

“Surviving the time of the butterflies” est une série photo créée durant l’été 2019 dans le quartier de Washington Heights à Manhattan. Le projet a été commissionné par le magazine new yorkais Phosphènes sur le thème de la révolution.

Altagracia De Pena fait parti des millions de Dominicains qui ont vécu durant la dictature de Rafael Trujillo de 1930 à 1960. Elle se confie lors de l’entrevue sur leur mode vie à cette époque et sa connexion avec les soeurs Mirabal qui furent des héroïnes et martyres durant cette dictature.

La séance photo a eu lieu un samedi matin à son appartement dans Washington Heights, habillée par sa petite-fille Jennifer De La Cruz et entourée par son fils, sa fille, sa belle-fille et ses petits-enfants. Tout le monde vaquait à ses occupations pendant que l’on prenait les photos, sa belle-fille cuisinait, son fils écoutait de la musique et ses petits enfants discutaient dans le salon. Un morceau de son quotidien que j’ai eu la chance de partager avec Altagracia et sa famille.

Ma série de photo est une série de portraits où l’on s’est amusé à habiller Altagracia pour renforcer sa prestance et ses origines dominicaines tout en exploitant l’esthétique de son appartement et les détails de sa décoration qui rappelle l’importance de la famille et de ses origines dans sa vie.

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Fifty-eight years later, De Peña confidently poses for Phosphenes and shares her life story and her connection to the legendary Mirabal sisters.

Full interview with Altagracia De Pena. Translated from Spanish to English by Genesis Santos

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GENESIS SANTOS: What is your earliest memory of living in the Dominican Republic when Trujillo was in power?

ALTAGRACIA DE PEÑA: I was born the same year that ] Trujillo was appointed President of the Dominican Republic. Although I was very young, I remember how hard times were. It was like walking on eggshells every day. Anyone who publicly opposed him was either arrested or killed by his men. Everyone lived in fear.

GS: Do you remember meeting or seeing Trujillo, if so when and where? How did you feel?

ADP: The first and last time I saw Trujillo was in a church mass. He looked stern and I just remember thinking to myself, how can a man so small in stature hold so much power?

GS: During that period, where did you stand politically?

ADP: \*laughs\* Well, I opposed him. He did nothing but terrorize us. But at the same time, people had to pretend that they liked him to avoid any problems. He had tape recorders hidden under the floors in everyone's house.

GS: The Mirabal sisters were also against Trujillo's control. What did you know about them? How did you take the news of their demise?

ADP: My cousin Rufino De La Cruz was a good friend of theirs. Rufino's dad was my grandfather's brother. He was so handsome, god bless his soul. There were 5 De La Cruz households all right by each other. His house was right in front of mine. I met the Mirabal sisters through him and

this was during their early teen and adult years. They were extremely beautiful and charismatic.

I remember they were very vocal about their beliefs and were fearless to have done what they did. It devastated me when I was informed about their deaths, especially since my cousin offered to be their chauffeur for their last night when they were on their way to visit their husbands in jail. Unfortunately, their lives were cut short, but their legacy will always be respected and remembered.

GS: How did the people react after learning about the Mirabals' and your cousin's death?

ADP: There was a huge uproar...everyone was devastated. They tried to stage the whole thing like it was an accident. Trujillo's men went to Patria's house that night and threw a big party that lasted all night. They were so evil in their ways. Trujillo's men also got a hold of Patria's children and tortured them. They electrocuted them, pulled their fingernails...these men were truly demonic. My uncle Millito was Mayor at the time and he was the first to go to Rufino's wake. Everywhere you looked there was a group of Trujillo's people listening to every word. And if anything bad was said about Trujillo and Balaguer they'd get arrested right then and there. It was a scary time we were living in. Rufino's mother Martina died from the stress of his death. It was a very hard pill to swallow not only for our family but also for the country – these girls were a symbol of hope.

GS: So the youth had no lives of their own.

ADP: No, how could they? When we would hold meetings at our social club people would warn us against it, saying, "Please be careful, don't do the meeting, the secret police are coming to watch tonight. They'll come and arrest you all." We said, "We'll go even if they arrest us – we don't care!" We were tired of living like caged animals.

GS: Where were you when the news of Trujillo's assassination circulated? How did you feel?

ADP: At the time I was home caring for my two children. I was ecstatic! Everyone was! People hosted parties to celebrate his death but before they assassinated him, they also killed many of his accomplices. The celebrations lasted for days. For once we were just happy to feel like we were free!

GS: Joaquin Balaguer was the Vice-President during Trujillo's presidency and then was delegated as President. Did things get better with his attendance?

ADP: Absolutely not! He was a horrible man who carried out Trujillo's ways. By this time my husband and I were the heads of the social club of our hometown. We would secretly meet with our neighbors to discuss how we can avoid and challenge his authority. During one of our meetings, policemen arrived and interrupted us. My husband was aggravated and had a huge argument with them. This prompted them to arrest us.

GS: Can you explain what happened when you and your companions got arrested?

ADP: When we arrived at the jail, we were told that it was unlawful for us to meet and speak behind Balaguer's back and that there will be consequences if we were to continue. They let most of us go with that warning except for my husband.

GS: What happened to your husband?

ADP: They kept him in jail for 2 days. They were interrogating him and they beat him badly. When he was released he had to recover for a couple of days. My companions and I went back to jail and demanded they release him...which they did to my surprise. We were valiant but also very lucky – they could've killed him.

GS: What else do you want other people to know about experiencing Trujillo's dictatorship?

ADP: What Trujillo did to us will never be forgotten. He did more damage than good, but that did not destroy our spirit. It took some time for our country to recover from all the damage he did, and the next President [Joaquin Balaguer] was just as bad. But we did not give up. We fought back for what we thought was right, and although we lost many important people, we transformed the country's government from totalitarian to democratic.