

Presidentes Municipales

Richard Tichich

There have been many portrait series which display a consistent expression of the photographer, for example, the work of Julia Margaret Cameron, Richard Avedon, Karsh, and Judy Dater. In this type of series the subjects play a secondary role to the creative style and presentation of the photographer.

The history of photography also reveals an endless rendering of the human subject. Once techniques were sufficiently sophisticated, nine out of ten daguerreotypes featured a person. Sometime these photographs were only faint shadows with no special "artistic" treatment, but their surfaces captured the spirit of the subject. For the most part, our ancestors have become nameless faces photographed by anonymous photographers. But when we consider the portrait in a series, the hand of the artist is eventually revealed. As individual images, E. J. Bellocq's photographs of the ladies of New Orleans allow us to enter gently into the elegant houses and from a safe distance become detached voyeurs. We are free to look as long as we wish, we can freely take whatever we want, but we can never ask any questions. The photographs are silent and all the information must come out of our own experience, our own prejudices. As with a Rorschach test, we eventually see only ourselves reflected in the surface of the photograph. With an extended series such as Bellocq's we can begin to know as much about the artist as we do about his subjects.

It was my intention to conceptually construct the most neutral position possible when photographing the *Presidentes*. The idea of doing a portrait series of the mayors of Mexican cities came to me suddenly. There was no reflection on historical precedent or the feasibility of the project. Through the concerned efforts of Tita Valencia, Cultural Coordinator of the University of Mexico in San Antonio, Texas, I was awarded a grant to travel and to photograph in Mexico. I made no official application or proposal. Up until the last minute it was uncertain whether the money would actually be made available. Ms. Valencia's motivation was very idealistic: the artist, through his or her art, can function as a cultural ambassador if given the freedom to interact with another culture. I was free to photograph anything I wished. Her original concept was to have a photographer work with children because it was the closing of the International Year of the Child. I didn't like that idea. I'm not sure why, but I was certain that to work comfortably in a strange country and to produce a substantial series of photographs in a short time, my concept would have to be as narrow as possible. It would have to be a project that defined its own boundaries. I was totally unfamiliar with the political structure of the country and curious about the people who ran the cities of Mexico. In the face of limited knowledge of the history of Mexico a certain myth seemed to

surround the political leaders. When I first began telling people about the scope of the project, they all seemed interested in seeing the final outcome. Tita Valencia was both apprehensive and pessimistic about the idea. Given that I didn't speak Spanish and had no experience with the culture, she felt that it was an impossible project.

In retrospect I had two previous experiences that seem to have led me to this idea. The first is that, living in Galveston, Texas, with a population of 70,000, I had known the last three mayors of the city. Not one was a professional politician. The office is part-time and non-paying. Most cities seem to try to elect someone from the community who has exhibited a willingness to work unselfishly for the good of the community and who will approach problems more with common sense than with exceptional learning. I am not afraid to work with anyone who approaches problem solving with these credentials. I suspected that the elected officials of the Mexican cities would have the same qualities as any other leaders.

The second experience is my knowledge of the career of Paul Gittings, the Houston, Texas, photographer. Years ago I happened to read his autobiography, and in it he detailed his business and artistic philosophy. In particular, to establish his portrait business Gittings would arrange to photograph the political leaders of a city such as Houston, then exhibit the work in the most traveled of galleries, the local airport. The politicians loved the idea, and there was usually ample time for the traveler to view the work. Gittings's aesthetic approach gives the portraits a uniform look and says much more about the talents of the photographer than about the individuals being photographed. With this merchandising concept, other members of the community were willing to pay to join the elite club and be photographed according to the same aesthetic.

When I worked with the Mexican politicians, my approach was to neutralize as much as possible my own aesthetic input. In my case there was no need to sell the portraits or rely on merchandising the aesthetic treatment. My goal was merely to present the individual in his or her own surroundings. I did not want to idealize the major politicians with dramatic lighting and artificial settings, then use a totally different aesthetic when dealing with a small farming community. I wanted to standardize each sitting to allow for all the photographs to be compared with one another on an equal basis. When possible, I wanted to photograph the individual in his or her normal place of power—usually sitting at a desk. Unless the spirit of Benito Juarez objected, I utilized the same approach for each photograph. I felt free to violate the two primary rules of executive portraiture: first, never to shoot a businessman at his desk, and second, never to center the individual in the frame. With this obvious method of standardization I felt that the surrounding environment would provide as much information as would the individuals. I went to Mexico to fill in the blanks. On entering an office, I could readily see that the *Presidente* at his desk and what immediately surrounded it did all the

Richard Tichich is Director of The Galveston Arts Center on the Strand, Galveston, Texas, and an independent documentary photographer.

work. My role was that of a technician working to complete the one concept rather than make each photograph a single creative experience.

If anything, the major pictorial thrust of the series came through the selection of the cities to be photographed. Logistically, my approach was to select the largest cities in Mexico and to address a cover letter to the Presidente asking permission to take his portrait. Half of the Presidentes responded, and the typical reply was that they would be more than willing to participate and merely to contact them to arrange the sitting when I arrived. With the series in mind I felt it was extremely important to photograph the Presidente of Mexico City. The series would be incomplete if I obtained a small farming community without a photograph of the mayor of the largest city in the country to provide the necessary contrast. When crossing the border I still had not heard from Mexico City. I had 10 weeks to complete the shooting. Knowing that I wanted to photograph the largest cities in the country, I designed an itinerary by filling in the lines between these cities.

The first town I visited was Sabines Hidalgo, and any apprehensions I had about the feasibility of the project were immediately dispelled. The Presidente owned an auto parts store, and the sheriff was a mechanic who spoke English and had worked in Detroit. In the photograph, the Presidente is actually on the phone with the mayor of Cienega De Flores arranging the second portrait for that day. On my first day in Mexico I finished two portraits and knew that the series would be possible. The Mexican politicians seemed as interested in participating in the project as the people in the States in viewing the series. The response "*Si como no*" became a familiar one to my request. Throughout the trip it didn't seem as if I were traveling a lot. The next city was only about 5 miles away, and I had the option to stop whenever I wished; in every city there was a leader.

The title "mayor" does not conveniently translate into Spanish. My concept of the mayor of a city is the primary elected official. In the larger towns this title is Presidente Municipal; in the smaller, the elected official is the Agente Municipal, Sheriff, or Comisario. It is sometimes difficult to locate an inexpensive hotel, but to find the mayor of the city the search can start with asking the first person you meet. Everyone knows the Presidente and where his office is. There were times when, after I asked a policeman the location of the mayor's office, he would provide a police escort. In a smaller town an assistant rode off on a bicycle and brought the mayor back from lunch. I welcomed their cooperation, and they were honored to be included in the series.

The mayor of Mexico City presented the biggest challenge. As it turned out, arranging the portrait session was as easy as walking into his office and, through a series of intermediaries, merely asking for permission. I always carried a letter of introduction from Tita Valencia describing the scope of the project. Unless someone spoke English the mayors were unable to ask very detailed questions. In Mexico City the shooting session lasted not more

than 5 minutes. I was given an appointed time and asked to return. In the Presidente's office I arranged the camera and adjusted the lights. The presidente came into the room, greeted everyone, sat down and smiled as if he were addressing a classroom, and the photograph was taken. When work was completed, he immediately left. This brief encounter was a contrast to the session with the Presidente of Ciudad Victoria. Here the Presidente arranged a 2-hour lunch and a personal tour of the city. Most of the Presidentes did not seem to realize that my sole mission in Mexico was to take their portrait. They were all proud of their cities and were quick to point out the more traditional photographic opportunities.

There certainly is a difference in scope between community problems in Mexico City and in the small farming community I later used. The officials of one large city were skeptical of the feasibility of arranging the portraits. The mayor's executive secretary seemed unwilling to disrupt the mayor's schedule and said that the smaller cities would certainly cooperate because their Presidentes had nothing to do, but it would not be possible to arrange portrait sessions with the officials of the larger cities. His advice came quite late in the project, and, in fact, I had not been turned down by any city. Once I mentioned that I had already completed the Presidente of Mexico City, he seemed to adjust his ideas, and within 5 minutes I was lighting the mayor's office.

Each photograph has its own narrative, each Presidente ruled with his or her own sense of command. None seemed out of place. Their executive presence made my meetings with them comfortable experiences. I was surprised at their willingness to allocate time for a project they knew little about. To me they seemed to exhibit a natural sensitivity to working with someone who has an idea.

Mexican culture is revealed in many ways. Experiencing the Indian ruins, open markets, and cathedrals builds a fascinating mystique. The mixture of European and Indian cultures paints the country as brightly as the murals which cover the Presidentes' offices. The opportunity to gain access to those offices allowed me and, I hope, the viewer of the series to get a new view of the country.

I am now working on the second half of the portrait series and plan to photograph the mayors of Texas. The combined effort will demonstrate the visual differences between the cultures. I am interested in exploring the differences between the large and small towns in Texas as well as drawing cultural comparisons between the two countries.

The photographs of the Presidentes can tell their own stories, and within the series each can contrast itself with the others. I don't believe I should add anything to the photographs now. It's too late to add silver back to the image or to ask the Presidente to adjust his position. I think it best to remove this narrative from the photographs and allow the viewer to look inside the image for all the information. This text is merely a footnote to the photographs.

Figure 1

Cesar Santos Santos
Presidente Municipal
Monterrey, N.L.
Population: 2,000,000
Occupation: Lawyer

**Figure 2**

Jose Castillo Pombo
Presidente Municipal
Cuernavaca, Moralez
Population: 256,000
Occupation: Lawyer





Figure 3
Jesus Martinez Alvarez
Presidente Municipal
Oaxaca de Juarez, Oax
Population: 100,000
Occupation: Lawyer



Figure 4
Magdalena Vasquez
de Huicochea
Presidenta Municipal
Chilpancingo, Gro.
Population: 100,000
Occupation: Elementary
school teacher

Figure 5
 Homero Ibarra Montemayor
 Presidente Municipal
 Sabinas Hidalgo, N.L.
 Population: 32,000
 Occupation: Owns an auto
 parts store



Figure 6
 Jose Garcia Cruz
 Presidente Municipal
 Dolores Hidalgo, Gro.
 Population: 25,000
 Occupation:
 Juiz Del Jigatio Civil

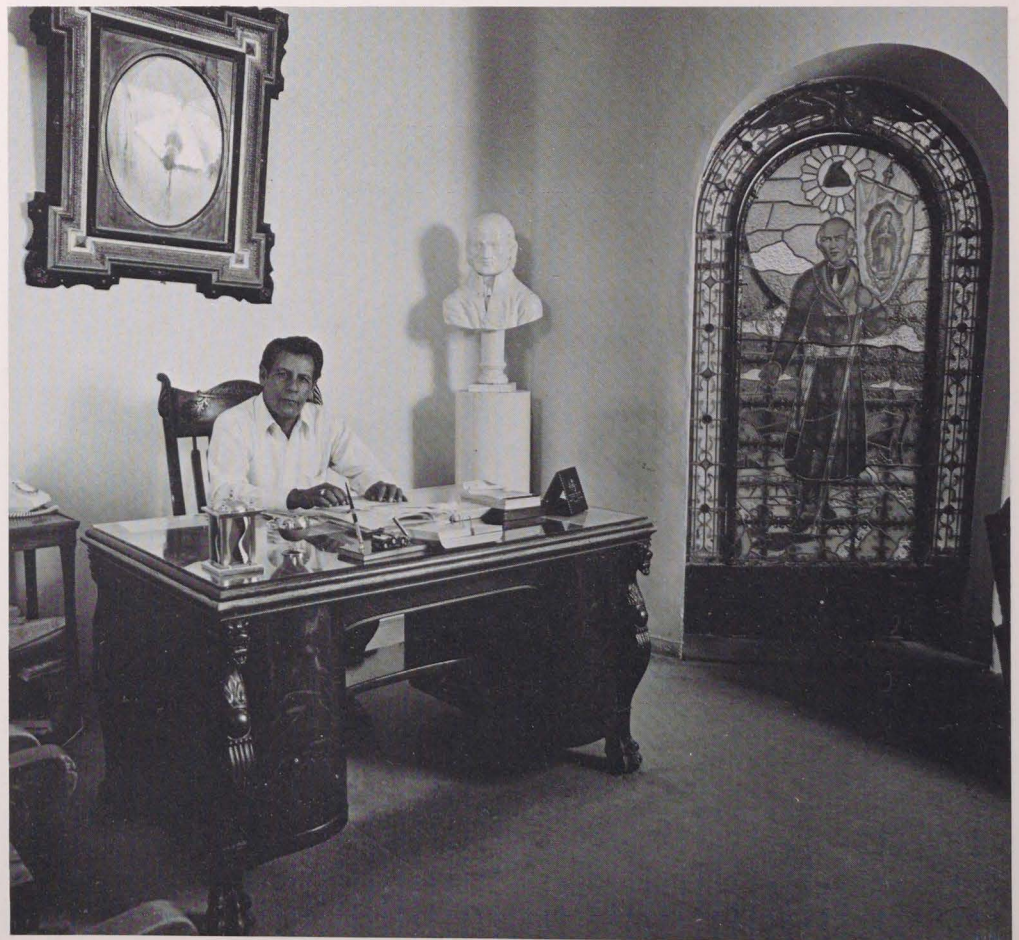




Figure 7
Ecliserio Rosas Martinez
Presidente Municipal
Villa De Tehuitzingo,
Puebla
Population: 20,000
Occupation: Farmer



Figure 8
Humberto Arendono Herrea
Presidente Municipal
Nochixtpan, Oaxaca
Population: 10,000
Occupation: Pharmacist

Figure 9
 Panfilo Sanchez Moralez
 Presidente Municipal
 Chila De Las Flores, Puebla
 Population: 9,000
 Occupation: Shoe salesman



Figure 10
 Salomon Arroya Vasquez
 Comisario
 Xuchiapa, Puebla
 Population: 2,800
 Occupation: Farmer

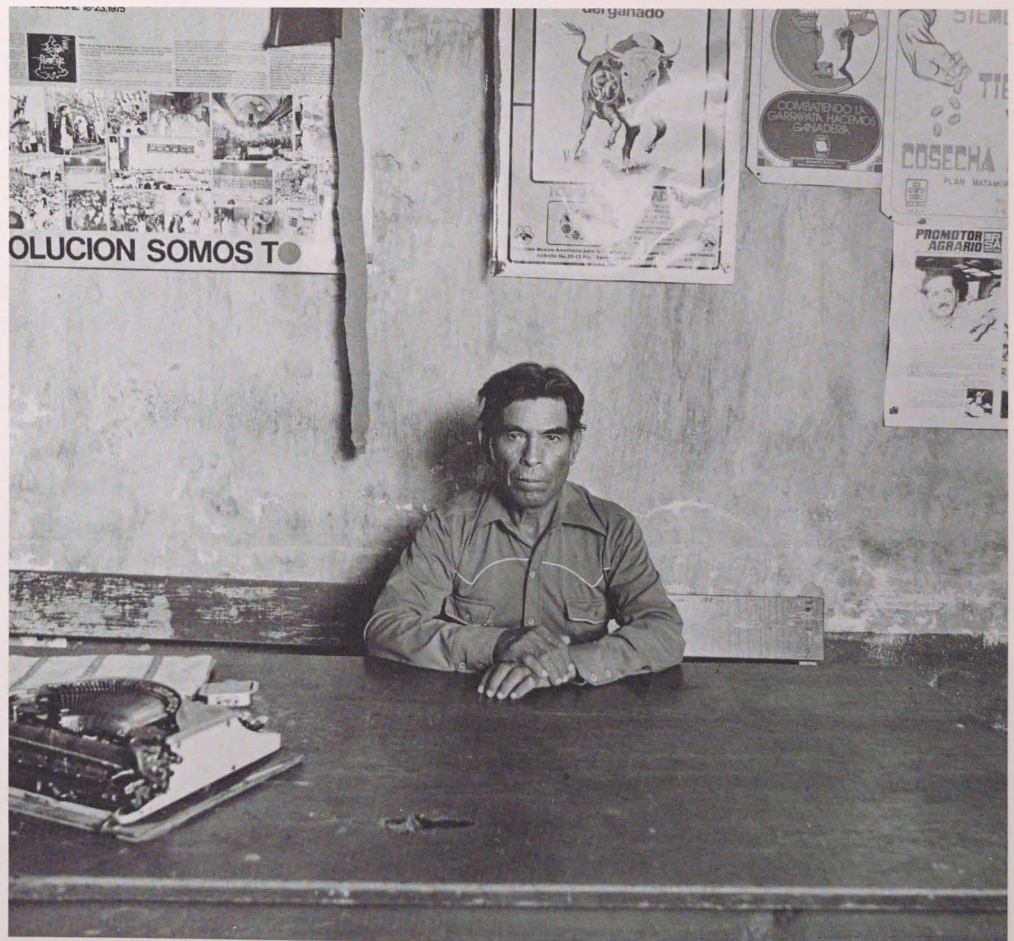




Figure 11
Mariano Chavez Garcia
Sheriff
Plan De Los Amates, Gro.
Population: 1,300
Occupation: Brick mason



Figure 12
Rogelio Aleman Garcia
Comisario
Lomas Chapultepec, Gro.
Population: 300
Occupation: Farmer