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JOSEPHINE SACABO
LATIN MAGIC



ISSUE 18 . APRIL 2002 . US \$7.95 . CAN \$9.95 . UK £3.95

JOSEPHINE SACABO

Juan Rulfo's 1955 novel, *Pedro Paramo*, is one of those unique, *sui generis* works in modern literature. It is the inspiration for virtually all of the Latin American magic realism that followed it, but set in a barren landscape without the consolation of fecundity and folkloric detail that magic realism conjures up. It is the rare modernist classic that is "difficult" by virtue of the simplicity of style, a novel revered and publicly acknowledged by writers as disparate as Pablo Neruda, Miguel Angel Asturias, Carlos Fuentes, Octavio Paz, and Julio Cortazar; a pessimistic and fatalistic work in which death rules life—in which, in fact, all of the characters are spirits speaking from their dusty crypts. How could such a book suggest this suite of elegant and exalted images that Josephine Sacabo has made?

Sacabo says that she began making these images before seeing the book. "I had travelled with Jacqueline, my model, to Guerrero Vieja, and there was something about crossing that border, back into Mexico—into that culture that I'd been ignoring, really—and there in my pictures and in my mind was a town in ruins, a woman wandering through it—I was already doing *Pedro Paramo* without knowing it, and then Jacqueline's aunt pressed it on me, saying I should read it...." This is how Sacabo works, by instinct rather than from deliberate and drawn-out schematics.

Sacabo's photographic career is almost the happiest of accidents. Born in Laredo, Texas, she never studied photography or art,



but picked up a camera simply for something to do while living at her house in the Languedoc town of Saint-Guiraud. Another inhabitant of this small town, the documentary photographer, Harold Chapman (*Vanishing France, The Bear Hotel*) mentored her. "He taught me how to use the camera, especially how to print, which pictures would work and which ones wouldn't, so I had rigorous instruction in printing."

Sacabo's early work was influenced by the European photo-journalism of Cartier-Bresson and Robert Frank, and she pursued this style when she moved to New Orleans in the early Seventies. But she found the genre frustrating and self-defeating. "Not only did I feel frustrated waiting for a picture to happen but I got depressed about the sadness and sordidness of what I was photographing. Why should I put more of it into the world?" Seeking solace photo-

graphing shop windows with art reproductions in them, or funny juxtapositions—gazing into displays where nothing was left to chance—"I thought I might have to create my own beauty."

Sacabo was reading Rilke's *Duino Elegies* and found them re-echoed in the pictures she had been making ("I found in the text what I had been working on"), and this unconscious doubling of picture with text continued with work that suggests and is, in turn, suggested by Baudelaire and the Chilean poet Vicente Huidobro. "Because I'm not an intellectual and also not terribly verbal," says Sacabo, "I tend to sense my way into things." The dark, chthonic beauty of Sacabo's images reflect perfectly the beautifully bleak and pared-down prose of Rulfo's masterwork. Her pictures do not illustrate the novel so much as illuminate it. *Pedro Paramo* is an exploration of a culture with which she is familiar, one she describes as "that ranchero culture into which I was born, and soon I realized that this very 'regional' novel was in fact universal."

The space in the pictures at first seems to be breaking apart into tenebrous chaos, but looking deeper the unseen, like the undead in Rulfo's novel, crowds in and congests the image, filling it up with a nearly baroque effect. Skulls, birds, clouds, the eternal woman, the images of grief and suffering attest to the power of an imaginative landscape shared uniquely and depicted perfectly by Sacabo and Rulfo—that of the Mexico that Carlos Fuentes describes as "a land where the life

of death is very important, as is the death of life."—Jon Newton

■ BOOK INFORMATION

A luxury edition of *Pedro Paramo* illustrated with Josephine Sacabo's photographs is being published by the University of Texas Press in the *Wittliff Collection of Mexican and Southwestern Photography Series*, and is due in September 2002.

■ PRINT INFORMATION

Prints are gelatin silver, archivally toned. Size is 20x24 inches. Editions limited to 25. Prices start at \$750 and increase at specific points as editions sell.

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