

This project is submitted for the OPEN THEME section of the contest

Title: BUT I'M HERE STILL

Nowadays the tourist market tries to specialize to offer the consumer an ad hoc product; the globalization process pushes every tourist place to build a strong and recognizable identity within the collective imagination.

The strategies highlight a pseudo-relationship between cultures, presenting the life-style of each country as strength. The use of a certain territorial image inevitably causes the consumption of some territorial components at the expense of others.

A greater cultural effort is needed: intercultural communication is the basic element to get out of the logic of difference, so important for contemporary marketing, and to face the situation from a new sociological perspective, where respect for the other is born and developed especially because of the value of "another experience".

According to visual sociology, the gaze is not only influenced by marketing strategies and advertising promotion, since there are also historical, cultural and experiential factors that influence our way of observing reality.

It is essential to understand the process and development of the image and the imagination and above all it is important to dwell on the importance of the existence of stereotypes.

They tend to influence our perception in a uniform way, but they are also the main tool for creating expectations, stimuli and curiosities about something or someone we don't know, which in a certain sense is "unfamiliar".

It is these expectations that create the basis for a relationship between cultures, which underline the presence of the other and therefore highlight a diversity that was not known before.

Stereotypes try to influence us to believe that there is not a single culture and that diversity can be known.

If on the one hand, stereotypes are linked to a passive and homogeneous perception of culture and human being, on the other hand the images represent a multiplicity of screens, which have the power to influence the context in which we are looking and their characteristic is to be a less defined, more hidden concept. Photography itself is responsible for creating images of a reality, and very often this set of images lays the foundation for the consolidation of a common imagination. The result, for example, according to Gilbert Durand, is a "perverse effect": the images have a very strong hypnotizing effect and end up imposing their message on passive, anesthetized viewers who have lost the capacity for critical discernment, judgment, of value and therefore of choice.

Las Vegas is a city that can be used as a perfect physical example of this difference between image and collective imagination in the perception of a territory.

To deepen the understanding of the city it is necessary to confront those who live that reality daily.

What emerges, by interviewing some locals, is precisely the great desire to go beyond that collective imagination and make the invisible visible.

It is not about denying what is clearly a fundamental part of a city. The so-called "city of Sin" hosts more than 40 million visitors each year, is the economic lifeblood of Nevada and is home to the majority of the state's 2.8 million residents. According to UNLV's most recent data 100,450 people are currently employed on the strip in the resorts.

But going beyond numbers and beyond what the common eye already knows, the great need is to destroy the stereotype, giving voice to a community that exists and lives a parallel reality.

The characters of this photographic project live in Las Vegas. Each of them was asked to choose a personal place or a person (or more) dear to them to be photographed with. The representation of authentic atmospheres and sensations was fundamental to contrasting the excessive, surreal and frenetic imagination of the city. Identities become central and impose themselves delicately by telling a new story.

## STATEMENTS

Ramy 24 years old: My experience of living in Las Vegas is veiled in mystery. I can't imagine how the average person views Las Vegas other than Casinos. My perception of this city has always changed with time. I'm finally getting to know the more interesting spots in town. Being a musician here helps me now, for the longest time it was just Stores, School and sleep."

Sonia 22 years old: Our city is an illusion brought to materialization. It exists in polar opposites, both beautiful and grotesque, hedonistic and ascetic. It's pleasure-seeking and self-loathing, and in a constant state of motion. Our city is a burning fire.

Memo 26 years old: "A lonely valley with the illusion of hope. Tourists only see what they want to see, like a mirage in the middle of the desert. In actuality, there's vibrant culture unlike anything else."

Raul 24 years old: "Vegas has always been seen as The City of Sin, but I hope that the world can see the strange paradise that is beyond that idea".

Sinead 23 years old: "People forget about the vast desert around them; I see the stars from my backyard, I watch the sunset behind snowy mountains, I breathe the cold morning air as I walk barren wilderness. Las Vegas is a special kind of strange, you find beauty all over this rugged wasteland."

Michael Angelo 13 years old: "I've never really thought of Vegas anymore than just my home, my best friends homes, and where I was born, I've never been able to experience what tourists think of Vegas, so yea to me Vegas is just home."

Jennifer 40 years old: "When I think about life in this city, growing up here, having children here, I think about how this city looks as visitors see it flying in. They see a barren desert and then suddenly a facade of the Las Vegas strip with its glistening lights. Underneath lies a spring that provides life to those of us that call Las Vegas home. We Las Vegans have to be a spring to ourselves to build a community and culture through art, where we express who we are beyond the facade and beyond how we make our living catering to the desires and whims of those that visit us in the middle of nowhere."

Michael 35 years old: "Living in Las Vegas and working On the strip has given me a weird relationship with the city. A necessary evil where I make my living and obstacle stretching right through the middle of my hometown...I love here, I hate here, I live here, I cry here. When a tourist asked me what's it like living here I ask them what's it like where they are from? Yes we have stores open 24 hours a day. A convenience for sure, and sometimes a burden. It's never truly dark here, I never truly feel rested, somehow though it's my comfort."

Aliyah 11 years old: "When I think about Las Vegas I think about the dessert and cool hikes I have done. My family doesn't go to the casino's, we go to the desert for fun and we go on hikes so when I think about Las Vegas I think about hikes, desert and even cactuses."