

Zamudio examines Chicago through the lens of nostalgia

CHICAGO PHOTOGRAPHER CAPTURES THE FADING ESSENCE OF A BUSTLING POST-WAR CULTURE'S DESCENT INTO GENTRIFICATION.

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Things of the past have a tendency to recur in the present. Such is the driving force of Chicago photographer Dan Zamudio's latest exhibition, "Chicago and the Diana: Toy Camera Images by Dan Zamudio," currently on view at the Chicago Cultural Center. Taking a vintage Diana camera for endless walks in both Chicago's more recognizable neighborhoods and in areas really only known to native Chicagoans, Zamudio has managed to capture the fading essence of a bustling post-war culture's descent into gentrification.

Here, an explanation of the Diana camera is probably due. First, it is a toy entirely made of plastic, including the lens. The original Diana cameras were discontinued in the late 1960s and early '70s, but they've recently made a comeback. Any fan of Lomo cameras, or Urban Outfitters for that matter, can have their own try with the toy.

Using a Diana camera is usually deemed as trite child's play, but Zamudio turns it into an art form. As a medium format camera, the Diana produces lo-fi, blurred, almost surreal photos. Often it produces images not exactly like those seen through the viewfinder at the capturing moment. The images can turn out slightly different, akin to memory's quality of distorting moments into more or less ideal impressions.

Walking through the galleries of the Chicago Cultural Center is reminiscent of flipping through the pages of a grandparent's photo album. Small black and white images of 24 by 36 millimeters, Zamudio's images are intimate and fond memories not only of places and things, but of a bygone era.

Zamudio's chief concern is the disappearance of any evidence of an era of neon signs, jazz bars, water towers, decaying buildings, and grimy diners. Glimpses of shopkeepers through the windows of the storefront remind the viewer of not only a favorite deli, but also a hardworking, often immigrant, middle class. Streets engulfed with the glow of neon signs offer heartwarming, fuzzy, evocative vignettes.

Zamudio frames his images in a particular manner, for instance by leaving the beginning of a neon sign out of the frame. In this way, he seems to not only assume viewers to be familiar with the locale, but also for them to have memories associated with it. It is up to them to reconstruct the area from what they remember of it. Chicago's lesser known landmarks, coffee shops, bars and streets, favored by true natives and urban explorers are preserved in Zamudio's work.

As a whole, the exhibition takes on a greater importance than individual images of places and things, and certain images call to mind fellow Chicago photographer Art Shay's style of work. Zamudio's images are a childlike love letter to a vanishing urban ecosystem. As Chicago's numerous neighborhoods catapult toward the trendy, fashionable, and shiny new aesthetic, his images draw the viewer back into an album of the past, reminding him or her to honor and preserve the foundations of our society and culture.