

Mona Kuhn

Native

For her latest series of photographs, *Native*, Mona Kuhn returned to her homeland Brazil in search of connections both past and present. It was a journey fuelled by an emotional desire to understand her relationship with the place where she had spent the first 20 years of her life. The allegories of returning to a homeland run deep and wide in human experience and have many varied expressions in arts, music, and literature. Kuhn's point of entry was photographic, a visual inquiry that lead her through urban, social, and natural landscapes. Her recently published book (*Native*, Steidl, 2009) weaves together photographs of nature and people in a highly personal portrait of a place seen through the artist's eyes and imagination. For those familiar with Kuhn's work, the imagery in *Native* will seem immediately recognisable, but the shift of environment seeps into these photographs at a slow and subtle pace that is typical of Kuhn's style.

We spoke with Mona Kuhn about this new body of work and the experience of returning home with a camera aimed at the unknown.

Heather Snider: It has been a long time since you lived in Brazil; you've spent your adult life elsewhere. Though you undoubtedly expected things would be unfamiliar, what things surprised you the most as you dug under the surface and tried to operate in this new yet familiar situation?

Mona Kuhn: I wasn't so surprised because it was very familiar. It was more like the reoccurrence of something you once knew but had forgotten. I was surprised by how connected I still am, emotionally, to everything there: the smells, the taste, and the feel of my own body in such a familiar environment.

HS: What were the biggest challenges you faced?

MK: My biggest challenge was finding the people that I wanted to photograph. I've been working in a naturalist community because I want to do nudes and I want it to be an authentic experience, where people are already in the nude. But Brazil is, despite the images of bikini beaches and Carnival, a Catholic, Latin American country, and not as open as you might think. Interacting with the people there, and old friends, took time. Trust had to be established. But once it all started rolling

then it grew by word of mouth, which is in the end most fulfilling. Through good fortune I was able to find a place where I could bring people to photograph, a place that had been empty for 20 years and coincidentally had the palette that I wanted to use. A friend of mine told me about an apartment, and offered to show it to me. When we opened the door I knew immediately that it was the place. In France I have my own closed environment to work in but in Brazil I didn't have that place. I didn't want to use my own personal house because it wasn't about exploring my own attic. I wanted it to be more abstract than that, to be a fantasy and not autobiographical. I didn't want the sepia reproduction photographs of my grandparents in the background!

HS: The whole process of working in Brazil was quite different from how you have been working for the past few years, yet you achieved a remarkable consistency in your imagery. How much did you have to consciously work on this? What were the parameters you set to make sure you stayed within the rather specific visual language you have delineated in your work up to this point?

MK: I like researching. When I realised I wanted to do something in Brazil, something that would interpret my own feelings about Brazil now, as an adult, I looked at things that had been done. I knew what I did not want to do: Carnival, the beaches, the poor people in the streets, and the images of happiness and Bossanova. I started narrowing my thoughts, becoming more and more personal, and realised my interest was in the internal, the emotions of living there. I wanted to use colours that I always felt were part of my life there: the greens, the yellows, and the pinks. The way I worked with the people was similar to how I usually work, it was just a bit more moody perhaps. But with photography, inside your parameters, you have to leave it loose and open, to allow for the spontaneous and let life be what it is, so that was an important part of it too.

HS: Would you say you were searching for something in particular, or wondering what you would find? If so, what was "it?"

MK: There is a quote of Eugene Smith's, I don't remember it exactly, but it is something like this: "You

must be lost before you can find yourself again"... that thought was often in my mind. When you go back to your childhood place, certain things seem so mundane, but you have to remind yourself to see things with new eyes. I was working intuitively, not knowing what was going to come out, letting myself react, putting myself into situations. I didn't really know what I was looking for, which was good, because my antennae were open to everything. When I found the apartment it started coming into focus. The first trip I made was very broad and open, but it was like being a cat: you throw it and it has to land on its own feet.

HS: Would you say that this series is more about yourself than earlier work?

MK: It is about myself because it is my homeland, but I'd say that my other work is equally about myself in other ways. I also still go to France to work and that work is a big part of who I am and have been for the past 15 years. *Native* is about my first 20 years.

HS: Was this work done mostly in Sao Paolo? Can we talk about choosing to portray only interiors and nature in the midst of one of the biggest urban environments in the world?

MK: I worked mostly in the state of Sao Paolo, though some of the forest regions were further out, in different areas. But many of these portraits were taken in the city, in the very heart of the city. I didn't really want to capture reality. I wasn't interested in portraying where it was, more in entering the thoughts. In the editing, the way the apartment photographs and jungle photographs work together, my intention was to be inconclusive. It's not meant to be about Sao Paolo. It is about a mood, about Brazil, about a bird returning to a nest in the forest. Just like my work in France is not about the Medoc region. It is about a fantasy place.

HS: Jungles are such potent metaphors: thick, dense with life in a dangerous sort of way, a fecund, untamed environment. As a child growing up in Brazil, what was the jungle of your imagination, or real life experience? What is your adult perspective on the jungle, and on the Brazilian jungle in particular?



© Mona Kuhn – Sultry, 2009



© Mona Kuhn – *Heartbeat*, 2009



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© Mona Kuhn – *Livia & Renan*, 2009



© Mona Kuhn – Nest, 2009



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© Mona Kuhn – *Jungle Roots*, 2009



© Mona Kuhn – Gabriel, 2009

MK: When you enter a forest, deep into a forest, and walk under very tall trees, you realise how overpowering nature is. It has a spirituality that draws you into it. It is also a place where you can escape and create your own reality. For an adult, it has the power of bringing your instincts out. You have to be aware of what's happening around you, your instincts are turned on, and human nature comes out. This is a different set of instincts than those of day-to-day street life. It is humid, you can smell your sweat, and feel the moisture in the air, your senses become more acute. The Brazilian forest is very sultry, and makes your sexual senses more acute. There is also a feeling of adventure, and fear, balanced by a sensual element.

HS: Were there any artists you were thinking of when you set about photographing, artists that you had in mind either for the idea of returning home or who portrayed similar environments?

MK: I was definitely looking at Rousseau, whose forests look like paradise, idyllic with beautiful fruits and so full of detail. But one thing I did not want to do was to pose people in the forest setting. I wanted the forest to be separate, a psychological atmosphere more than a real place. In the instances where I did photograph people there, it was because I happened to find them there or I was walking in the forest with a friend and we just decided to try it. I also looked at Gauguin, particularly a painting titled *Where Do we Come From: What Are We? Where Are We Going?* Gauguin was looking for clues, learning about life. He submerged himself in Tahiti and it became part of his life.

HS: There has always been a certain artifice to your photographs, of subjects being posed or placed, which is tempered by the very natural atmosphere of your work, the relaxed lack of self-consciousness. In most of these new images, your subjects weren't found in the environment, they were introduced for the purpose of making photographs. How did this change your working process and the photographs that you ended up with?

MK: I wanted to create a narrative, and it was important to put parameters in place as we mentioned earlier. Unlike Avedon travelling across America, or Irving Penn's use of a backdrop in many settings, I didn't want to isolate my subjects from their environment, or to photograph them as the "other" or the exotic. I wanted to photograph contemporary people that are part of my generation in Brazil, the people I might have been if I were living in Brazil today. The apartment we worked in was in the very centre of downtown Sao Paulo, one of the oldest areas of the city. At one time it was a prominent neighbourhood but now it is a marginal area, decayed and empty at night, not really a residential area. It took some time to get there from other areas of Sao Paulo and more than once the people I was photographing mentioned that the long drive getting there helped them to detach a bit from their everyday. Visiting this place we wouldn't normally go helped to enter a different state of mind, to abstract the moment.

HS: The interiors have a distinctive atmosphere, suggesting decay, abandonment, and to me are quite unfamiliar and mysterious. Are they, or are certain elements, particularly Brazilian? Do you think they would resonate differently to a viewer from Brazil than to someone who has never visited or lived there?

MK: I guess they are very Brazilian because there are hints about what the culture has gone through. The green walls reference the geography, the forest, and also the militarism in Brazil's history. There is also the decayed matte gold curtain, a sign of the early Euro-Baroque influence, and a light fixture that is very 1950s, an era in which Brazil was letting go and having their own cultural enlightenment. This was when Brasilia was built, and Brazil was developing a tropical Modernism. One of the portraits is of a woman named Veronica who is wearing a crucifix. When she came to the apartment she asked if she should take it off but I thought it was perfect, just a hint. All these things made sense to me, touching on the symbols of culture without entering it completely.

HS: I spoke with you the night before you left on one of your first trips for this project and you described to me a dream you'd had filled with anxiety, about the fears you had of the real dangers present in Brazil, and your concern that you might be putting yourself in harm's way. How did this anxiety work its way out in the process?

MK: I was very afraid, because I had experienced dangerous situations when I lived there and there is always the threat of random criminality. It was an anxiety about destiny. I was wondering what it meant for me to be returning and if I was tempting fate. Part of my creative process, a big part of the project, was to throw myself into unknown situations. Especially working in downtown as I was, and even in the forests there is the possibility that people can be hiding. I did everything alone. I didn't have an assistant. I didn't have security. I was putting myself into situations and had to be aware and alert, but the work is not about that. There certainly were risks, but I was not interested in documenting or portraying any of that in the photographs. This was just part of the territory I was working in. It did manifest itself twice while I was working there, but it wasn't part of the work.

HS: Will you go back to photograph in Brazil? Do you feel that this project is complete?

MK: It feels complete now. If I went back, I would do something else. My curiosity about coming to terms with the past is resolved. I was searching for the past but it was an oxymoron because you can never find the past. You can't go back. The people I met there represented the present.

HS: Recently you've also worked on a music video. Can you talk about working in this new form? There is an element of choreography in your work already; did this expand in new ways with the introduction of motion?

MK: I was invited to direct a music video, actually 3 short movies, for an artist I had worked with in the

past. In my photography the choreography is more spontaneous, and the personal body language of the models is so important because that is what makes them individuals. But in the movies there had to be a script, and more planning. It is also a lot more choreography working with a movie crew and having all these people around. I usually don't plan ahead and this had to be more controlled than I imagined. But once I was able to ignore the people around me and focus on the subject matter, it was a good experience. It was easier than my own photography, which is more personal, and involves the immediate one-on-one psychology with a person. The movies had this too, but I had a whole crew taking care of things so I didn't have to bother with the details and could really focus on what was happening in front of the camera. It was interesting to learn how to bring intimacy to the situation. Somehow we could do it.

HS: In one of the essays in your new book, Wayne Anderson mentions the quietude and silence of your photography. Do you agree with this observation? How did this change in regard to the above project, when you were literally working with sound?

MK: I do relate to the idea of slow motion, a pensive state, and the moments in between thoughts. Though my photographs show nudity, they are quiet as opposed to sexy. In making the video we weren't really working with sound, it was placed afterwards. We knew we had a five-minute space we had to create and I knew the music and the lyrics, but it was a visual process.

HS: Are you already working on your next project, what ideas are next on the horizon?

MK: I have been working on a side project for the past couple of summers in the Bordeaux region of France, a collection of portraits over a long period of time all taken in the same room. It is quite traditional, and it may take as long as wine to reach maturity. Meanwhile, I've started researching my next active project. I'd like to do something about my present time and place, which is Los Angeles. I'm still defining it, but it will be about my present, where I am now.

TEXT BY HEATHER SNIDER

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Jackson Fine Art, Atlanta: Mona Kuhn Native:

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