



Living

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Belgian photographer Annick Donkers has spent the past five years taking pictures of Mexican life. "Trip to Nowhere," a photographic exhibit opening in Guadalajara on April 23, shows scenes of the Huichol community clinging to their traditions.

A Trip to Somewhere

BY PAUL IMISON
Special to The News

With her solo exhibit "Trip to Nowhere" at the Museo Regional de Guadalajara, Belgian photographer Annick Donkers will realize a dream that began with her first trip to Mexico five years ago. Since that time she has built her career photographing vivid scenes of Mexican life and spiritual devotion, taking her inspiration from both Catholic and indigenous traditions.

"El Tercer Coloquio: Pueblos Indígenas e Indigenismo en el Occidente de México" runs for three weeks beginning April 23 in Guadalajara and will display Donkers' pictures from her time spent with the Huichol tribe of Jalisco this year.

"I'm especially drawn to the spirituality here," she explained. "And the two main sources of that spirituality – the indigenous roots and the Catholic myths, such as the Virgin of Guadalupe."

Donkers graduated from university in Belgium with a degree in psychology and worked in market research before a round-the-world trip inspired her to take up photography as a hobby. She began with a handful of night courses in Antwerp but it was a chance meeting with some Mexican travelers in Prague that led her to visit Mexico for the first time in 2002.

"I was supposed to head north and meet friends in Texas, but I never made it," she said. "I became fascinated with Mexico. It was less the natural landscapes and more about the people, the towns, and the things



happening in the towns.

"It seemed to me a very vibrant culture – color and excitement everywhere, something happening on every street corner. I hadn't seen so much of that in Europe," she said.

Over the next few years, Donkers would travel back and forth between Mexico and Europe, but it was in her native Belgium that she found the big break to pursue her love of photographing Mexico.

RECEIVING GRANT FUNDING

While doing research at the Center of Mexican Studies in Antwerp, she stumbled upon the chance to fill a vacant slot in a photo exhibit on "Native Mexicans." At the event she met a minister from the Mexican Embassy in Brussels who encouraged her to apply for a grant from the Mexican government.



"Colored Feet," Annick Donkers, Tuxpan de Bolaños, Jalisco



PHOTOS COURTESY OF ANNICK DONKERS



The photos pictured left, top and above were taken of the Huichol community during Semana Santa in 2007.

Upon being accepted, Donkers quit her job in Brussels and has been traveling around Mexico since December.

During that time she has taken intimate and revealing photos of pilgrims at the Basilica de Guadalupe on Dec. 12 and of the offerings to the Santa Muerte that take place each month in Mexico City's barrio of Tepito.

She says that she was struck by how the faith in Mexico appears to be "much more out in the open, much more devotional than in Europe, and it crosses greater social boundaries."

"In Tepito, for example, you could find drug addicts and transsexuals praying alongside grieving mothers and children, young people with piercings and tattoos alongside elderly people in indigenous dress," she said.

But Donkers' main fascination with Mexico and the theme of her exhibit are the small,

The exhibit "Trip to Nowhere" is part of a cultural event celebrating the Huichol organized by INDESO, which works with economically vulnerable social groups around Mexico. www.annickdonkers.be www.indeso.com.mx www.cdi.gob.mx/wixarika

rural indigenous communities that have clung strongly to their pre-Hispanic beliefs and social structures while assimilating the most enduring elements of Mexican Catholicism such as Semana Santa and the legend of the Virgin of Guadalupe.

For a "Trip to Nowhere," she will display her photos of the Huichol communities of Jalisco. Originating in the state of San Luis Potosí, the Huichol are known for their long-held reluctance to accept outside influence and make their living predominantly from tobacco farming and selling their handicrafts in tourist areas.

Donkers heard about the tribe during her first trip to Mexico when, during a visit to the town of Real de Catorce, she found herself instantly attracted to the brightly colorful Huichol art and handicrafts she saw in the local markets.

Over the past few months, Donkers has visited with the Huichol on three separate occasions, including during their recent Semana Santa celebrations. Indigenous tribes can be notoriously private and suspicious of outsiders but through CDI (the Comisión Desarrollo Indígena), a group promoting indigenous culture and economic help, she was able to receive permission from the shaman of the tribe to enter the community, and observed several of their ceremonies.

EUROPEAN MENTALITY ASIDE "Of course, some things were off limits to me," she says. "But I was surprised and grateful at how accommodating they were." She describes coming into contact with the culture and beliefs of the Huichol as like "having to put my European mentality to one side and see things from a neutral point of view."

"For example, the Huichol were planning a pilgrimage," she says. "But no one was sure the day that it would start. It rested on the shaman of the tribe waiting for a dream that would let him know when to begin."

Describing her motivation for leaving her job and taking up photography, Donkers said: "I like the fact that I can project my feelings about the world but I don't have to be on view myself."

"Occasionally you can feel like you're intruding, but the strangest thing is when someone will actually come and ask to be photographed. It was like that in Tepito for the Santa Muerte offerings," she added.

"Many people were actually happy to be photographed and proud to show something of their faith."

Yale has 40,000 Peruvian artifacts

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LIMA - Yale University is holding some 40,000 artifacts from the famed Inca citadel of Machu Picchu, a government official heading efforts to return the pieces told the state news agency Andina on Sunday.

Peru's government and Yale University reached an agreement last September to return 4,000 pieces - including mummies, ceramics and bones - that were taken a century ago from what has become one of the world's most famous archaeological sites.

The tally of 40,000 artifacts appeared in a report presented by archaeologists from the National Culture Institute to the Peruvian government earlier this month after taking an inventory at Yale, Health Minister Hernán Garrido Lecca said.

Officials at the National Culture Institute and at Yale could not be reached Sunday for comment. There were no indications of whether Peruvian officials previously knew about the additional 36,000 artifacts and no details of their historical significance.

Peru demanded the return of the collection in 2006, saying it never relinquished ownership when Yale scholar Hiram Bingham III rediscovered Machu Picchu in 1911. Yale responded with a proposal to split the collection. Negotiations broke down, and Peru threatened a lawsuit.



NYT PHOTO/YALE PEABODY MUSEUM

Hiram Bingham III is shown at Machu Picchu in 1912. Peru is seeking the return of archaeological treasures unearthed in a dig led by Yale archaeologists.

Under last year's agreement, Yale and Peru will co-sponsor a traveling exhibition featuring Bingham's pieces and later a new museum in the Andean city of Cuzco, the ancient Inca capital.

The mountaintop, pre-Columbian ruins of Machu Picchu, which thrived in the mid-15th century, are Peru's top tourist attraction.

Australian actress gives birth to 3rd son

People Cate Blanchett gave birth to her third son, Ignatius Martin Upton, in Sydney on Sunday, said Tim McKeough, media relations manager at the Sydney Theatre Company, where Blanchett, 38, and her playwright husband are co-artistic directors. Australian Prime Minister Kevin Rudd offered his congratulations and said she would still co-chair an arts panel at a national summit Saturday.



BLOOMBERG PHOTO/FRANCIS SPECKER

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