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Komchen, A Maya Village

Stephen Gaye

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KOMCHEN,
A MAYA VILLAGE

by

Stephen A. Gaye

Candidate for the Masters of Fine Arts
School of Photographic Arts and Sciences
Rochester Institute of Technology

June 4, 1976

Advisors:
Owen Butler
Evon Streetman
Dr. Robert H. Johnston
To Jeannie Elizabeth Pearce for helping me see.
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THESIS PROPOSAL

for
The Masters of Fine Arts Degree

College of Graphic Arts and Photography
School of Photographic Arts and Sciences

ROCHESTER INSTITUTE OF TECHNOLOGY

********************************************************************************

TITLE: Komchen, A Maya Village

PURPOSE: To photograph Champoton, Campeche, Mexico, (90° 40' West Longitude by 19° 20' North Latitude) a
village with residual Mayan characteristics; fundamentally
unchanged in many of its principles, attitudes, and
rituals since before 1500 B.C.

SUBMITTED BY: Stephen A. Gaye January 26, 1976

THESIS BOARD:

Chief Advisor: Owen Butler
Assistant Professor
School of Photographic Arts and Sciences
Rochester Institute of Technology

Associate Advisors: Evon Streetman
Assistant Professor
School of Photographic Arts and Sciences
Rochester Institute of Technology

Dr. Robert H. Johnston
Dean
College of Fine and Applied Arts
Rochester Institute of Technology
SCOPE AND BACKGROUND OF THESIS:

Having spent much of my childhood in Hispanic cultures (San Jose, Costa Rica; Las Palmas, Canary Islands; Talara, Peru) and in my recent participation in the RIT Mexican Workshop, 1975, I have developed a great empathy with the people and customs of these areas.

What I propose is a personal ethnographic study of a Mayan village; Champoton, Campeche, Mexico. Because of its proximity to the Yucatan Peninsula, where the Mayan civilization was most highly developed, the area is rich in traditions, rituals, and physical evidence of the Mayan past (Tekal, Palengue, Edzna, Zayil, Kabah, Uxmal, Chichen-Itza).

"It is through perception, largely visual and auditory, that we respond to the humanness around us. Our recognition of cultural phenomena is controlled by our ability to respond and to understand. The camera is an optical system - it has no selective process - and alone it offers no means of evading the need for perceptive sensitivity." Although there is little use of contemporary technology, by the Mayans, there is a crude, but amazing sophistication in their understanding and awareness of the human condition displayed in their traditional rituals and day to day life. This thesis is, in general, about human interaction and observation. Living and working closely with the people, I hope to transcend the obvious cultural barriers and gain more than a superficial insight into their experience. As a special supportive skill I have fluency of the Spanish language. I will photograph people, historical sights, natural and man-made phenomena; their environment, rituals, and indigenous crafts. For the final body of work I will select those images that most strongly portray my observation of and interaction with the Mayan people and those physical elements significant to the maintenance of their beliefs.
PROCEDURES:

I will depart from Rochester, New York on February 15, 1976 and drive to Champoton, Campeche, Mexico. I plan to work and live in and around Champoton. As rapport is developed with the villagers, I will photographically explore and document personal as well as cultural characteristics of the area.

I will use the 4 x 5 view camera and black and white film as my basic tools. 2-1/4 x 2-3/4 format and 35mm will be employed as supplement formats only in those situations in which use of the 4 x 5 is technically impossible. I will process the black and white film daily and make studio proof prints to send to my thesis board periodically so that they may monitor and evaluate the progress of my work. I will contact the members of my thesis committee by telephone at pre-arranged intervals.

I am presently being certified for underwater diving in order to insure access to any pertinent underwater imagery.

I will return to Rochester during the first week in May, 1976. The final exhibition of prints will be prior to the close of the Spring Quarter, June 12, 1976. It will consist of a minimum of twenty mounted black and white photographs not to exceed 8" x 10" image size.
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PROPUESTA DE TESIS

Maestría en las Bellas Artes

Facultad de Artes Gráficas y Fotografía
Escuela de Ciencias y Artes Fotográficas

INSTITUTO TECNOLÓGICO DE ROCHESTER

TITULO:

PROPOSITO: Fotografiar Champotón, Campeche, México, (longitud Oeste 90° 40' - latitud Norte 19° 20') una ciudad con residuos de características Mayas; fundamentalmente inalteradas en muchos de sus principios, actitudes, y ritos desde antes de 1500 A.C.

PRESENTADA POR: Tony Gaye 26 de Enero de 1976

CUERPO DE SINODALES:

Asesor Principal: Owen Butler
                   Escuela de Ciencias y Artes Fotográficas
                   Instituto Tecnológico de Rochester

Miembros del Consejo: Evon Streetman
                      Escuela de Ciencias y Artes Fotográficas
                      Instituto Tecnológico de Rochester

                      Dr. Robert H. Johnston
                      Decano
                      Facultad de Bellas y Artes Plásticas
                      Instituto Tecnológico de Rochester
APLICACION Y ANTECEDENTES:

Habiendo pasado la mayor parte de mi niñez entre culturas hispánicas, (San José, Costa Rica; Las Palmas, Islas Canarias; Talara, Perú) y siendo mi más reciente participación el viaje de estudios a México, 1975, organizado por el Instituto Tecnológico de Rochester, se ha desarrollado en mí una gran identificación con la gente y la cultura de estas áreas.

Lo que propongo es un estudio personal etnográfico de una ciudad Maya; Champotón, Campeche, México, la cual debido a su proximidad con la península de Yucatán donde la cultura Maya alcanzó su más alto nivel de desarrollo, es rica en tradiciones, ritos, y evidencias físicas del pasado Maya (Tekal, Palenque, Edzna, Zayil, Kabah, Uxmal, Chichten-Itzá).

Es por medio de percepción, mayormente visual y auditiva, que repondemos a la humanidad que nos rodea. Nuestro conocimiento de un fenómeno cultural está controlado por nuestra habilidad para responder y comprender. La cámara como sistema óptico -- carente de un proceso selectivo -- no ofrece medios para evadir la necesidad de una sensitividad perceptiva. Los Mayas, a pesar de poco usar la tecnología contemporánea, muestran una cruda pero asombrosa sofisticación en su comprensión y conciencia de las condiciones humanas que se manifiesta en sus ritos tradicionales y vida cotidiana. Esta tesis, en general, trata sobre la interacción y observación humana. Al vivir y al trabajar cerca de ellos, espero trascender las barreras culturales y así penetrar profundamente en sus experiencias. Cuento a mi favor con amplios conocimientos del español. Tomaré fotografías de la gente, de sitios históricos, fenómenos naturales y de creación humana; su medio ambiente, ritos, y artesanía indígena. Para la última etapa de mi trabajo seleccionaré aquellas imágenes que mejor representen las observaciones de interacción de los Mayas con aquellos elementos físicos significativos en el mantenimiento de sus creencias.
PROCEDIMIENTO:

Partiré por carretera de Rochester, Nueva York a Champotón, Campeche, el 15 de febrero de 1976. Pienso establecerme en las cercanías de Champotón y conforme vaya alcanzando un mayor acercamiento con los aldeanos, explorar y documentar fotográficamente características culturales y personales del lugar.

Como implementos básicos de trabajo usaré una cámara (view camera) de 4 X 5 con cinta fotográfica en blanco y negro. Formato de 2 1/4 X 2 3/4 y 35mm serán empleados para suplir el 4 X 5 en aquellas situaciones en que el uso de éste no sea técnicamente posible. Revelaré la cinta fotográfica (blanco y negro) diariamente y obtendré pruebas que enviare periódicamente al cuerpo de asesores para que puedan ellos observar y así evaluar el progreso de mi trabajo. Me comunicaré telefónicamente con el comité de asesores a intervalos de tiempo por ellos determinados.

Estoy adquiriendo mi certificado de buceo para así, en caso necesario, tener acceso a situaciones que así lo ameriten.

Regresaré a Rochester, durante la primer semana de mayo del presente año. La exhibición final de las fotografías será antes de finalizar la sesión de primavera -- 12 de junio, 1976. Consistirá de un mínimo de veinte fotografías --blanco y negro-- sin que la imagen exceda el tamaño de 8 X 10.
PREPARATION:

The thesis project was preceded by three months of research on Maya history with emphasis placed on current ethnographic material on the Yucatan Peninsula available through Wallace Memorial Library, Rochester Institute of Technology, University of Rochester Library, and Rochester City Libraries.

Several agencies and individuals were contacted by phone and/or letter regarding prospective financial assistance, information, and advice for the project. Among those contacted were:

Dr. Edwin H. Land - Polaroid Land  
Bill Tappe - U.S. Travel Association  
Mexicana Airlines  
Aero Mexico  
University of Mexico  
Mexican National Tourist Council  
The Institute of History and Anthropology, Yucatan  
The Institute of History and Anthropology, Oaxaca  
The Mexican Ambassador to the United States

The project received partial funding from the Department of Fine and Applied Arts, Rochester Institute of Technology, Dr. Robert H. Johnston, Director.

I would like to thank all of the people that helped make this thesis possible: The Institute of History and Anthropology in Merida, its Director, Norberto Gonzalez, the Museum of Anthropology, its Director, Don Alfredo Barrera Vasquez, Friends in Komchen, Jeannie Pearce, Charles Slatkin, Kathy Collins, Tom and Julie Wilson, my family and, of course, my thesis board, Owen Butler, Evon Streetman, and Bob Johnston, for their collective support and patience.
On the evening of February 14, 1976, a small group of close friends gathered at 190 Oxford Street for a good-bye toast and a much needed show of support for the project. The weeks prior had been frustrating and hectic, and now, as I left Rochester, I was, for the first time, fully aware of the responsibility of making the thesis work. I had, over the past few weeks, shoved all doubt into a quiet corner of my mind and now it began to surface. I was committed to doing something. That something had been written down and discussed and gained the support of my thesis board and the M.F.A. Committee. But I still wondered if I had been understood, or if in the defensive rhetoric of winning approval of the committee, I had shrouded my intent in order to get sanction to begin the work on the thesis. At least, I felt my board understood. They seemed to understand the desperation I felt in wanting to attempt the project and the frustration in not being able to be more specific about the images with which I hoped to return. I honestly did not know what images I was looking for. Furthermore, I wanted to reserve defining what I was after in order for the images to grow from the experience. The thesis was to be a learning experience, and without having had the experience already, I could not, nor did I want to, lock myself into a specific procedure. The spontaneity of dealing with new situations has always been an important experience, a curiosity of human behavior, to me. I have no academic background in psychology beyond a few undergraduate courses.
I have rather intuitive feelings about the way people respond in new situations based on my experience of having moved an average of once every eight months of my life.

My feelings about the thesis proposal were mixed, but generally positive. The proposal had given me an opportunity to consider many possible directions to take with the thesis. But for every reason to take a specific tact, there were equally reasonable arguments for a different approach. I wanted to photograph people. I first chose Mexico because of my interest in exploring new cultures, a comfort I feel in Latin American countries from having lived and travelled in them, a desire to move to better weather and working conditions, my ability to speak Spanish, and the stimulation of an adventure. But then, why not photograph people in Rochester; there are cultures within the city that are as foreign to me as those in Mexico, I speak the language, I am familiar with the geography, and I have good darkroom facilities available. In response to "why not Rochester?", the only reason that I am aware of now that was not considered before is that city dwellers pose more of a threat to me (imaginary or not) than do non-city dwellers. My city work has always left me with a feeling of quick, stolen glimpses and superficial insights. I am not a city person and I find most cities claustrophobic. It is a problem I hope to deal with at another time.
I selected the 4 x 5 view camera as my principle tool because of my fondness of print qualities available from the large negative, and my preference for the discipline of slow selective shooting. But, if photographing people, why not use a 35mm camera that would be less obtrusive and certainly less trouble in the Mexican heat. I considered the possible problems of confronting people with the large format camera, as well as the limitations on where I might be able to shoot with it. But, I wanted these people to know that they were being photographed. I felt that being taken into their trust enough to photograph them comfortably with a large format camera was the minimum level of trust I wanted to exist between us as subject-photographer, regardless of the format size. In a way, the use of a large format camera was a test of our relationship.

I am a puzzle solver at heart. I enjoy the problems that are encountered in unfamiliar situations. Though it is not always the most efficient or effective approach, I find it stimulating and find that it is often the most interesting way for me to work. I find plans boring to make and difficult to stick to. Plans presume a certain progression of events and impart a basic security for those who make them. But it seems the most memorable experiences for one who plans are those times when plans break down. I prefer to try to maintain a direction, but not an itinerary.
The ten day trip from Rochester to Champoton was a time for thinking about possible directions I might take when I reached the Yucatan, and getting accustomed to speaking and thinking in Spanish. I began to wonder what Champoton was really like. I had, in the thesis proposal, specified Champoton as the site of the thesis. It had been referred to often in my reading as an area rich in Maya culture, but would it be what I was looking for? I was enjoying documenting the trip on 35mm slides, but was getting more anxious each day to begin the work for which I had come.

On February 23, I arrived in Champoton. As I entered the city limits of Champoton I was filled with a sense of almost foreseen disappointment. Champoton was a town of approximately 12,000 residents. It was situated on the coast, on the main highway, with fish packing plants, tractor trailer traffic and a few fourth class hotels. It looked and felt like any other prosperous Mexican fishing village. Even though I thought I had prepared myself for this possibility, the disappointment left me empty. Time to make a decision; to stay and make Champoton work, or to keep looking. The fact that I felt that I would have to "make Champoton work", made me realize that I would have to revamp the whole idea and feeling that I was looking for. My only option was to move farther north. I decided to search further into the Yucatan for a more suitable village. I felt that an area
that had had the benefit of industry, would probably remove
the people one more step away from their heritage and further
into the twentieth century. It seemed that an agricultural
community would be less effected than a community involved
in commerce and the fight to sell something for more than
it's worth to realize a profit. Agricultural communities
seem to retain more of a feeling of community sharing and
inter-dependence among the people. There is more trading
of commodities than selling. They are poorer, but generally
less confused about who they are and what they want from
life. It is not to say that ignorance is bliss; in fact it
is this limited foresight that keeps the poor, poor. But
I am not here to judge whether or not it would be good for
the poor to experience prosperity. My guts tell me that they
are happier poor than they would be if their purpose in life
was to become rich. They have dealt with the apparent reality
that they are poor and have learned to set their goals and
expectations of themselves within their reach. They are
more concerned with basic experiences; friends, family, crafts-
manship, that seem to get lost in the rush to make money.
My thoughts during the drive from Champoton to Campeche did
not offer any consolation. The experience in Champoton had
momentarily made me lose my positive attitude and the excite-
ment of what I was doing.

I knew no one in Campeche to contact for assistance.
My arrival in Campeche coincided with the four-day carnival
celebration for Easter and all official offices were closed. It appeared that another four days would be lost before I could begin work on the project. But the next ten days were spent talking to people in bars, cafes, and on the road, driving to villages and exploring back roads, looking for the type of village I had in mind. Many that I looked at felt good and were small enough. They were not modern, the streets were not paved, many or most of the houses were of the traditional Maya absidal shape, of thatch and primitive materials. Many were isolated by near impassable one-lane dirt paths, but they lacked the primitive look and feel that I had found in the Chiapas Region the year before and had hoped to find in the Yucatan. I felt that I might find a more primitive setting for the thesis if I looked deeper into the Yucatan.

On March 3, I arrived in Merida, the largest city in the Yucatan, and for all practical purposes, the seat of government for all three states of the Yucatan; Campeche, Yucatan, and Quintana Roo. Eighteen days had elapsed since leaving Rochester. I had made several 4 x 5 exposures in a barber shop in Campeche and in a nearby abandoned church. The act of shooting lifted my spirits some and helped me through the frustration that had begun to set in from not having started the thesis and the panic of watching the days quickly pass with no tangible evidence of my presence in the Yucatan and nothing firm to count on.
Due to the dry climate of the Yucatan, fresh water was at a premium. The hotel that I had stayed in near Campeche was plumbed with cold salt water only. Fresh drinking water was supplied in a one liter jug, that was refilled twice a day from a bottle in the manager's office. In order to insure that my equipment was operating properly and anxious to look at negatives, I decided to try the salty tap water for processing. Beginning the technical processes of the project, I began to realize the limitations I was to be up against working in unstable and less than ideal conditions. The results were not good. Images yes, tones no. The negatives were grossly over-developed. In addition to using salt water, the temperature of the chemistry would rise 15° to 20° by the end of an eight minute development. The procedure made a joke of the "Zone System". At least I could be sure that the shutter was opening and closing. I would make more reliable tests as soon as I could find more stable conditions and fresh water.

On March 4, I located the Institute Nacional de Historia Antropologia (National Institute of History and Anthropology) in Merida. Uncertain as to how the thesis proposal would sound to them, and feeling unsure of my knowledge of the Yucatan, I knew it was time to turn to someone for help and advice. I felt that I should have known more about the people that I wanted to photograph. Talking to the Director of the Instituto Nacional, Sr. Norberto Gonzales, was the
most positive experience I had had since leaving Rochester. Sr. Gonzales offered a list of people in Merida that he thought might be interested in the project and might be able to offer some advice in finding a suitable village. Also, in return for making some 4 x 5 aerial photographs of a recently discovered ruin and some photo copy work for the Institute, Sr. Gonzales offered me full use of the Institute's darkroom, library, and other resources. Since the Institute's mission in the Yucatan is to study the archeological and anthropological remnants of the Maya culture, I found myself in contact with anthropologists and archeologists involved in ongoing studies of the Maya. Their responses to the photographs were often valuable and always appreciated in helping me better understand my project.

With the help of Sr. Gonzales and his staff at the Institute, and Don Alfredo Barrera Vasquez, I spent the following week looking at over fifty villages within a seventy kilometer radius of Merida. I was given a map and had compiled a list of villages suggested by people at the Institute and Sr. Barrera. A systematic route was plotted out to follow in order to expedite the search. One of the first villages I looked at was Komchen, approximately twenty miles north of Merida, a few miles off the main road to Progreso. Tourists rarely travel north of Merida in the Yucatan and despite its proximity to Merida, Komchen seemed to retain a quality of integrity that I had been looking for. But, it still didn't
quite fit the vision of what I was looking for. Its primitive quality seemed more economic based than cultural.

The week spent looking for a village helped ease the anxiety of not photographing, but I was getting more discouraged that I would not find a village any closer to what I had envisioned.

I decided to commit myself to Komchen and begin working. Komchen had felt closest to what I was looking for and the people seemed open and gentle. On my first visit, I had spent the afternoon walking around the village, talking to people and had felt welcome. I had also met an American linguist whose wife was Maya from Komchen and who, for the past six years had spent two or three months a year living there. Through David and Anna Boles, I was given my first introductions into the community. David and Anna returned to the U.S. a few days later, but their influence helped initiate me into the community.

Komchen is a village of approximately 1,200 residents, predominantly of Maya descent. The dwellings are of three basic styles. Most are absidal in shape; two long parallel walls with rounded ends, similar to an elongated zero. The poorer houses are made of thin trees lashed together and buried standing upright to form the walls and are covered with thatched roofs. The houses rarely have interior walls and generally cover about 200 square feet of dirt floor space. There is usually a doorway in the middle of each straight
wall, but more often than not, lacks any kind of door. Those families that can afford to, build the identical house, but use large limestone rocks instead of wood for the walls. There is no mortar used; the stones are simply stacked. The most prosperous villagers build rectangular houses of approximately the same dimensions as the absidal dwellings, but substitute concrete blocks and plaster for wood or stone. Some have concrete floors. A small zocolo (town square) and Catholic church serve as the hub of activity and the center of the village. The streets are hard dirt, and the only two cars in the village are pre-1950 and used to transport people and animals to the main road. The economy of Komchen is based primarily on the government regulated heneken industry. Heneken is a large succulent resembling a Century Plant, with long pointed green leaves that are cut and processed for their fiber which is woven into rope, doormats, carrying bags, etc. Most of the male population works about thirty hours per week in the heneken field and earns a weekly salary of $9.60. Things that are not produced in the village are expensive; i.e. one beer costs .48. The village is practically self-sustaining in terms of food, clothing, and basic commodities. Most families raise cows, pigs, turkeys and chickens in their yard for meat. Raw materials, like cloth and extra corn are bought or traded for at local markets.

On March 11, I returned to Komchen. The first three days were spent looking around, meeting people, and getting
to know the people. Their mother language is Maya, but most speak Spanish. I felt welcomed in Komchen. Everyone I met was warm, open, and curious. A two person conversation quickly grew to ten or fifteen active participants, if it lasted more than a few minutes. I was unaccustomed to the lack of defensiveness that I had learned to expect from my experience in the rest of Mexico. I began to worry about not wanting to take advantage of their trust. I did not want to rip them off. I hoped that they would participate in and enjoy our encounter and the project. As the first few days passed, our conversations grew less formal. By the third day, I felt it was time to bring the camera. I photographed a wall for test exposures. The size of the equipment caused quite a stir at first, but everyone quickly grew accustomed to seeing me carrying it and setting it up around the village.

I had been spending my nights organizing the Institute's darkroom in Merida. Sr. Gonzales had requisitioned an air conditioner for it, but it had not arrived yet. I processed the test negatives and once again I had trouble controlling the temperature, but the test negatives looked good. The only problem was slight over-development. I decided to wait until the air conditioner arrived before processing any more film. By the time the air conditioner had arrived and the darkroom was cleaned, organized, and ready to use, six days had elapsed. I had been shooting daily and had exposed 86 sheets of film. That night, March 19, I began processing.
The film was individually processed by tray in FG-7 1:15, using 8 minutes for a normal development. The film was Kodak Tri-X Pan Professional, rated at 225 ASA. Thirty-six hours later, the batch was processed and contact printed. A few of the images were good, good enough to encourage me to continue. The rest of them left me cold. They were too quick, unthought out, there seemed to be nothing happening between me and the subjects. I missed having someone whose opinion I respected to discuss the work with. I realized that part of my problem was that in trying to set a few tangible goals for myself, I had decided to try to shoot 20 sheets per day. It was foolish, but it had been a good lesson. I was photographing people as objects, trying to control, and not allowing them to define their own space and mood. I had been more concerned with meeting my quota, than investing the time to make one exposure that I would be pleased with. I decided that I would load no more than four sheets of film per day, and not worry about shooting any. I would process film nightly to get immediate feedback. I would spend more time talking and looking. I began making lists of things I saw that I might want to shoot, and began photographing what I wanted, rather than what I felt I should. I would often go to the fields with the men from 5 A.M. to 10 A.M. and help cut and carry heneken leaves. I began to feel less like an outsider.

By the end of March, the direction of the thesis was fairly well established and many of the photographs began to
feel better to me and reflect that direction. The thesis would consist primarily of portraits of the residents of Komchen. They would have to be direct. They would have to reflect that feeling of a shared trust. The photographs would be ethnographic in either a graphic sense, that is, show a significant element of the environment, or a human sense, reflecting their strength, pride, humbleness, or compassion.

Komchen had developed into a positive environment to work in, but I still wondered if I might find the village I had envisioned if I looked hard enough in the Yucatan. I felt that a break from Komchen might offer me time and distance to think about what I had not photographed and better define the thesis. I decided to travel east to look for another village. If I found what I was looking for, I would have time to work on the thesis there and benefit from my experience in Komchen. If I was unable to find a more suitable village, there would be time to return to Komchen, pick up where I left off, and further investigate its character. I would not be satisfied that I could not find a more suitable village until I looked. I allowed myself ten days to look. I travelled east from Merida to Isla Mujeres on the Northeast coast, west (back inland) to Maxcanu, and north back to Merida. I looked at forty-three more villages. Before leaving Merida I had met again with Sr. Gonzales and Don Alfredo to explain to them what I was looking for. Neither of them knew
of such a village, but encouraged me to look and gave me a letter of introduction to Dr. Balam in Valladolid. Dr. Balam is the Director of the Instituto Nacional Indigenista (National Indigenous Institute) that works closely with the most underdeveloped areas of the Yucatan. From several meetings with Dr. Balam, I learned that the villages in the Yucatan were all basically the same. They are modeled after classical Spanish city design with a church and town square as their centers. I also learned that, because of the generally flat terrain of the Yucatan, communication and interaction from village to village had not been difficult, and that this standard architectural style had evolved since the Spanish conquests of the 1500's. Dr. Balam recommended that I look at the village of Yalcoba. After spending three days in Yalcoba, I was convinced that Dr. Balam was right. The lesson was more of a relief than a disappointment. I continued the search for a few more days and decided to return to Komchen to work.

The longer I stayed in Komchen, the more I realized that those things I had been looking for at first were surface characteristics. They did not really characterize the Maya people, or at least not those in Komchen. The most central characteristics were the lifestyle and attitudes; the compassion shown towards children, adults, and animals, the importance of honesty, and their gentleness and warmth. The work in Komchen continued for another five weeks and by May 12, I prepared to return to Rochester. I felt good about
the project and had already selected forty-five negatives to edit down to twenty for the thesis exhibit. In all, I had exposed over three hundred and fifty sheets of film. During the final days there were so many photographs to be made that I knew it would be impossible to finish the project on this trip. Before leaving, I presented prints to everyone I had photographed in Komchen.

The thesis exhibit opened on June 4, at INDIOS, 289 Alexander Street, Rochester, New York and was exhibited for four weeks.

The final meeting of the thesis board was a casual session at Indios. The meeting began roughly, with a sort of collective effort to break away from a formal thesis sharing, but with a serious tone of academic critiquing and sharing of thoughts. There were specific questions presented concerning my personal feelings about the results of the thesis, pertaining to the intended proposal and how I felt I had succeeded in attaining my personal motives. Evon questioned the actual presence presented by the portraits; whether they were to be a group of formal portraits or a casual meeting of the people in the village. The portraits were classically presented and this she questioned in contrast to the type of personal and close encounters I had described. We discussed, at some length, the idea of the formal versus the informal portrait and how it related to this particular body of work.

Discussion arose as to the feeling of intruding on
these people's privacy; ripping them off. I feel, as was agreed by everyone, that the portraits exhibited a sense of mutual trust with the sitters that strengthened their personal contact. The images are a collection of close-up portraits and portraits including personal space. We discussed which was stronger for this type of intent; to include the personal surroundings or to center on specific details of the person.

Owen questioned my personal involvement pertaining to the final results of the thesis. At first, my defenses were up because I was thinking, "My God, I've spent the last four months sweating over decisions of which of the 300 images to choose that best describe the personal relation that I felt with these people". Then, looking at the images, Evon's statement of their formality returned. The formality was there, but I felt that the formality best expressed their pride of being Maya. But, perhaps I could only express that by recounting conversations and whole strings of experiences. Now the question arose, "Had I gotten too personally involved with their cultural problems and was I subliminally trying to express this to the viewer?", most of whom had no knowledge of the personal lives of these people, and were viewing the images as portraits of a few Maya Indians in a village in the Yucatan. So, my personal involvement with the images was, perhaps, too personal for any viewer to see as I had felt it. They could understand and like the images in relation to their personal ability to
relate to another person, environment, or culture. The mere curiosity of another culture, I feel, is a universal attraction. An interest in the face, body, or clothing in combination with the qualities of light and shadows, I hope would express a certain feeling, a sense of atmosphere that others might be able to relate to, and by that relation be able to attain a personal feeling whether positive or negative.

In offering advice to someone planning a similar project, it is difficult to foresee all the problems that might be encountered. It is important to make as many contacts as possible where you are going, before you leave. They can usually offer advice and help avoid many problems indigenous to the area. It is also important to contact as many local officials as possible, upon arrival. These people are usually flattered to be considered or involved and can afford you greater personal security. Your openness will dispell any suspicion as to your presence.

It is helpful to pre-arrange a method for receiving extra cash from home. The American Express is usually the fastest and most dependable.

Take anything photographic you might need. Supplies are difficult to find and usually twice the price overseas.

It is essential to maintain a file of extra copies of all official documents, letters of introduction, personal identification, and serial numbers of equipment.

If wanted, it is a good idea to keep a brief log to be
able to more accurately reassemble your experience later.
Prepare for a different country, with a complete open-mindedness to accept problems of communication and of people
not cooperating or understanding what you are trying to do.
TECHNICAL INFORMATION:

Camera: Arca Swiss IIIA 4 x 5
Lens: Schneider Symar S 180mm F4.5 with Copal Shutter
Film: Kodak Tri X Pan Professional
Recommended ASA 325
Adjusted ASA 250
Meter: Gossen Luna Pro with Spot Attachment
Exposure/Development: Zone System; N Development = 8 Minutes
Developer: FG7 1:15 68°F
Enlarger Lens: Schneider Componon
Paper: Ilford Ilfobrome Grades 2 and 3
Paper Developer: Two Bath: Selectol Soft 1:1 and Dektol 1:2
Paper Development: Selectol Soft: Variable Time 2-5 Minutes 70°F
Dektol: TRAY - Variable Time 15 Seconds to 1 Minute 70°F
OR
BRUSH - Applied Locally to Highlights at 100°F 15 Seconds to 1 Minute
CONCLUSION:

The thesis is finished and the deadline is behind me. It is a relief. It was exhibited at Indios, 289 Alexander Street, Rochester, New York, from June 4 to June 30. The opening went well and the thesis was well received.

Printing of the final prints began May 8 and was completed June 3. The last week was a seven day marathon printing session. Several paper/developer combinations were tested and Ilfobrome with a two bath development was selected. This combination gave me maximum control over shadow and highlight development and good resolution.

The most difficult factor to deal with; the thing that robbed more energy than any one other factor, was the expectation I assumed was on me to produce something of consequence. The question of quality has been with me throughout the thesis experience. Of course, it goes back further than that, as it does with everyone. We are all, in one way or another, concerned with quality from the instant our sensory apparatus begins to function. The idea of quality is self-taught, but it is influenced by everything and everyone around us. Our peers, our families, our heritage, our mentors, technology, social rank, our total environment, are constantly defining the parameters of quality for us and undermining our trust in our own sensory responses.

The question of quality for me is, "Who can define
quality?". It has no physical presence, it is an idea. That many people would agree on the presence or lack of presence of quality in a particular object is understood. But it, quality itself, is only alluded to by a subtle string of adjectives and modifiers that at best, help describe the object, but fall short of facing up to the definition of quality.

It seems that quality, beyond a simple sensory response, unique to everyone, is only a word, an adjective, a convention, a tray bespangled with glossy floss, used to serve up the chance to someone else to experience something that you found meaningful. For me, further definition is a spiralling maze; a dog chasing its tail.

Each phase of the thesis was plagued by the thought "is there quality here?". To ask is to not be in touch with the quality that either is or isn't there. Writing the proposal, searching for a village, selecting images to photograph, on thinking of my relationships with the people of Komchen, reviewing contact sheets, printing the show, writing the report, each began with an awesome responsibility to produce; and produce something great. But in each case, I realized that I could not create something great. Great is like quality, not the idea quality, but the convention quality. It takes consensus to achieve greatness. But quality, the idea, is a singular concern. It requires detachment. Only through detachment from everyone else's
idea of quality (the convention), can you experience quality; the idea.

So, I set down to the task at hand; to just keep the machinery in motion. Eventually, each phase of the thesis was fulfilled with the sense of quality, either through the acceptance of a fact or situation or detachment from what was expected of me. Each phase ended in a pleasurable way, just as in writing this conclusion, I have finally pushed through to the pleasure of writing the thesis report. I can't discount the feeling that I could go back and rewrite the report with better understanding now. It has been re-written enough and it must stand as a document of the event. In fact, I feel the entire thesis could be redone with more understanding now. But for now, it will stand. I thank everyone, and would like to say I find quality in avocados and lime juice.