

Ideas

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Invisible America

In immigrants' rooms, a photographer documents a fragile stability

BY DUSHKO PETROVICH

THE NATIONAL IMMIGRATION debate, such as it is, depends to a surprising degree on the invisibility of its main characters. The angry tone, the controversial laws, the various stereotypes and idealizations all concern people who, for obvious reasons, cannot come forward and announce themselves, much less tell their stories. The threat of deportation requires they be, if not unseen, then unidentified. So while they are attacked as an amorphous specter and defended mostly by proxy, the undocumented immigrants themselves remain unspecified, vulnerable, and largely unacknowledged as individuals.

Mary Beth Meehan, a photographer living in Providence, noticed this "imposed obscurity" and wanted to address it. She had been taking pictures in her native Brockton for years, but this issue seemed vexingly paradoxical: How to photograph this community without endangering its members? How to document the undocumented?

Meehan had been working on a different project this April when she happened to take a few pictures in the home of a family from Guinea-Bissau. Knowing not to include them in the frame, she focused instead on their living room (Kevin Costner was on the DVD), and the kitchen sink, where they were preparing some fish. When SB 1070 was passed in Arizona a few days later, Meehan says, she quickly recognized these images as "seeds of a **IMMIGRANTS**, Page K12

Immigrants

Continued from page K1

larger project," which has since grown into a fascinating and multifaceted series depicting various living spaces of immigrants from Mexico, Colombia, and El Salvador, along with Cape Verde and Guinea-Bissau. As she continues to expand by reaching out to other families and nationalities, Meehan hopes her photos—which invariably depict living spaces *without* their inhabitants—"might be a way of somehow making these people visible."

The curious magnetism of the images lies in that very contradiction. Once you know the subject matter, the subject's absence becomes both conspicuous and revealing.

We are first of all forced to recognize that people are standing behind or beside the camera because they can't show their faces. Everything we do see—the carefully appointed dining room, the children's neat beds, the adjacent gerbil cage—would be evacuated if their owners were identified. This important fact lends a provisional air to interiors that would otherwise seem remarkably stable. The objects are often quite ordinary, but their missing owners signal the scene's underlying disquiet.



MEXICO



COLOMBIA



EL SALVADOR



GUINEA BISSAU

IMMIGRANTS' APARTMENTS IN BROCKTON, PHOTOGRAPHED BY MARY BETH MEEHAN. CAPTIONS INDICATE THE RESIDENTS' HOME COUNTRY.

The palpable lack of inhabitants also puts a certain pressure on the viewer. If not voyeurs exactly, we do become interlopers, peering into strangers' rooms, perusing their (sometimes unfamiliar) belongings. We are suddenly the ones who feel foreign. Should we take off our shoes? What is the custom in Guinea-Bissau? Nobody appears to greet or guide us, so the sense of mere visitation persists—a discomfort that lengthens, perhaps, into empathy for our unknown hosts, who must often have these same feelings themselves, but on a vastly different scale.

At the same time, these pictures also convey a poignant hope of belonging. These interiors aren't unkempt hovels or weird criminal dens, but emphatically *homes*, the kind we all recognize. Their otherwise unremarkable details—a pink backpack, flowers on the table, the home entertainment system—speak plainly of a wish (and sustained effort) to establish a normal life in Brockton. At heart, the power of these photos lies in the fact that we *can* identify with the spaces; we can see their living room is a lot like ours, or maybe like our grandparents' when they first moved here.

The question of privacy comes up gently but repeatedly. We know that these families have invited Meehan—and they seem to have tidied up (as any

one would)—but it's hard not to imagine other, less sympathetic visitors searching the same grounds. One picture in particular seems to bolster itself against this weight: A wooden door is posted with an illustration of Christ knocking on a similar door, along with a hand-made sign that declares "I love you Papi," complete with seven hearts, in bright marker on graph paper. These paper guardians sit above and below a deadbolt, reminding us how tenuous—and tender—this domestic arrangement must be.

In some of the pictures, deportation (or escape?) actually seems imminent. We see a child's packed suitcase, or a bed with just a sheet, and we wonder if the people have been removed not just from the photos but from their homes as well. (Meehan says she recently attended the "deportation party" of one of the families she worked with.) We start to feel eerily like tourists in Pompeii, examining some undetermined state of departure frozen in time. Where did they go? What caused them to leave?

We scavenge the room for clues, but given only a few details of decoration—along with their countries of origin—we strain to imagine the actual inhabitants. How long have they been here? Where do they work? Of course, the photos don't divulge this information, so the more we look, the more we're

left confronting our own ignorance.

Our emotions, whatever they may be, struggle to fill the void. Along with their physical attributes, we are left to imagine the privation of their home countries, the harrowing border crossings, the unknowing children. Without being able to see the people who hover just outside the camera's frame, our feelings have no place to land. Our own experience of immigration, our political views, even the order in which we see them can determine, from one moment to the next, whether we find these images beautiful or repellent, exotic or familiar, interesting or banal. Still, the pictures do not put forth a political argument, or attempt to fully catalog the experience, or even make an overtly emotional appeal.

Instead, they withdraw, modestly offering us a space (technically someone else's) where we can ourselves encounter certain aspects of an undocumented life. In a literal sense, the immigrants themselves do of course remain unseen, but their endeavors to raise children, to earn a decent living, to build somehow a more dignified life—all of this is suddenly made visible. As these pictures shift our focus from border patrols and state legislatures to the human particulars of individual homes, they orient us away from willful neglect and toward these lives as they are actually lived.

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