and again on the way down.

Possibly as a result of these projects, Huarcaya was awarded the Cité International des Arts residency

fellowship in Paris in 1997. In France, three concepts began to connect in his works: the omen, the accident, and the fragment. Just before he left for Paris, he had started a series of works titled "Flores" (Flowers, 1997), in which flower vases placed on small tables are about to tip over. As the supporting tables collapse we witness—by way of photographic artifice—the instant just prior to the shattering of the vases. *Tiempos Soñados* (Dreamed times, 1998) is a grid of transparencies on light boxes that come together to represent a globe and the twelve symbols of the zodiac—perhaps a detour toward esoteric thinking, or is Huarcaya objectifying the idea that heavenly bodies have an effect on human behavior?





In spite of its title, *Creación* (Creation, 1998), one of the most elaborate of Huarcaya's Paris works, does not run along felicitous lines or touch on the grandiose humanism of the Sistine Chapel ceiling. However, there is a vestige of Michelangelo's iconic hands reaching for each other, as Huarcaya himself and his wife Daniela are depicted swimming spermlike toward each other in the midst of butterflies and sunflowers. A child is in their mind; the work is a celebration of reproduction. *Presagio* (Presage, 1998), on the other hand, is as ominous as *Creación* is joyful. Several skeletons arrive on the backs of fish. On the dark waters of the Seine there is a sinister octopus and the figure of a person who may be drowning or drowned.

Quiromancia (Divination, 2003) is a group of images of hands on whose palms the lines—so often associated with fate—are written over with text. On an older person's hand we read: "As a child she endured the horrors of World War II." On a younger hand: "She wants to be a veterinarian when she grows up." Some phrases are more oracular and even tautological: "Life lasts however long it lasts."

Upon Huarcaya's return to Lima, after his stay in Paris, he underwent a series of misfortunes and joys, from the death of his father to the birth of a son. As fate (or some faulty logic) would have it, all previous works seem to have led to Huarcaya's "El Último Viaje" (The last journey, 2004): twelve nocturnal images of automobiles wrecked, presumably, in highway accidents. The misshapen pieces of fenders, hoods, engines, and chassis are rendered unreal by the flashlight illumination that fragments them further. There is nothing autobiographical about these works—but something powerfully biographical. In spite of the destruction, there is no gore among the twisted pieces. Huarcaya's wrecked automobiles are, in a sense, like Weegee's forensic finds. Were it not for the flashlight illumination, one might presume that the artist had switched back to the documentary mode. But the wrecks reveal the obvious—namely, that these vehicles belonged to people who were heading somewhere when they met their fate. ◻

PREVIOUS PAGES: From the series "Continuum," 1994;

LEFT: From the series "El Último Viaje" (The last journey), 2004.

Photographs courtesy of the artist