

Series Number Four

Portraits: San Cristóbal de las Casas

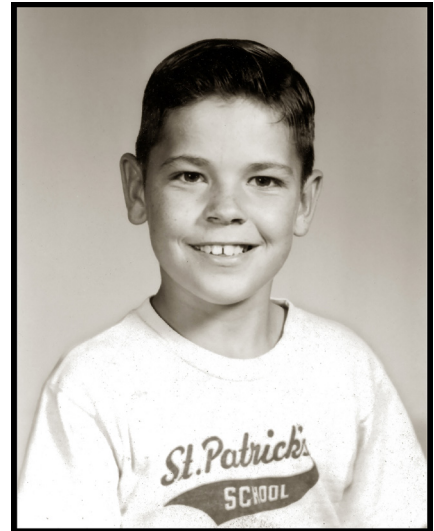
1986-1988

Nineteen Photographs

Essay - June, 2024

Portraits: San Cristóbal de las Casas, Mexico

THERE is a difference between having your portrait taken and taking a portrait. In grade school our teacher told us to form a line, our last name determined the order. Nancy Nicholson and I waited for our turn to stand in front of the camera. The school photographer told each child the same thing. *“When I say Corpus Christi, SMILE.”* What I remember most was that the school photographer never smiled.



What gives the word “permanence” significance must be change. I read about Julia Margaret Cameron turning her hen house into a dark room in 1863 in England. She photographed Alfred Tennyson, Charles Darwin, neighbors, friends and workers. Most of her photographs are at the Humanities Resource Center in Austin. With white gloves, I held one of her photographs and then another. She wrote in her journal, *“I came running out of my darkroom to show each new photograph with such excitement, each time dripping silver nitrate staining my blouse.”*

My wife Naomi and I were invited to be artists-in-residents at Casa Na Bolom in San Cristóbal de las Casas, Mexico. Na Bolom had been the home of anthropologists Frans and Gertrude (Trudi) Blom. Frans was one of the first anthropologists to excavate Palenque, the ancient Mayan City. Trudi was a jungle adventurer and dedicated to the protection of the Lacandon Maya people and the preservation of the rainforest.

We stayed in a tiny cabin hidden in Na Bolom’s lush gardener’s garden. Rain started and stopped every early morning. Dinner each night was lit by candlelight. Large wavering shadows appearing on painted stucco walls. The long dinner table was covered with red and purple Zinacantan cloth, flowers, hot soups and breads. There were artists and movie actors, visitors and indigenous Tzotzil Maya women, men and children around the table. Trudi Blom was in her mid-eighties and would appear in formal indigenous dresses with heavy jewelry around her neck and fingers.

She would yell at anyone that arrived late. “PorQue’ llegas tarde!” Languages circled, birdcalls and clinking silverware competed for attention.

San Cristóbal sits in a small valley surrounded by hills and tropical jungles. 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. After spending time in a desert, it is impressive what water can do to the earth. The Tzotzil, native Maya people from Chamula and Zinacantan arrived into the city in morning darkness. The streets breathed and fireworks exploded. The smells were taller, mint greener, smoke and cold were inseparable. Every shiny, skinny street desired recognition.

Art is devoted to bringing us closer into focus. Portraiture can be more than a handshake or “Buen dia” in passing. Meeting someone for the first time there is an exchange of early words and histories. Light is shrinking and swelling - Then, there is a slow sudden stare. Silver light travels through the air, bouncing, reflecting off a person and then that same light passes through the lens and softly touches the negative. So much is seen. So much is hidden. To bump up against someone can leave a fingerprint.

Augustine the street sweeper was responsible for cleaning the area around Santo Domingo Cathedral. He rarely stopped moving. The streets were littered with street things, pieces of fruit and papers and sticks and blowing dirt and objects falling from people and sky. His broom was made of tree branches, long and tied with strong twine. Augustine said, “My work starts over every day.” There can be a reverence and generosity in a look.

(San Cristobal Brooms #6 & 7)



Returning to Casa Na Bolom in the late evening, feeling both tired and glad, I saw a mother and daughter were waiting for a bus. They had faces and language that they owned. All the lengthening shadows first follow, before dissolving into nothingness toward night time. After dinner, I went to a local bar and drank too many beers. I thought about portraiture. Several weeks earlier in Tuxtla Gutierrez, I watched an itinerant street photographer working with confidence in the city square. He first made a paper negative and then re-photographed the negatives into positive prints. His darkroom with chemicals were inside his camera box. A bucket of water held his finished portraits. He was never in a hurry. What did he understand about faces?

The next morning, I went to the busy city square and set up my 5x7" view camera/tripod, film plates, backdrop and single chair. I had a large hand printed sign in Spanish, announcing: Portraits for 25 cents. (Peso equivalency.) At the beginning, a large crowd circled, watched and waited. No one stepped forward. It was very awkward.

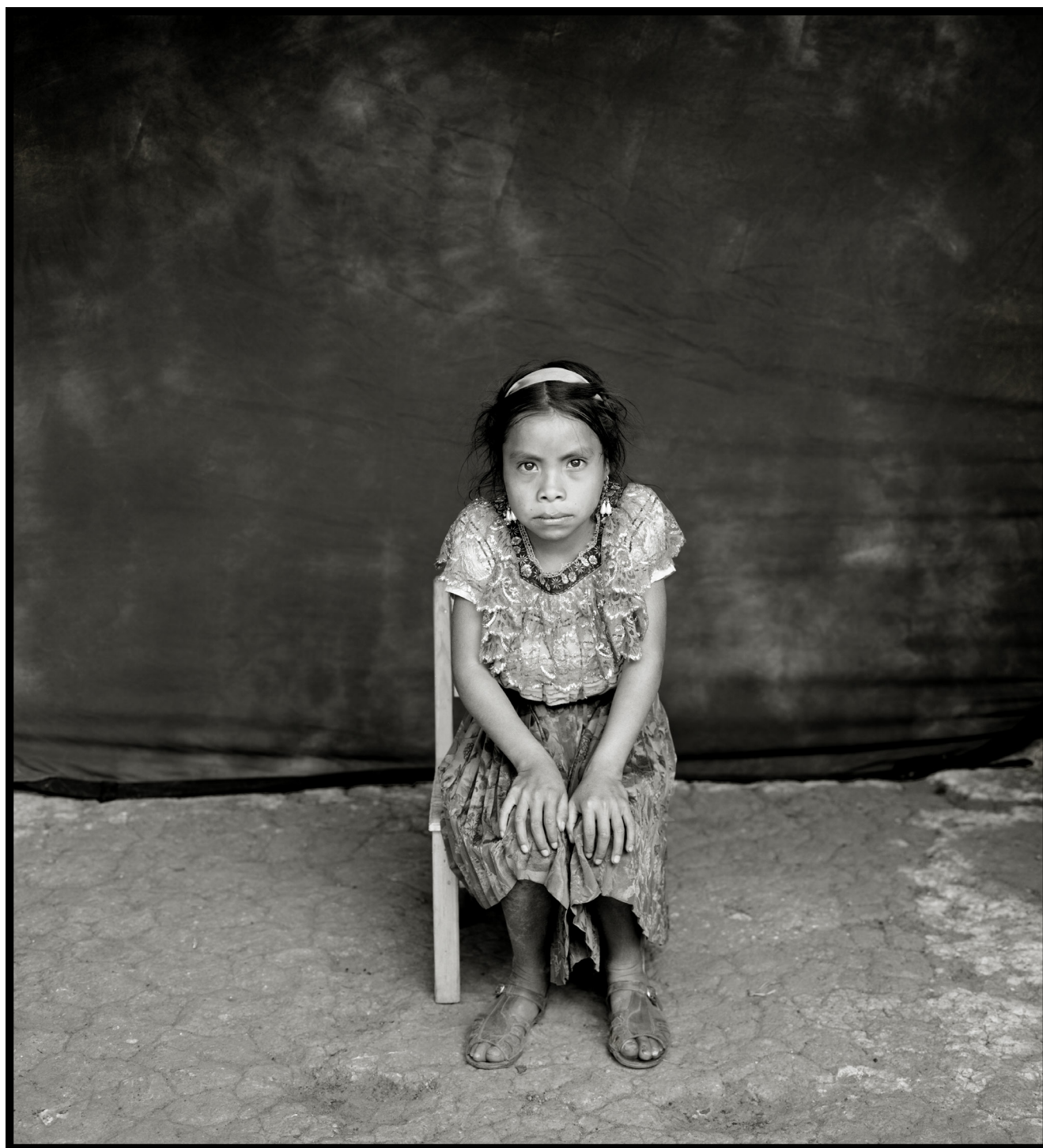
Finally, a father and his son approached the camera and we started talking. We agreed on the price and I told them that I would deliver the portrait in two days. Within 20 minutes, a long line gathered to have their portraits made. Mothers brushed their children's hair, cleaned their faces, pushed shirts into pants. A brother and younger sister held hands. Laughter and questions were exchanged. An old woman with an injured leg stood tall. I was nervous. What if the negatives were over or under exposed? What if the developing chemicals were contaminated? What if the people hated the portraits? My close friend Barry Norris, a photographer working with his wife Joan at Na Bolom had a darkroom that I used.

No one refused their portraits. Some were delighted, while others complained. Some wanted their portraits in color, not black & white. Some were unhappy because I cut off their feet. One man was annoyed because most of his head was missing. (No charge for that one.) I reduced prices for my mistakes in judgment. Reciprocal participation was appealing. The exchange was not just a photographic portrait for currency, but for conversations, human presence, connection and acknowledgment. It was a sideways or tilted kind of knowing. Photographs can increase in value if it becomes part of a family's history.

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In the village Aguacatenango, I photographed a large extended family. Father, mother, aunt, uncle, grandparents, neighbors, older brother and sister. A young girl begged her parents to have her portrait made. (See - Aguacatenango - One) They said, "No, No, No!". As I was leaving, she ran to a small chair and sat down in front of me. She placed her hands on her knees. Her eyes stared deeply into her future. Her need to be seen was her heart beating.

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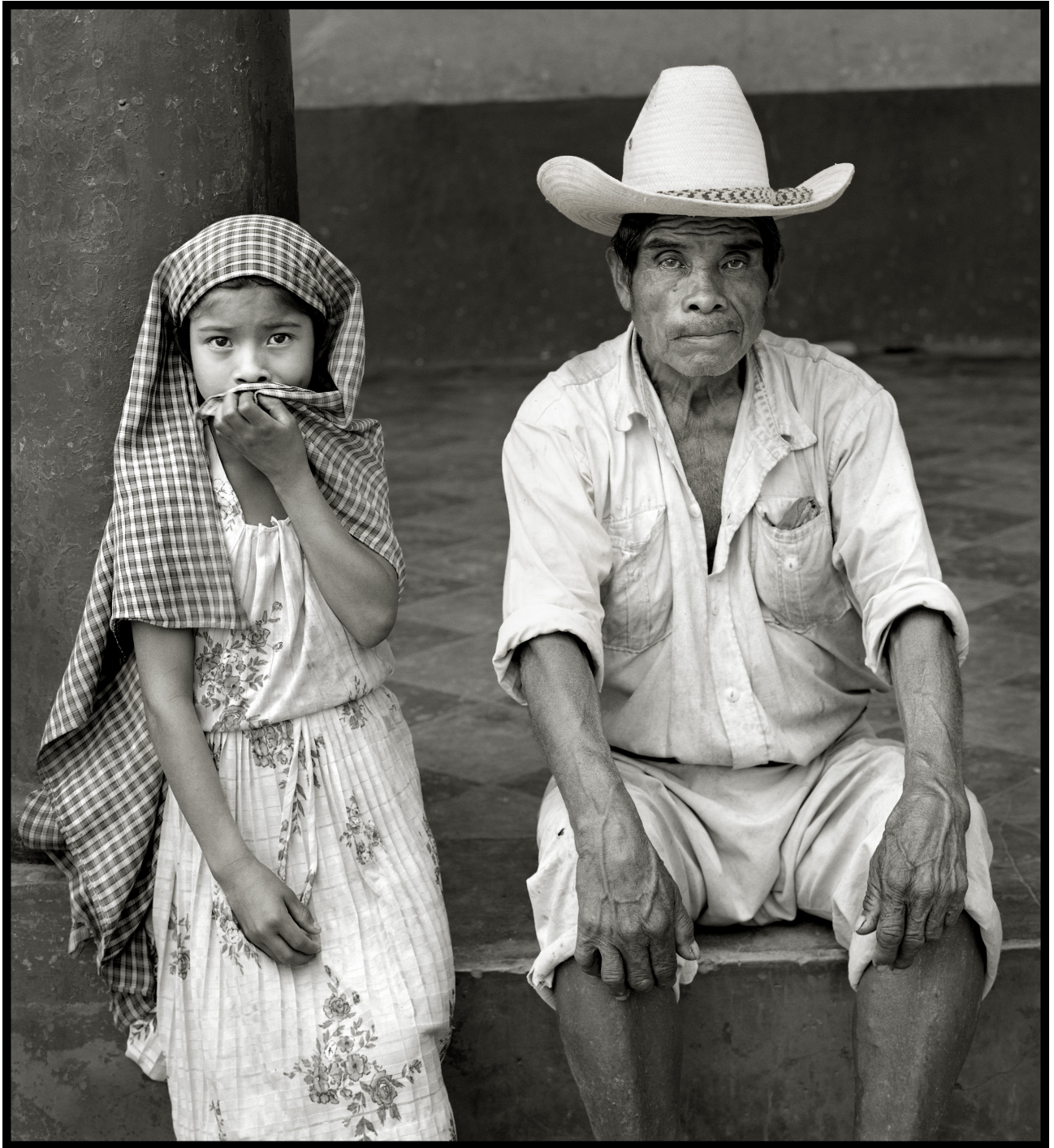
Aguacatenango - *One*



San Cristóbal - Two



San Cristóbal - Three



San Cristóbal - Four



San Cristóbal - Five



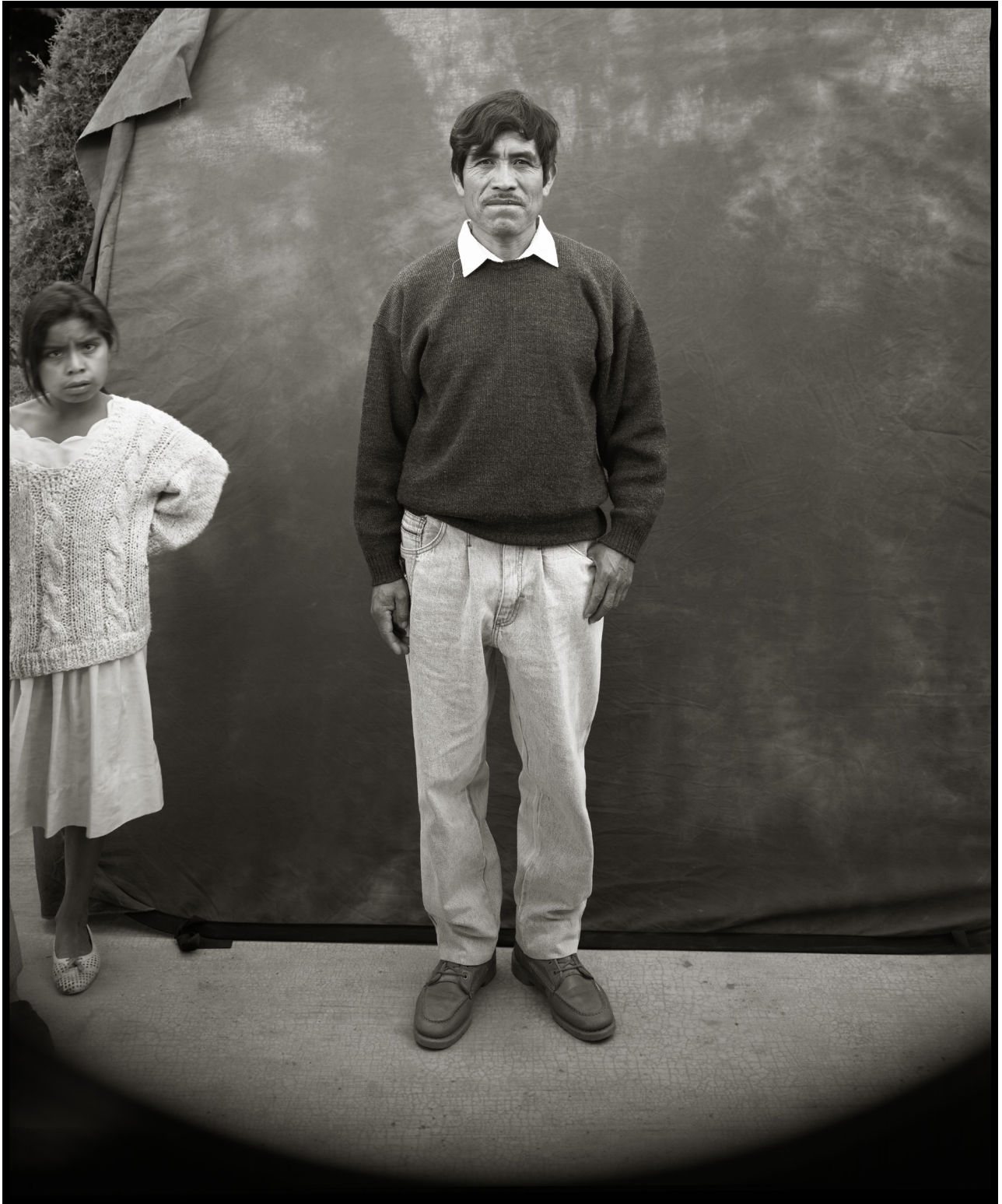
San Cristóbal - Six



Brooms - Seven



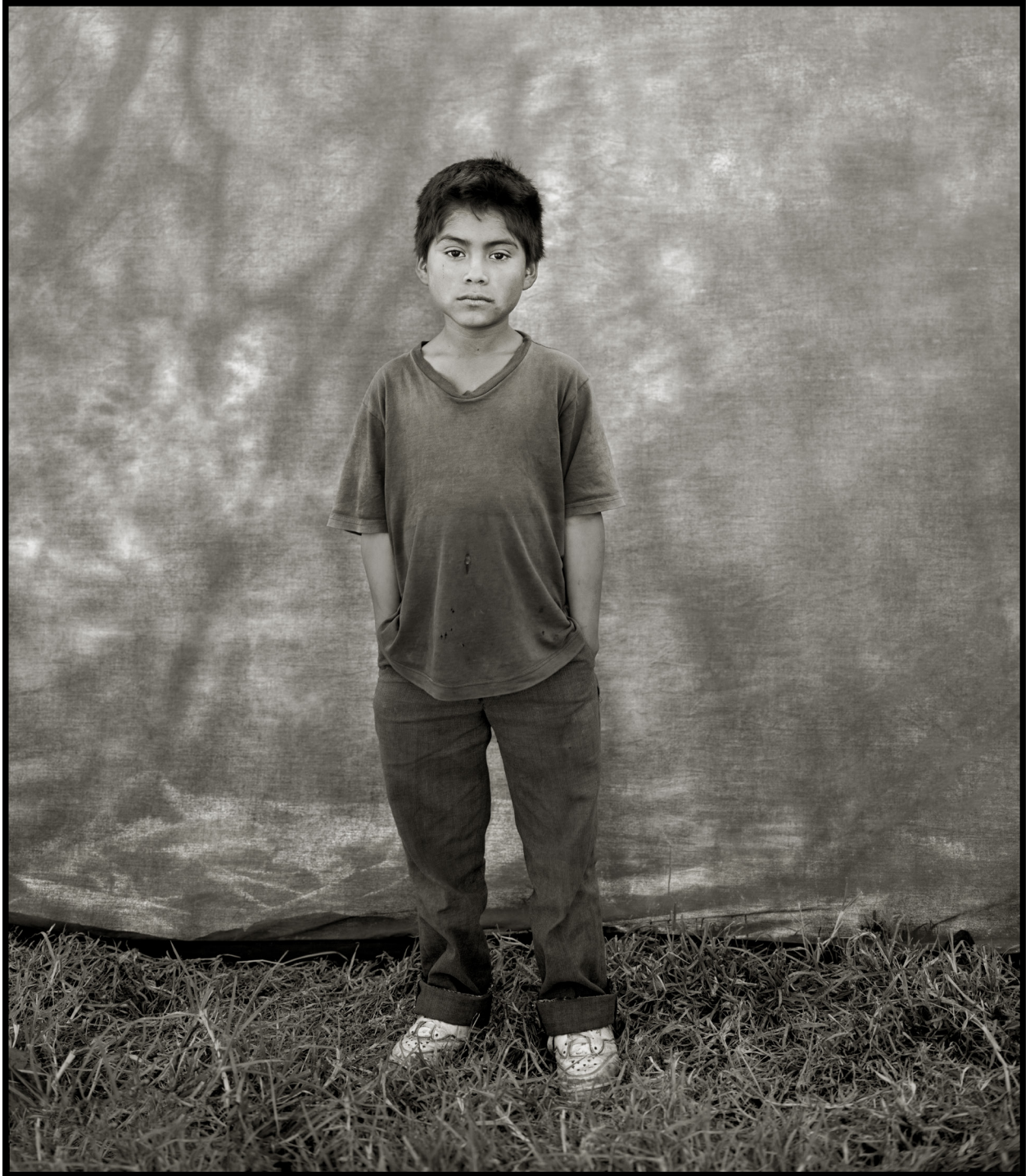
San Cristóbal- Eight



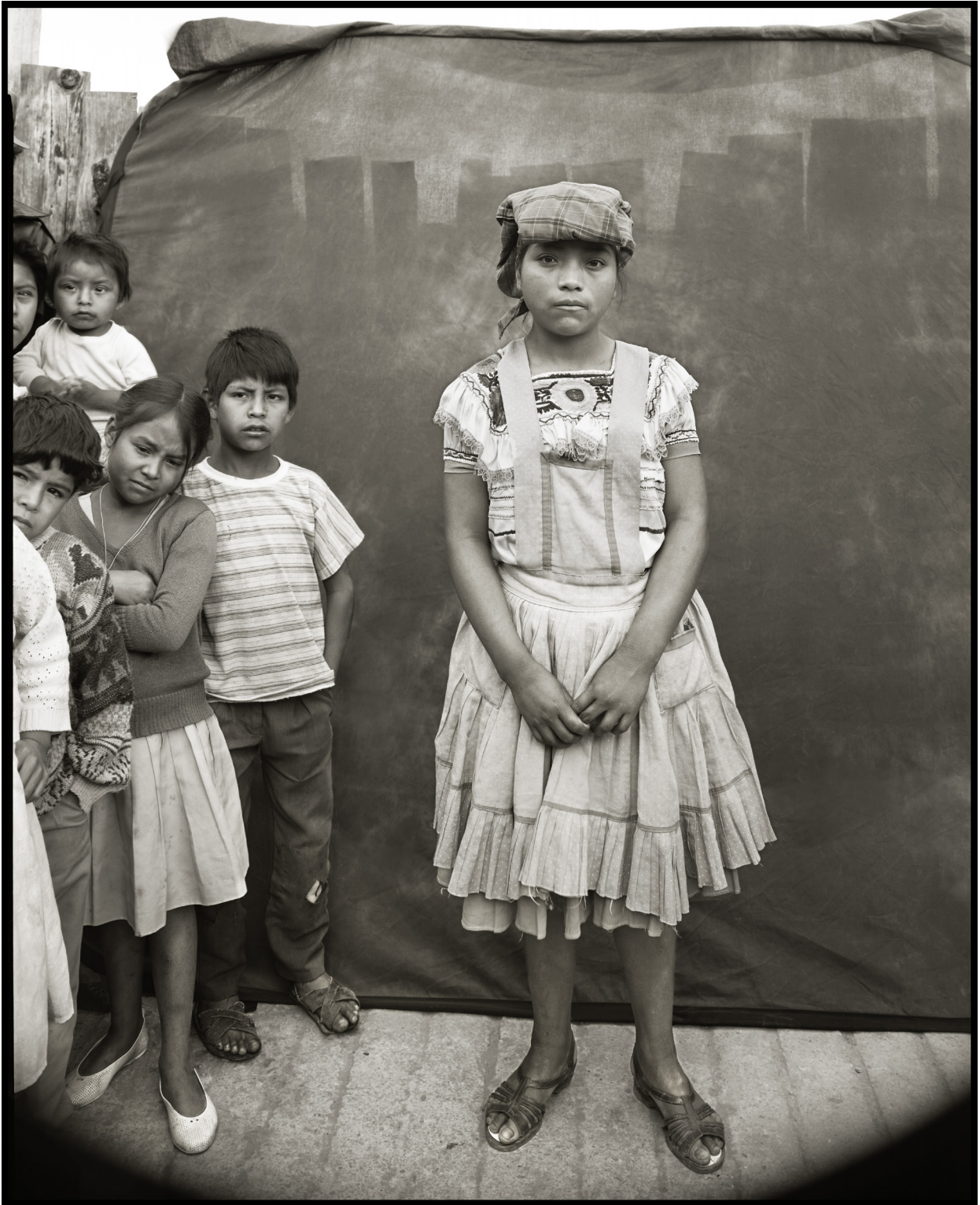
San Cristóbal - Nine



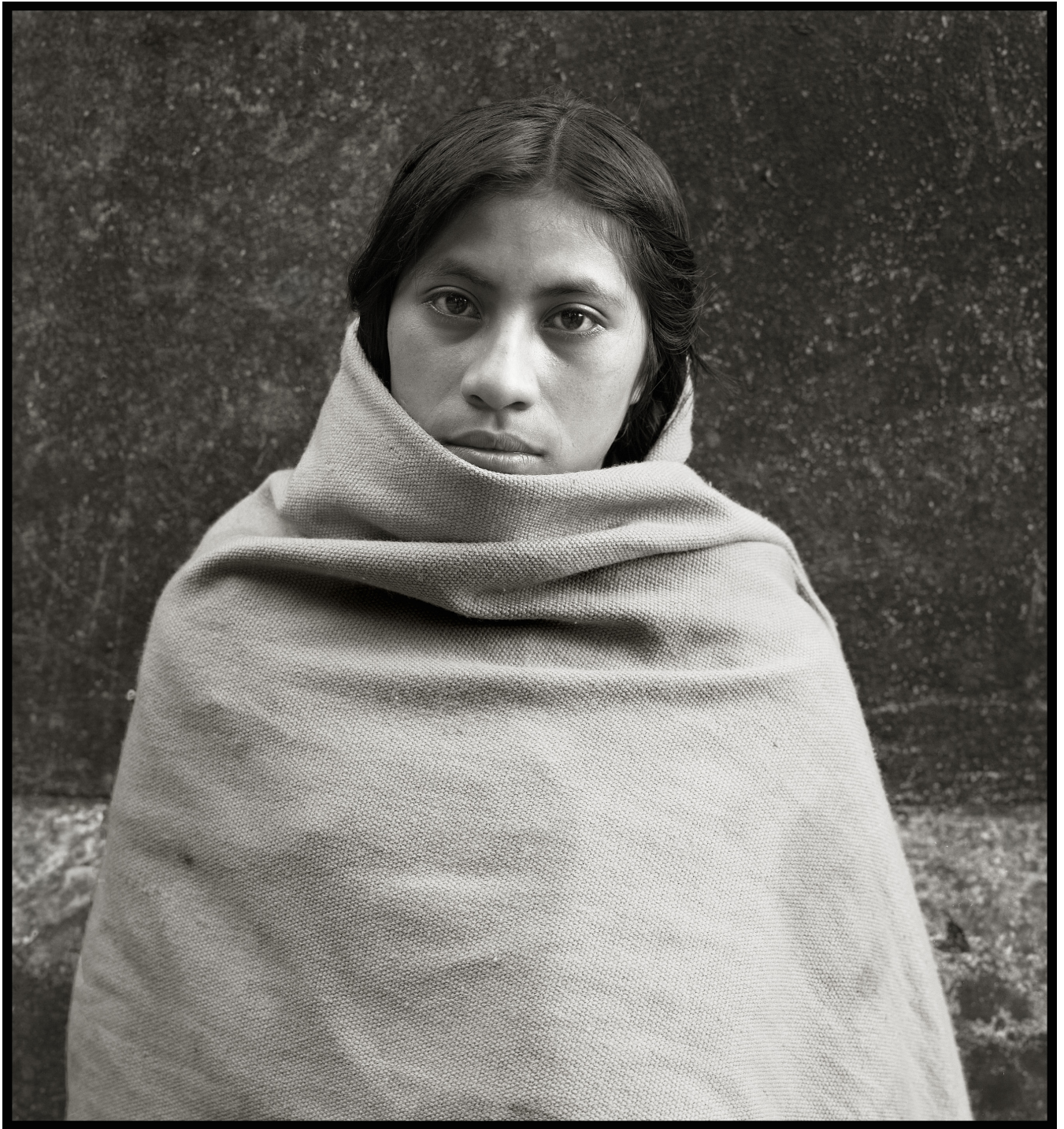
San Cristóbal- Ten



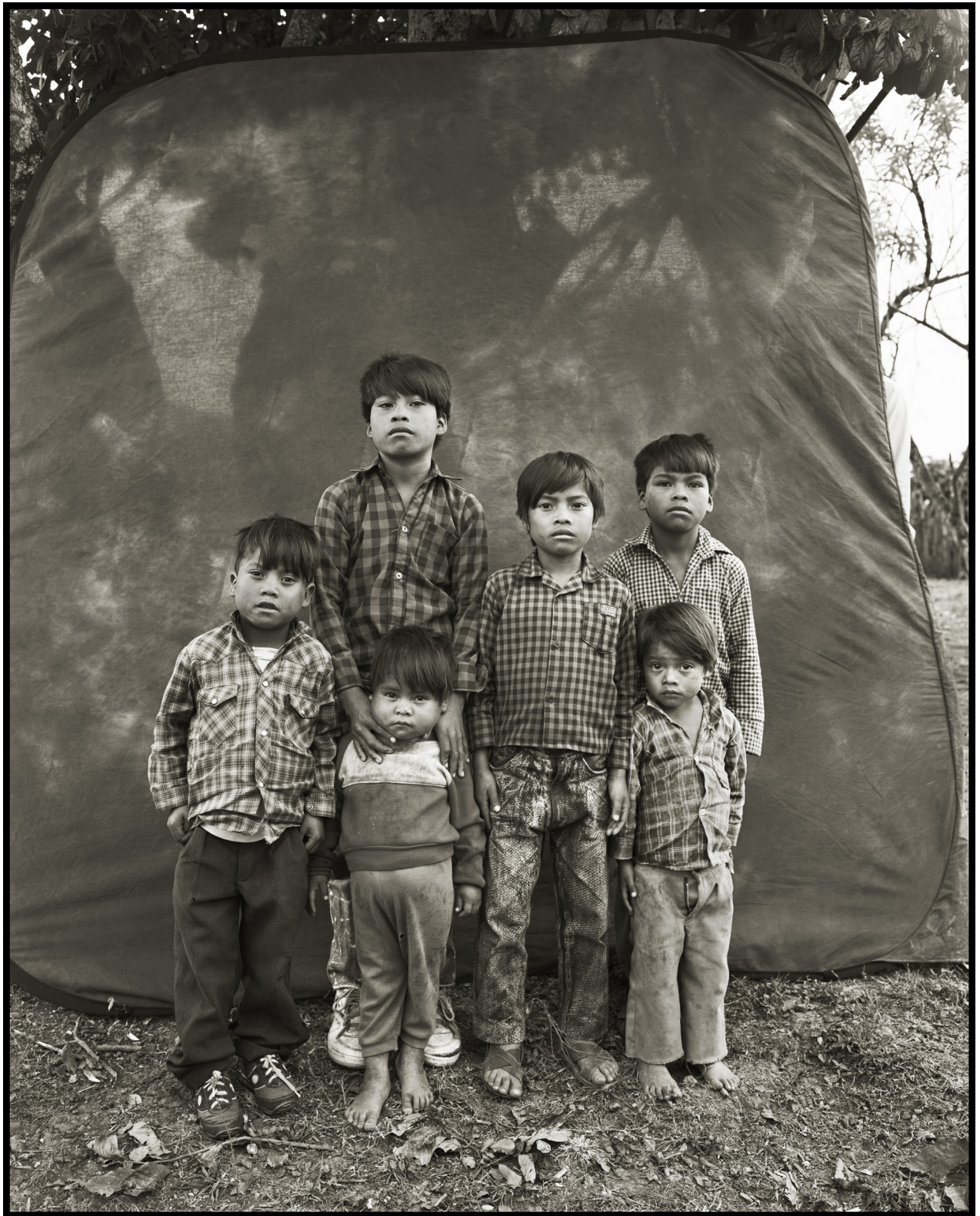
San Cristóbal - Eleven



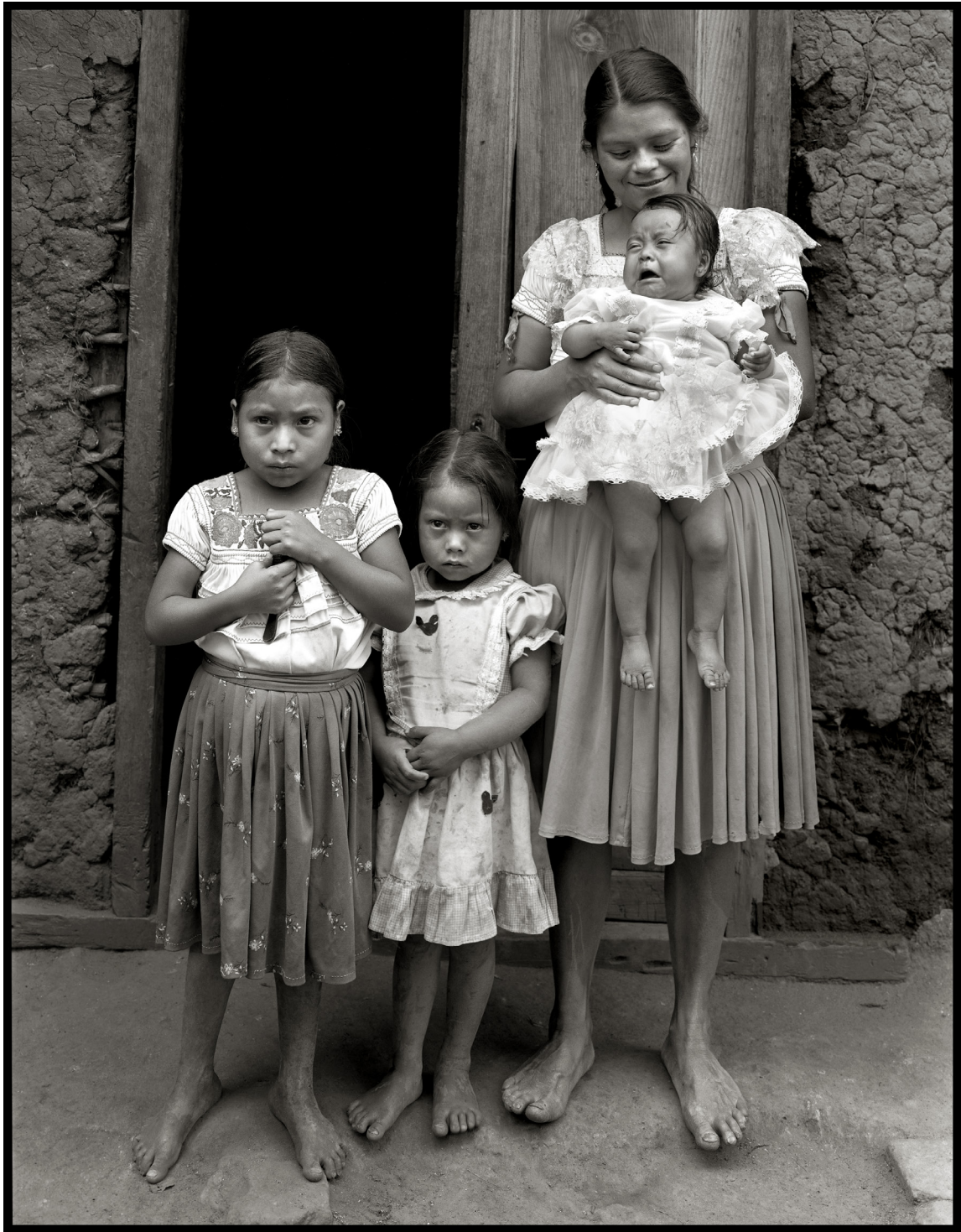
San Cristóbal- Twelve



San Cristóbal - Thirteen



San Cristóbal - Fourteen



San Cristóbal - Fifteen



San Cristóbal - Sixteen



San Cristóbal - Seventeen



San Cristóbal - Eighteen



San Cristóbal - Nineteen