



From *Al Campo*, Ernesto Bazan

By Marlaine Glicksman

A fish walks a man down the street. Or perhaps the man walks the fish. It isn't clear. Both heads are being offered up—to the gods or the vultures, we do not know. Nor, as the picture's photographer, Ernesto Bazan, has often stated, is it clear who is more alive and who is more dead: their faces both leathery, their lips both parted, the life sucked equally from each. Indeed, the fish's eyes are more open than the man's.

In Ernesto Bazan's images, nothing is quite as it seems at first impact. Subtext abounds, labyrinthine layers of picture and meaning swim, you might say, below the surface.

In his books *Bazan Cuba* and *Al Campo*, the Sicilian-born photographer's dramatic mille-feuille images bear witness to the Special Period in Cuba, where he lived, worked, married, and raised a family for fourteen years, until it was suggested—strongly and in no uncertain terms—that he stop. His award-winning *Bazan Cuba* explores the island in graphic black-and-white stills, while *Al Campo*, published summer 2011, delivers dramatic colorwork on the countryside and the farmers with whom he lived and photographed for five years. Bazan's eye on Cuba then, is both singular and intimate, and his books, which he edits and self-publishes with the help of many of his students, immerse you in their impact and immediacy.

Cuba's ironically appointed Special Period in Time of Peace was a decade-long economic depression that began in 1991 after the dissolution of the Soviet Union, greatly affecting its citizens' access to petrol, medicines, and imported goods. Yet it also gave rise to sustainable and organic farming, which the Cuban regime mandated (perhaps accounting for the relative calm of the campesinos in comparison with the city folk in Bazan's pictures). Still, hunger and, even, famine was the norm. The books, however, are less directly about politics than the people who struggle beneath them.

Bazan had what he describes as a "happy childhood," in Palermo, Sicily, spending his days under the watch of his paternal grandmother, Ida, while his mother, a teacher, and his father, a surgeon, worked. From Ida he learned Sicilian and the intricacies of the city's street markets, which resounded with the island's long Arabic inheritance. After seeing him fed and his homework completed, Ida permitted Bazan soccer with his friends. He entertained the idea of becoming a professional player until a dream he had at seventeen foretold he'd become a photographer—and he unquestioningly chose to follow it.

He pursued the profession at School of Visual Arts, in New York City, and at age 23 was asked to join the mythic Magnum Photos. After only two years, Bazan abruptly left the agency. He then traversed New York City and the world shooting, producing the books *The Perpetual Past* and *Passing Through*—all propelled by an indefinable inner longing.

In 1992, Bazan arrived in Cuba to discover the childhood he only then realized he was still searching for. Like Ida, herself, the island welcomed him into its embrace and held him tight. He traveled back and forth shooting editorial work until marrying Sissy, in 1998, making his metaphysical roots manifest. His work in Cuba garnered him photography's highest honor, the Eugene Smith Award, along with a Guggenheim fellowship and a grant from Mother Jones. In 2002, he began his Cuban photo workshops, teaching until 2006, when he was asked firmly to stop, and became, as he often says, a persona non grata in the country. Bazan now lives in Veracruz, Mexico, with Sissy and their twin sons, Pietro and Stefano.

In his earlier book *Passing Through*, one can see his nascent layered frame-within-a-frame-within-a-frame Bazanian thumbprint, but it was with Cuba, and with *Bazan Cuba*, that it fully flew. Taking in Bazan's graphic and affecting black-and-white images is like an exercise in visual tectonics. Line and plane turn in upon themselves, as though an Escher. The eye torques and ricochets about the frame, teased in a game of tag—Look here! No here!—the composition echoing and reflecting like a series of funhouse mirrors: through a window, past a door, down a corridor.... The book's pages juxtapose and collide with the Eisensteinian dynamism and pathos of Battleship Potemkin's Odessa Steps sequence.

Yet though Bazan's photos carry his undeniable eye, they are not stylized, and mise-en-scène never surpasses subject matter or emotion. The photos of *Bazan Cuba*, which begin with a shot of Sissy with the couple's infant twins, are woven with a melancholic nostalgia, a sense of looking back to some unknown point of departure and yet being trapped in a never-ending wait to go forward. Its often-desiccated subjects grapple for moments of tenderness and move forth by Beckettian sheer will and little else: "I must go on...." Slow-burning despair is both counterpointed and underscored by a furtive squeeze of the flesh—of paramours in a park, of men dallying with prostitutes and lovers—and by bursts of childhood joy and ebullient bubbles. Bazan's camera captures the body's sudden seizing hold of passing possibility—a diver arcs mid-air; a gymnast balances on his hands, legs akimbo—only to realize it is evanescent, that the landing will likely be a hard one.

Bazan's images in the book display a combination of magical realism and gritty reality. A laugh is a release both celebratory and sinister; a scout peers out the window of a bus, while the ghostly bust of José Martí looms behind him, grasped by the throat by an invisible passenger; a young man carries a large water bottle through which we view demolished buildings whose reflections float in the bottle like a fish's bones; and any sense of enchantment is fleeting for both the viewer and subject.

The writer Vicki Goldberg calls *Bazan Cuba* a "love story," but it is certainly not a fairy tale. Though it contains the latter's fantastic and dark elements and extremes of love and death, it does not yet have a happy ending.

*Bazan Cuba* contains the first Cuban image the photographer was content with—a girl with a veil billowing behind her, frame left, while the shadow of a child, or angel, with wings floats frame right—made in 1993, a year after his first visit to the country. It was this photo that marked his transition from editorial photographer to street photographer and that began his love affair with and life in Cuba. The book also contains the love affair's painful conclusion: the shot of Bazan's twin boys under the covers, their dog tucked between them, on their final night on the island, in 2006.

In *Bazan Cuba* there are reflections of Robert Frank, whom Bazan cites as his mentor, and remnants of Roy DeCarava's deliciously dark prints, full of human spirit and sticky flypaper of life. One also sees also the best of early Bresson: the broken walls and children amid the rubble of civil war Spain, with their multilayered compositions, depth of field, elements of surprise, and graphic splendor.



From *Bazan Cuba*, Ernesto Bazan

In *Al Campo*, the photographer, like filmmaker Ermanno Olmi in *Tree of the Wooden Clogs*, depicts the epic everyday life and struggle of the campesinos. If *Bazan Cuba* is the photographer's Romare Bearden—urban, densely layered, frantic, and frenetic—then *Al Campo* is his Jacob Lawrence (whom the writer Regina Cherry first referenced in her review of *Bazan Cuba*), the song of the simple working man, contemplative and in living color, and where unexpected violence is contrapuntal to the innocence of children, and both exist simultaneously. If *Bazan Cuba* is the Unnameable's "I must go on," then *Al Campo* is its "I'll go on."

The images still somersault some, but they are also more restive. We experience the Cuban countryside through windows and doors, down darkened halls, enchanted forests, under tables, and sometimes just sitting out on the porch, smoking a cigar. On the farm there is life, but it is hard won, and the people are as weathered as the land. The earth can be unforgiving, but one maintains a little control over one's life in their being able to work it.

*Al Campo* opens with the image of a knife, followed by the rumpled bed where Bazan slept while photographing his farmer friends—making absolutely clear that these images are personal. A pair of child's blue plastic sandals draws us in. As in *Bazan Cuba*, mystery lingers, menace lurks. But so does humor: A campesino holds his prized rooster, the large hole in his shirt revealing his hairy navel (though one soon realizes the shirt is no joke to the man who is lucky enough to own it). There is also tenderness and camaraderie: Children embrace; families share in the ritual of eating or shampooing hair, or linger together to bathe in the river.

In *Al Campo*'s first chapter, a white-lace curtain, echoing the white of the man's shirt on the page preceding it, and the surreally white guts of an eviscerated pig on the page following, blows across a woman's pensive face. She is flanked by a child who peers through the rough-hewn slats of his crib and what appears to be another face through a window or door on her other side. The splayed pig stands in direct counterpoint; strangely, its guts gleam, but the ground below is strewn with blood. There is a hint of something Kabbalistic within these photos: darkness, smoke, sparks.... Peril punctuates beauty. A knife is brandished frame right while frame left a child dreamily holds her lollipop. This faraway gaze can be seen throughout on many a woman's prematurely lined face. Childhood figures prominently, as it does in *Bazan Cuba*, perhaps no surprise considering the importance to the photographer of recapturing his own.

On one page a man cradles a large bowl while on the next page a hand-hewn and wired-together wood chair, a work of art in its wabi-sabi, cradles a black-and-white TV displaying the national sport, béisbol. A dog with distended ribs stands in a doorway, the lines of dry wooden siding echoing its delineated chest. The dog's ribs reverberate the man's ribs subtly outlined by his white shirt on the preceding page, as well as the ribs outlined on the chest's of men throughout, ribs made distinct through hard work and hunger. In another picture, children braced behind the bars of a Ferris wheel cab rise up through the frame, both their composition and anticipation mirrored pages later on the faces of bulls barred in their bullpen. *Al campo*, as in Havana, life hangs perilously in the balance: In one photo a man finds fragile footing on a wooden frame high above us. The book ends with a man afloat in a river, arms outstretched, relaxing—or crucified.

The primordial landscapes that permeate *Al Campo* will lure Bazan to Latin and South America and places like Iquitos and Cuzco, Peru, where he has established a photo workshop and where, he says, he feels the spiritual guidance of the gifted indigenous photographer Martín Chambi, who had strapped a large-format camera to his llama and rode the Sacred Valley, making proud portraits of his fellow native people and the ruins of the ancient civilizations from which they descended.

I was first struck by Bazan's images in the nineties in a show in a now-defunct School of Visual Arts gallery in SoHo that celebrated the young photographer's work: a charmed, layered photographic eye on Cuba like no other I had seen before. His pictures and personal story took hold of me. More than fifteen years later I learned Bazan would be teaching in Brooklyn. My E-mail to him expressing my desire to join his workshop received the response: "The more I teach the more I believe that only predestined students come to my workshops. The only prerequisite is to have a strong and genuine desire to grow."

I gathered in Bazan's living room that first day with published photojournalists, a college professor, and a thoughtful and thought-provoking college student. We discussed what brought us together, shared the photographer's extensive photo-book collection, and were sent off with Bazan's simple (and oft-repeated) instructions, "Shoot what makes your heart beat." We met later and daily thereafter to review our work together and one on one, even the best and most experienced among us humbled upon hearing (as we all did), "Too descriptive" and/or "No moment" from our maestro. Yet it was through this intense edit and a week's passage that some indescribable but palpable and potent alchemy came over us and our pictures: that we began to see differently; that our images elevated and transformed; that the magic Bazan realizes in his photos realized itself in his workshop with us. The experience was demanding, but it was also profound.

Months later, I was in Manhattan's Chinatown still shooting the documentary-photo essay I began under Bazan when a SWAT team of shooters tricked out with telephotos descended upon a narrow and most-humble neighborhood sidestreet. Grandmothers on daily market visits ducked, the natural rhythm of the community entirely disrupted. I was struck by how very un-Bazanian this safari-style approach was; how the photographer only urged us to get closer, to feel more deeply, to shoot more intimately and from the gut.

*Al Campo*, which can be read as both a dedication and a destination, is the second of the photographer's books to be self-published under the Bazan Photos Publishing imprint [BPP], and was funded in part through a Kickstarter campaign and realized through the efforts of his students and friends. Bazan will go on an extensive American book tour this October.

A third book, on Bazan's panoramic pictures, is in progress. It was also in Cuba that Bazan felt uniquely positioned to move between color and black-and-white, and 35mm and panoramic work. "I have to make something clear," Bazan writes. "This work in color is the only one I've been able to do up until now. I was able to do this thanks to the fantastic harmony I found in Cuba. One of the lessons I learned from my colorwork in Cuba is that everything that happens around us can be a font of inspiration. I mean, it has poetry."

I caught up with the photographer for this conversation in Salvador de Bahia, Brazil, during his teaching. His students' images from "14 Quebras-molas" ("Fourteen Speedbumps"), his subsequent workshop, evidence Bazan's indelible imprint and undeniable, yet simple, poetry: The soles of a child's feet nestling atop its mother's pregnant, swollen belly; the curl of a dog's tail, golden like the sliver of light in which it sits, surrounded by a household's humble bowls; circling children clasping hands, reminiscent of a similar schoolyard shot in *Bazan Cuba*; a dramatic white horse from which thunderclouds seem to emanate. I am reminded that in his edits Bazan would select the very image that would raise the bar just high enough to lead you to that seemingly unreachable next plateau. I identify with what student Justin Meredith writes about Bazan's students being "a collective of individuals committed to making great images and encouraging each other to stay focused when doubt crept in."

But it was months later, on the tail of his workshop in Sicily, where Bazan celebrated his tenth anniversary of teaching, that I noted his students' work reached an all-new pinnacle, that their images, suffused with inaudible whispers, soared with the striking compositions and profound aura of spirituality so palpable in the photographer's work. Two sailors embrace; from on high the Virgin and Child, upper corner left, glance below at the profile of a young suited man framed by a mirror, corner lower right; from a low angle a man suited in black bends right-angle to a coffin swathed in flowers, as once again the ubiquitous Virgin, scepter in hand, anoints him from her picture frame above. I could sense that the workshop was as transformative for the maestro as it was for his students. "Wow!" I E-mailed Ernesto. "No: Whoa!" he E-mailed back. "Whoa."

MG: Describe a compelling photo for you: What is it about the composition, the light, the subject matter, the element of mystery, and/or of surprise. . . ? How would you put it into words?

EB: I'd simply say that a compelling photo creates an almost immediate, natural response. Your heart is trembling, and your legs are shaking. It's like love at first sight: indescribable.

MG: It's well known that when you were seventeen you had a mystical dream foretelling you would become a photographer. But you could have become any type of photographer. How, specifically, did you arrive at a street photographer who focuses on the common man?

EB: That dream didn't specify what type of photographer. I had to slowly figure it out by simply following the path that had been given to me. With hindsight, I've come to realize that this initial dream was the first of several revelations that I've had in my career. I hate to sound like a preacher, and I don't have to convince anybody, but this is the way I've become a photographer.

I'm proud to say that 35 years later I'm still following my dream. It actually becomes clearer everyday that it couldn't have been otherwise. It's a true blessing that cannot be taken for granted, not even for a second. More and more, I'm learning to appreciate every moment that I'm given to take pictures and to explore and probe cultures that I feel close to my origins.

MG: Exactly when and how did you begin photographing? And what did it mean to you at the time? Obviously, when you had your dream at seventeen, your becoming a photographer wasn't something suggested out of the blue?

EB: When I was fourteen years old, upon the insistence of a schoolmate of mine, I convinced my father to get me the same camera. I still remember the name of the brand and the model: It was a Fujica ST 801.



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I started exploring with it—having no idea that this hobby was going to change my life forever. I photographed my mother, my brothers, the moon, car races, my fellow students, and my girlfriends.

I started walking the old streets of Palermo together with a relative who had a passion for photography. He also taught me how to process the film and make prints. It was magic! I see that as the very beginning of my career as a street photographer. I must have been sixteen at the time.

MG: You have also referenced your childhood in Palermo as one of the main reasons you are a photographer.

EB: I had a very happy childhood. I was surrounded by the love of my parents, my large family, and, in particular, by the uncompromising care of my paternal grandma, Ida, who brought me up as her beloved and favorite grandchild. My grandma's and my parents' apartments were on the same block. For many years that Palermo neighborhood and that very block constituted my universe. Sometimes, though, I'd accompany my grandma to the old part of Palermo. We would delve into the open-air markets, with their very strong Arabic influence and with the rhythmic and melodic vendors' shouting in Sicilian—a unique, beautiful language—praising their produce. I think those walks in this beautiful part of town where time seemed to have stopped have played a major role in the way I became a photographer.

I like to say that being born and raised in Sicily has made me the photographer I am. If I'd have been born elsewhere in Italy, I'm sure I'd not be photographing the way I do. My Sicilian upbringing is in my blood, and I see it reflected in all my work in so many different ways.

You can see the images under my words: in all the hugging, all that closeness to my subjects—like those almost-stifling hugs, all those kisses that I'd receive from my grandma everyday; of a profound sense of fatalism; of cherishing simple things like running under the rain, like I did with my mother; of savoring some simple food in my family's company; and last but not least, in the tragic sense of religion, of death. All of this combined was what I lived and experienced growing up. I feel extremely lucky to have developed this sensibility thanks to my upbringing.

MG: This is the tenth anniversary of your teaching in Sicily.

EB: In Sicily I took my earliest images. It all started there. I feel fortunate that for the last ten years I've had the health, the desire, and some students to teach there. I've been photographing Easter in three towns on the northwest part of the island. I could have moved to other locations, but I haven't. Don't ask me why. All I know is that there must be a more-profound reason.

I have a love-hate relation with Sicily. I like being in Sicily for short periods of time. Every time I return I'm still very grateful to find my parents. But I couldn't live there. I hate the way the vast majority of Sicilians act and behave. I hate the lack of ethic, their love for cement, and the way they abuse nature in so many different ways. Not to mention the pervasive Mafia culture, which is so ingrained in the way many people think and behave. Things are slowly changing, but I still see so much apathy.

MG: It is clear from your mother's writing, which you include in both *Bazan Cuba* and *Al Campo*, that she is somewhat of a mystic, a quality that appears in both your work and your words. Were you aware of this growing up, this other dimension of life, and in what way?

EB: My mother has been a constant source of inspiration. I like to say that I got my creative energy from her and my persistence and determination from my dad. I've become more aware of her mysticism in the last 25 years, when she started providing text and intros to my books.

I feel that somehow her way of being is tied to the initial dream that I had. For many years, besides being aware that this was the path to follow, I never thought much more about it. After discovering Cuba, I finally started making more connections between apparently unrelated circumstances, such as becoming totally aware that I might have lived in Cuba in another life. The sense of belonging that I first felt when I got there, in 1992, couldn't be explained otherwise.

Recently a friend had my birth date interpreted using the Mayan calendar. It turned out that I'm a very old soul who has been reincarnating itself many times in the course of centuries. When she told me that, I wasn't surprised at all.

In *Bazan Cuba* my mother wrote: "I had named him Ernesto, after his paternal grandfather, not only because it was the custom but also because I felt a deep tie to my father-in-law, a grand old gentleman. When I took my last farewell of him, a month and half after my wedding, I asked him to remain within me, within the baby that I had just conceived. I'm now convinced that Ernesto Bazan, Sr., answered my prayers. All the memories of Palermo belonging to this man – quiet, learned, wise, and radiant with irony – had been passed on to my son. How else could my Ernesto know about Palermo as it was in the 1950s? How else could he write that in his globetrotting he came across places that evoked for him Palermo as it was then? Then he encountered Cuba, and it was a revelation."

MG: You have shot some fashion photography in addition to your editorial work.

EB: Besides fashion, I've done a few weddings. I've taken pictures of furniture in a store in Queens. I was even a paparazzi: Once, while waiting, on a cold New York night, by the steps of the Met [Metropolitan Museum of Art], I photographed the late Michael Jackson coming out of the museum, where a party had been given in his honor.

I'm proud that I did all of this. It has helped shape who I'm.

MG: You also had the opportunity, as a young photographer, to be a part of the celebrated Magnum Agency, and yet you chose to leave. Was that a good decision for your work, and why?

EB: I was only 23 years old, fresh from graduating from SVA [School of Visual Arts], in New York. I felt like I could touch the sky with my fingers. But it was short lived. At an early stage in my career, I was given the opportunity to explore and debunk probably one of the biggest myths in photography.

In those two years, I experienced how destructive, petty, and mean human beings can be to others. Unlike my own family or the nurturing extended family that I've created with my workshops, the agency was a completely dysfunctional family where each one of your accomplishments released a dangerous level of bile in some of the photographers. It was clear that for a photography lover like me, Magnum was not the right place to be. As part of my destiny, I was lucky to move on.

MG: Do you feel you have a mission as a photographer? Was it something that came to you gradually, or were you conscious of it from the beginning?

EB: I take pictures because it's an inner, spiritual necessity of mine that has to do with the way I became a photographer. I never shoot consciously having a message or a book in mind. I simply photograph places and people whose way of living move and inspire me for different reasons. Luckily for them, most will never be in the news. They just lead a dignified life, and most of them are still in touch with their culture and traditions. They are mostly poor and underprivileged but very proud and mostly content with what life has bestowed upon them.

MG: You love teaching as much as you do photography.

EB: In 2001, getting bored and frustrated over my work as an editorial photographer, I woke up one day and said to myself, I'm going to teach workshops. Having no clear idea of what to do. I think there is a big part of this decision that defies any rational thinking.

I consider this another important revelation. At the time I had no idea if I could be a decent teacher, if I could convince people to come to see me in Cuba and pay for my new work as a maestro. Sure enough, in January 2002, my first eight students showed up at my apartment in Havana. Eleven years later, the more I teach, the more I realize that it is meant to be.



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