

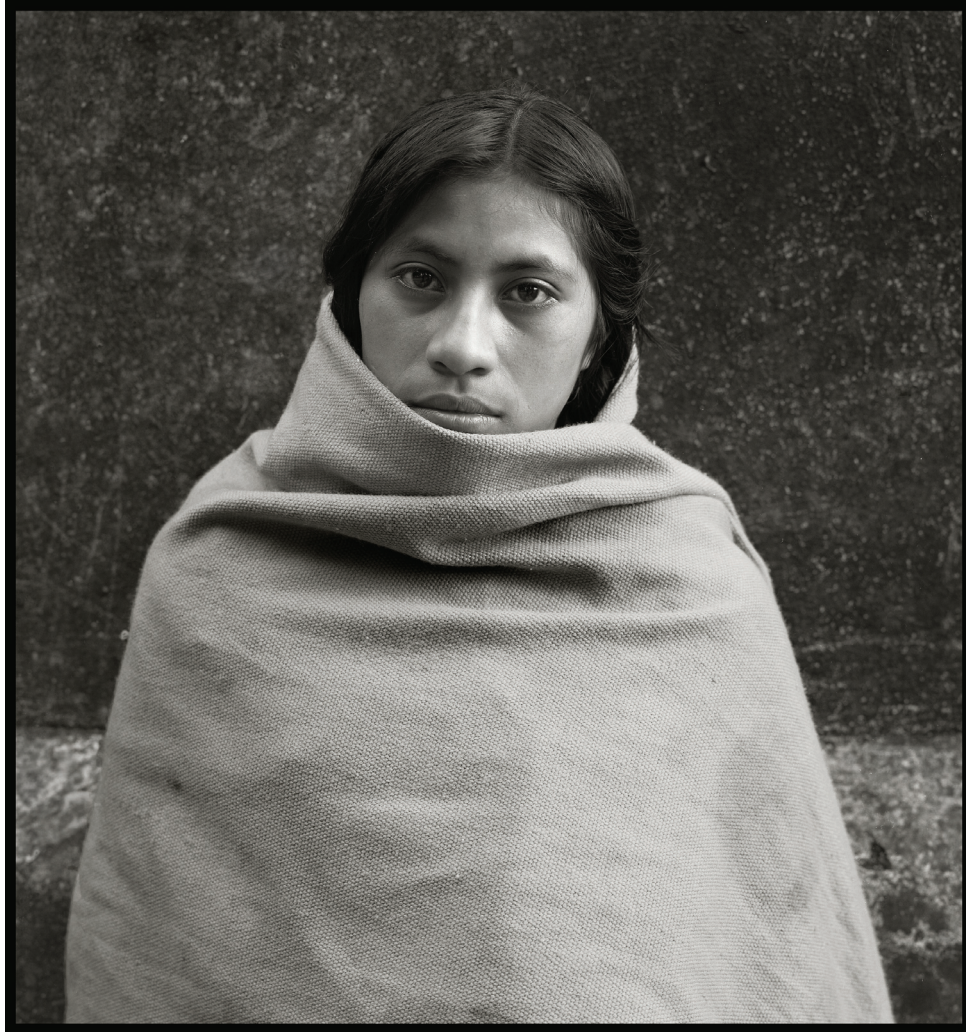
*Series Number Five*

*Portraits: San Cristóbal de las Casas 1986-1990*

*Seventeen Photographs*

*Michael Nye*

## *Portraits: San Cristóbal de las Casas 1986-1990*

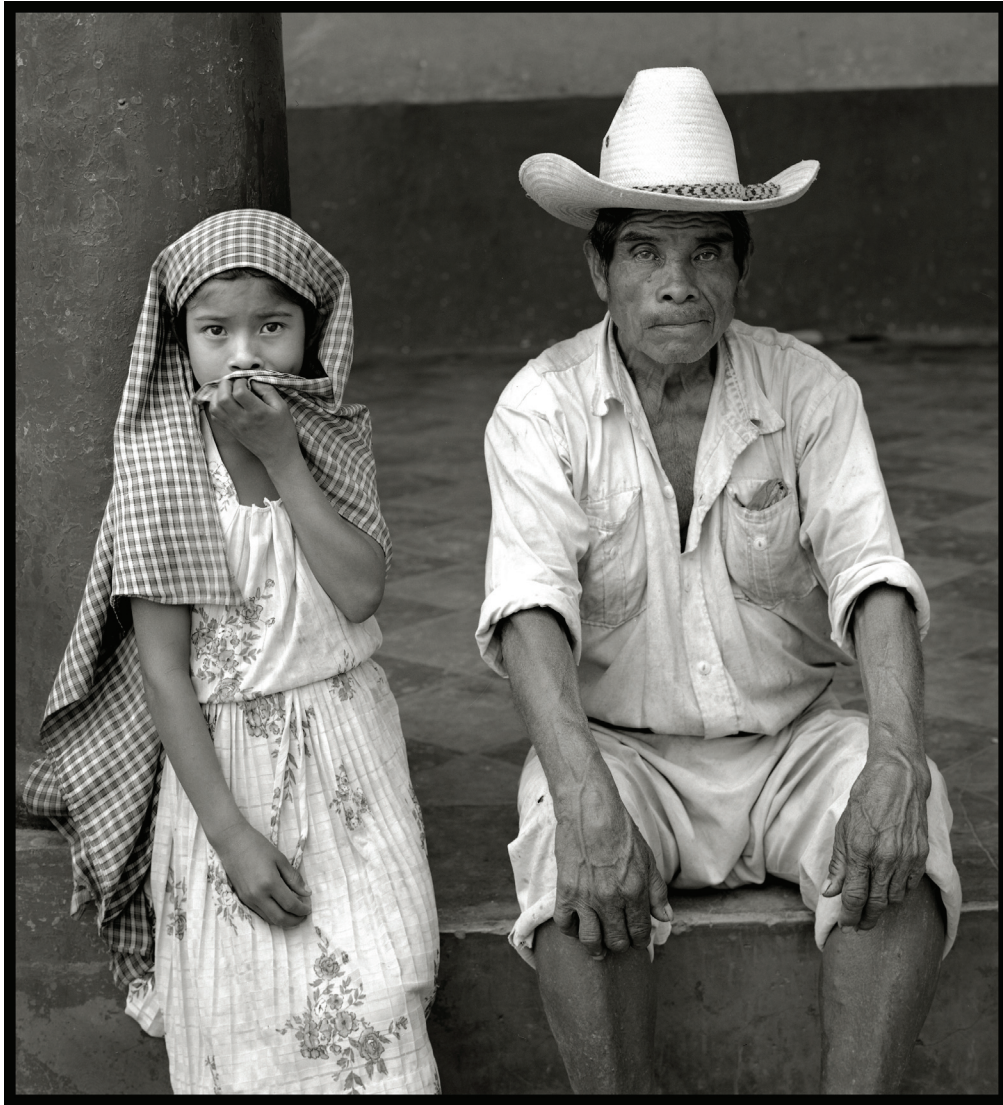


*Chiapas #1*

**D***evotion* is the quality of care or loyalty or enthusiasm for a person, activity, or cause. Art is *devoted* to bringing us closer into focus.

To many, Immanuel Kant is regarded as the greatest philosopher since the ancient Greeks. He grew up in East Prussia and never traveled outside his province. His life was so restricted to daily routine that the inhabitants of Königsberg set their watches as he walked by their windows. He published his masterpiece "*Critique of Pure Reason*" in 1798. Kant's primary aim was to determine the limits and scope of pure reason. Kant asked questions: What should I do? (What

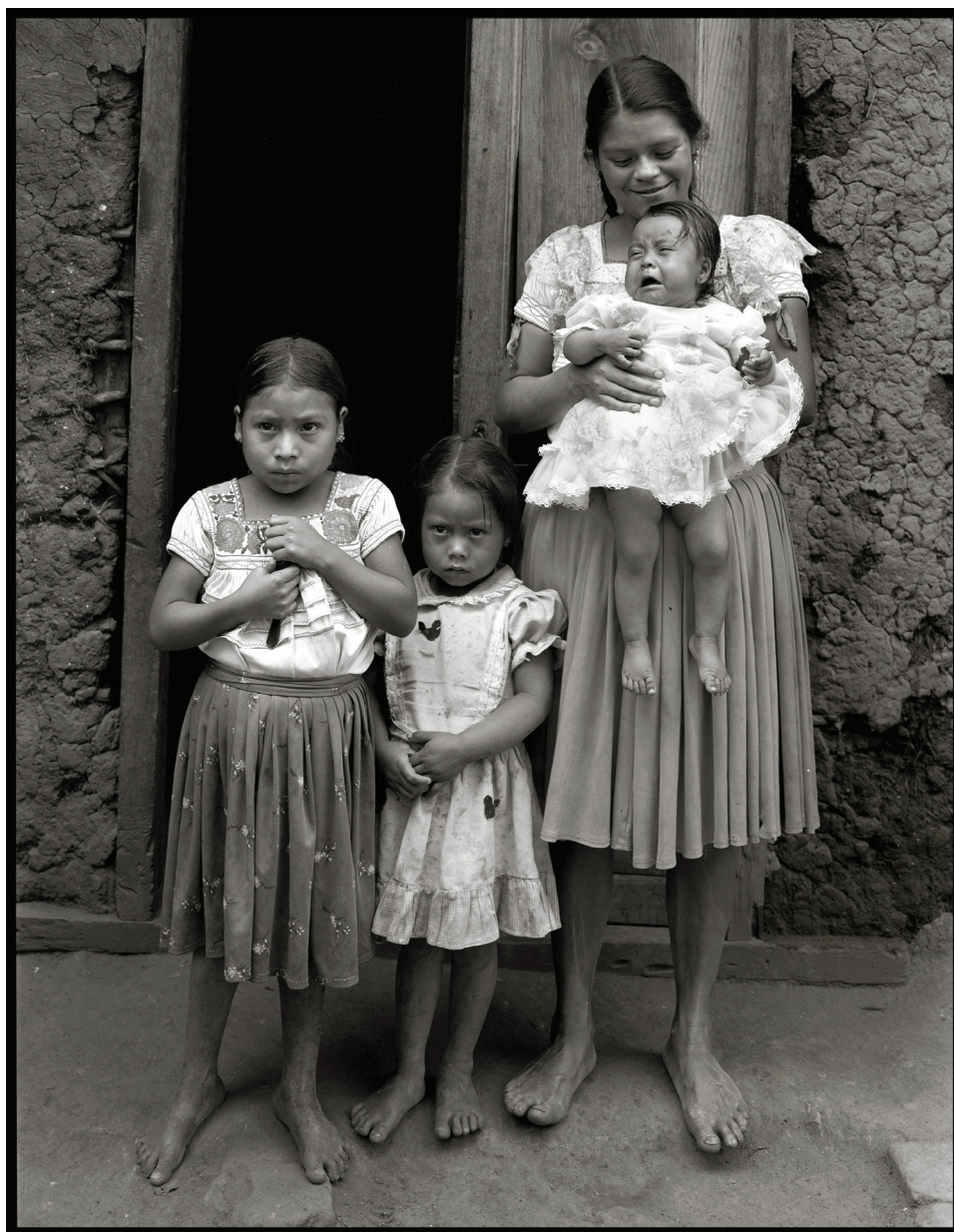
is important?) – What can I know? (What is the origin and limits of knowledge?) – What does it mean to be human? (What is our nature and what do we share with other?) and -- What can we expect in the future? (What is real – what is the nature of ultimate reality?) In my own life I began to lean in the direction of questions.



In 1985 I took a sabbatical from my law practice to focus on photography. What gives permanence significance is change. Many of my attorney friends secretly told me – “They wish they could be a writer or gardener or cook but couldn’t - they had expenses - a new house, a boat or children to educate.” My mother was gracious and supportive when she heard my news. My father wrote me: “You are throwing away your career and your reputation.” I thought – maybe the word *reputation* is overrated. Losing and finding suddenly seemed closely connected.



In 1985, my wife Naomi and I were invited as artists-in-residents to Casa Na Bolom in San Cristóbal de las Casas, Mexico. Na Bolom was the home of anthropologists Frans and Gertrude (Trudi) Blom. Frans was of the first to excavate Palenque the ancient Mayan City. He died in 1963. Trudi was a jungle adventurer and dedicated Na Bolom to the protection of the Lacandon Maya people and the preservation of the rain forest.



*Chiapas #3*

We would have dinner each night in candlelight – large wavering shadows appeared on walls. The long wooden table was covered with red and purple Zinacantan cloth, flowers, hot soups and



breads. Trudi was in her mid eighties and would appear from her garden in formal indigenous Indian dresses with heavy jewelry covering her neck, fingers, wrists and ears. There would be artists and actors, visitors and Lacandon Maya Indians gathered around. Many languages were circling. Bird calls and silverware would compete for attention.



*Chiapas #4*

San Cristóbal sits in a small valley surrounded by hills and has a mild highland climate. The Tzotzil Maya is the largest indigenous group making up roughly one third of the state's indigenous population. The wet season runs for six months. Tropical jungle was nearby. After spending time in a desert I was impressed with what water does to earth.



Journal entry:

*"I have a hunger to work. Photography nudges us to look in the opposite direction. The streets here are breathing. Fireworks explode nearby. Water is rushing down streets from early morning rains. It's cold. The Tzotzil, native Maya people from Chamula and Zinacantan are floating into the city at twilight making their way to the market. The smell is of firewood and mint and fresh rain. Every shiny street desires attention."*

I thought more and more about the process of portraiture: Meeting someone for the first time – the exchange of early words -- names and languages and places - how someone holds his or her hands and shoulders and eyes – how those on the outside of the portrait are watching - the subject becomes part photographer – photographer becomes part subject – the slow sudden stare – the large box camera waiting on its tripod - the tiny voice of the shutter – how light travels and softly touches the negative - the first careful words said after the portrait is taken. So much is seen. So much is hidden.





Journal entry:

*"Most days I see the street sweeper Augustine working at sunrise. He is responsible for the area around Santo Domingo Cathedral and up and down Calle Escuadron. He rarely stops moving. The streets are littered with pieces of fruit and papers and sticks and dirt and objects falling from people and trees. He keeps his brooms stacked on the side corner of the cathedral. (See image xxx) His broom is made of tree branches – long and tied with strong twine. I met his oldest son today. Augustine said - "No one has ever asked to take my photograph before." My view camera on tripod – dark cloth covering my head and the ground glass – a few people gathered watching us - Augustine stands tall, confident – looks into the lens. (see image xxx) The streets never stay clean. His work starts over every day.*



*Chiapas #6*



*Augustine's Brooms - Chiapas #7*

I read *"On Photography"* during my period in Mexico. Susan Sontag - essayist, professor, filmmaker and political activist - wrote a series of essays 'On Photography' that won the National Book Critics Circle award and was selected as one of the top 20 books in 1977 by the New York Times Book review.

*"To photograph people is to violate them, by seeing them as they never see themselves, by having knowledge of them they can never have . . . it turns people into objects."*

*"To photograph is to appropriate the thing photographed."*

*"There is an aggression implicit in every use of the camera."*

*"Just as the camera is a sublimation of the gun, to photograph someone is a sublimated murder – a soft murder, appropriate to a sad, frightened time."*

Sontag's book was more polemical than academic. I remember thinking – these essays are so alien – how could anyone be so wrong and cynical? Artists generally don't have secret agendas to exploit others. Photography like all the arts has its own inherent qualities and limitations. Sontag failed to understand that photography was more about light and less about dark.



*Journal entry:*

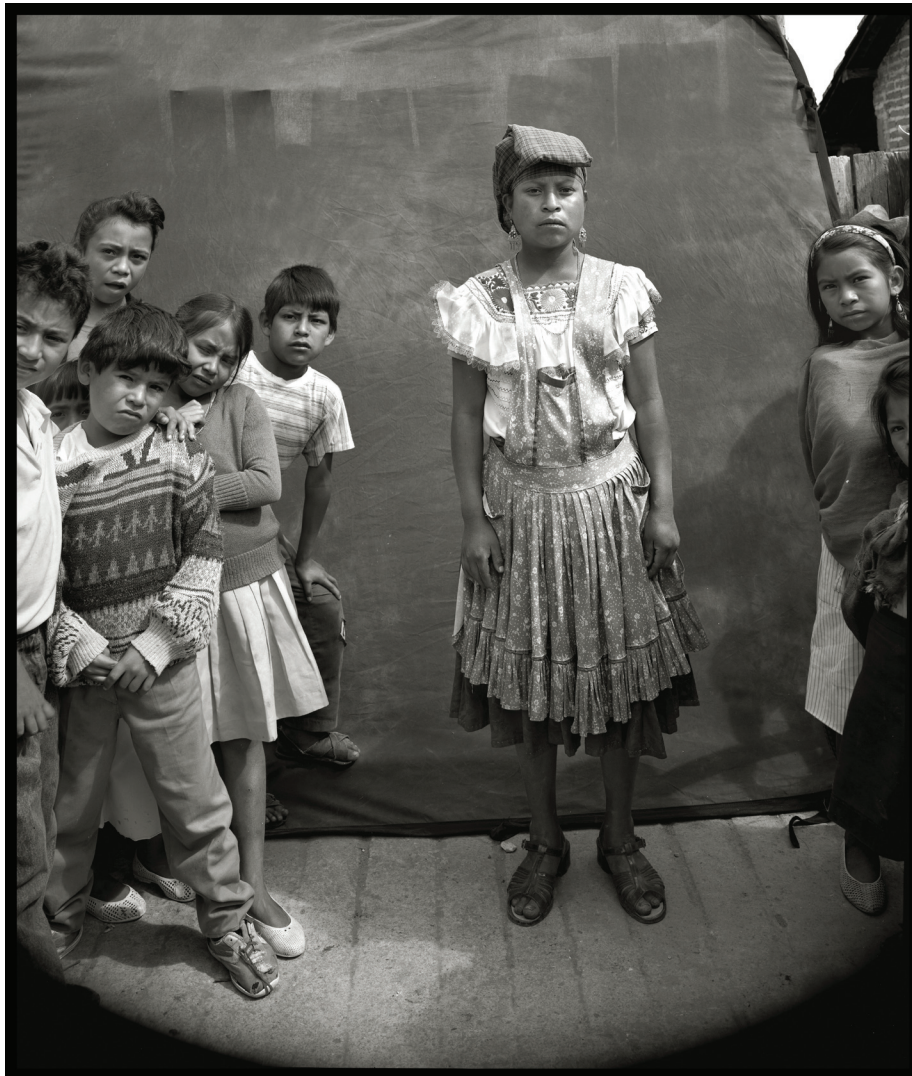
*"This evening returning to Na Bolom – with my camera on my back -- tired and glad – I saw two Chamula women - mother and daughter waiting for a bus --- hair and clothes and shoes the same. I asked– in my broken Spanish if I could take their portrait. They snapped at me – "No –no" -- and turned the opposite direction. I felt the "no - no" slap of their words. I didn't blame them – a foreigner wanting something - It is not right to take and take without giving something back."*

That night after dinner I went to a local bar and drank beers -- too many probably, and thought about the two Chamula women. I remembered a few weeks before in Tuxtla Gutierrez – I watched itinerant portrait photographers working in the city square. They first made a paper negative and then re-photographed the negatives into positive prints. Chemicals were inside the camera box. I thought, "This is what I will do."



*Chiapas #8*

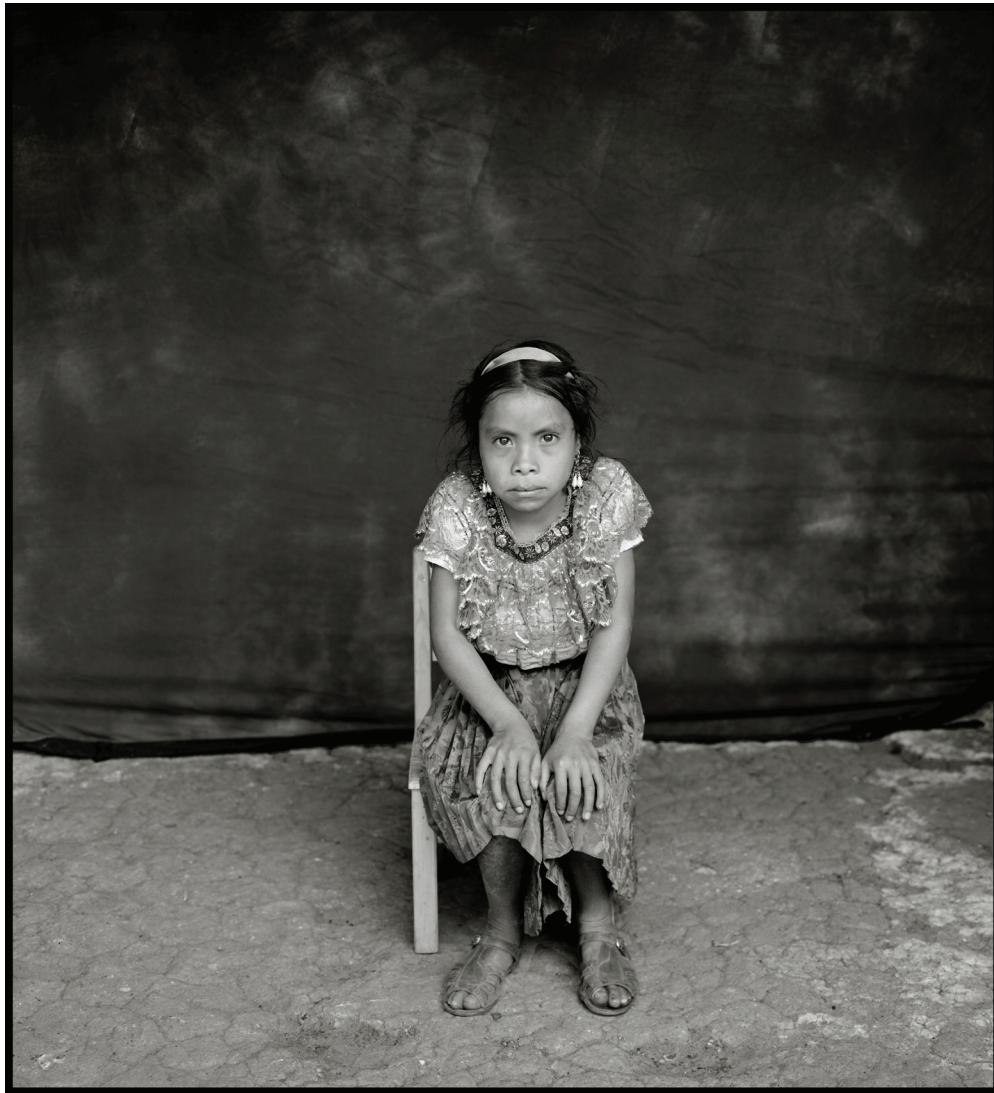
The next morning I went to the city square and set up my 5x7 view camera/tripod – film plates and light meter and single chair. I had a large hand printed sign announcing I was in business – *Portraits for \$25 cents.* (Mexican Peso equivalency.) At first a large crowd gathered watching and waiting. It was awkward. Finally, a family approached and we started talking. I told them that I could deliver the portrait in two days -- we agreed on the price and time of delivery. Within 20 minutes a long line gathered. Chamulas – Zinacantans - mothers brushing the children's hair– cleaning off their faces - pushing shirt tails into their pants – brothers and sisters -- an old women with a injured leg – workers just arriving from Aguacatenango. I felt very nervous. What if the negatives turned out too thin or I made a mistake with my exposures – or developing chemicals – or if they hated the portraits? My close friend Barry Norris -- photographer – working with his wife Joan in Na Bolom – had a darkroom and allowed me to use it.



*Chiapas #9*



No one refused the portraits – some were very happy but after receipt some asked for reduced prices. One wanted color not black and white – another said I cut off his feet –another said the portrait looked “malo” (undesirable). One man complained that part of his head was cut off. (No charge for that one.) I reduced the price of many portraits from 25 cents to 14 cents. (Mexico Peso equivalency.)



*Chiapas #10*

I found a new way to work – not as a business, but rather as an exchange and with cooperation. There was no taking, but rather a mutual giving and receiving between us. I remember in law school the concept of a valid contract is *reciprocity*. There must be an exchange of promises and actions flowing between parties. The exchange was not just for a photographic portrait, but also for conversations, laughter, questions and human acknowledgment. From this period forward I begin working with this idea held closely. A fair exchange mattered.

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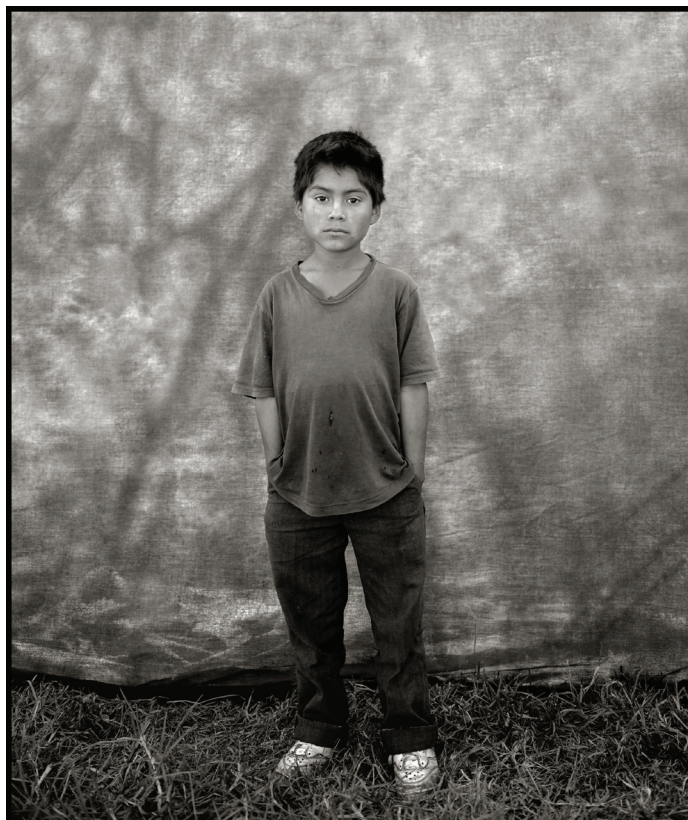


*Chiapas #11*





*Chiapas #12*



*Chiapas #13*



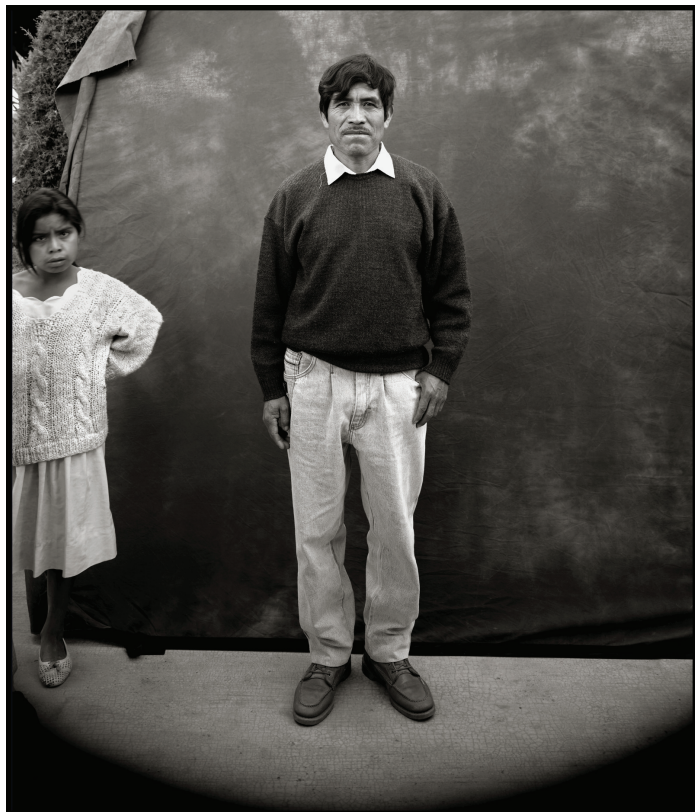


*Chiapas #14*





*Chiapas #15*



*Chiapas #16*





*Chiapas #17*