

August 2011

## Monika Merva

By Louisa J. Curtis



© MONIKA MERVA

*Zsuzsa, one of the featured children in The City of Children, wearing rabbit ears.*

Sometimes things work out for the better, even when you're not expecting it. Why would I say that, you ask? Well, my conversation this month is with fine art photographer [Monika Merva](#), and the irony here is that we were in the middle of preparing my article for last month (June) when I put my back out and had to take a few weeks off. So now, here we are in July, and the timing is perfect, because Monika herself was born on July 2nd, making her a Cancer, the Archetypical Mother of the Zodiac. So it is no surprise to me that her project The City of Children is centered round a Government-run home for children at risk, in her native Hungary, because as a Cancer, she has an inherent connection with children, nurturing and motherhood.

These children spoke to her Soul, and in return, they trusted her and allowed her into their private world. And after much patience, perseverance and hard work, Monika has produced a beautiful and compassionate study on these abandoned and misfit children. Monika is one of ten photographers selected for inclusion in EXPOSURE 2011, the 16th annual members' exhibition at the Photographic Resource Center in Boston, MA, by this year's Juror, Whitney Johnson, picture editor at The New Yorker.

Monika has been exhibiting her photography for many years and in May of this year Brian Clamp, Director of ClampArt gallery, gave Monika and her project its first solo show and book signing. I asked her if this was a defining moment for her in her career and she said, "I think it is a step in the right direction. Believe me, I was thrilled when he offered me a show! It is a great feeling of accomplishment to present this body of work at such a respected gallery in NYC. Brian and I have had an open dialogue over "The City of Children" since 2002 when I began the project. So it feels correct to have him introduce me to the commercial art world." I asked Monika what 3 words best describe her photography and she said, "Quiet, direct, lyrical, and compassionate. I cheated and gave you 4!" And when you look at her work, all of it, not just this particular project, you can see why she so aptly chose those words, so I asked her what made her become a photographer in the first place? "I have always loved looking at photographs and really appreciate the power of the image to educate, inspire, and encourage change. I wanted to share my point of view with the hopes of offering a different way of seeing the world." How do you decide on a new project, or do they come to you completely randomly? "I wouldn't say they are completely random, but it may look like that initially. So far my personal life and interests have led me to my projects. They start off as being very personal with the hopes of it ultimately having a universal appeal."



© MONIKA MERVA

When and how did this particular project "The City of Children" come about? Was there something in particular that drew you to this specific subject? "In 1999 I was living in Hungary for five months and I was searching for a project where I could get involved with a single community. One of my Hungarian cousins suggested it to me as a possible subject and at the same time told me I wouldn't gain access. A year later it turned out that a family friend knew the director and she put in a good word for me. Keep in mind that they do not let "outsiders" in and it took me a year to be invited. In 2002 I was invited to come for one day and during that time the children and the adult guardians would decide if I was able to stay. I got the approval when I was having lunch with them and so I came back for four days on that initial visit. After that I returned every year till 2009, usually for a week or two at a time. It was relevant for me to photograph in Hungary since that is where my family is from. Hungarian is actually my first language and that country feels like my second home. I wanted to be there to connect with the people and "my Hungarian side."

Correct me if I'm wrong, but did you not become a mother yourself during this project? And if I am right (!) how has becoming a mother yourself changed the way you approach your work (if indeed it has), and in particular, this project with the children? "Yes! During my 2005 visit with the children, I was three months pregnant and so sick. I couldn't eat anything and I could barely walk around. I always wanted to lay down where before I was moving all around the grounds looking for someone or something to photograph. The kids were excellent with me. Letting me lay on their beds while they shared stories with me. There is something different about the pictures I made during that time and the following years when I returned with my daughter, Lilla. (Which by the way is a Hungarian name. A few girls from my favorite group gave me a name book for a gift.) I don't know how to describe the difference, but I can see it in the photographs. Maybe it has to do with my greater attention to the environment, to the body language of the children, and learning to be patient. My relationship with the children changed as well, my nurturing response to them became even stronger. They were very interested in Lilla and wanted to play with her, she became their toy doll."

Do you have a preference for shooting B&W or color? What criteria make you decide to shoot a project in either one or the other? "In graduate school B&W was the ultimate. I loved printing in the darkroom. The look and feel of the lush fiber paper was pure magic for me. I did not want anything to do with color until 2000. I started experimenting with color sprinkled in between my love, B&W. The big change happened while I was in Hungary in 2002 photographing at The City of Children. I was going back and forth using both, color and B&W. I don't remember there being any logic in the decision-making in which to use. It was like, "oh, I love that pale green cabinet in the kitchen, let's use color." Thank heavens because when I returned to the States and saw my contact sheets the B&W images were terrible. They fell flat, no life; it didn't resonate with what I saw or with my feelings I had while making the pictures. It was the strangest discovery for me. Since then I can't make a decent B&W picture."

Do you keep a journal? What inspires you? "No journal keeping for me. Years ago I tried to but it was more trouble, making time to sit down and write. I admire folks who can do that. I'm inspired by the people around me and use my camera as an excuse to study them and capture what I find intriguing and beautiful. I love the idea of creating something, which stems from an emotion and becomes something physical that you can put on a wall and share with others. Curiosity plays a big part of getting me out the door to explore the questions I have about the world."



© MONIKA MERVA

What would you say is the most challenging or difficult aspect to what you do, and in particular with this project "The City of Children?" "I really try to connect with the person I am photographing on an emotional level. The surface of a person, such as their beauty, body language; clothing is an interesting starting point but not enough. I am looking for the essence of each individual. I want the viewer to be compelled and feel like they are having their own intimate relationship with the person in the photograph. What was particularly difficult with "The City of Children" was the 9-hour airplane ride to get to Hungary and the time in between when I was shooting. I made seven trips, starting in 2002 and ending in 2009. I went every year except 2006 when my daughter, Lilla was just a few months old. I always went during the month of May when I was able to take time off from my work and life in New York. I would spend around three weeks in Hungary visiting friends and family and spend two weeks out of that time at the City of Children. But when I returned home to the USA that is when I was able to process my film, look at contact sheets and see if I had any gems. They were always on my mind."

And what is the most exciting or fulfilling aspect of your work and what you do, and in particular this project? "Working at The City of Children allowed me to work on an important social issue involving children. I was able to give these children a voice and show them to the "outside world." After spending so much time with them, I hope I was able to show them (the kids) how wonderful they are, full of courage, and the willingness to make their lives better. I loved seeing their confidence grow. It has also allowed me to spend time in Hungary, a place where I feel very connected."

And here are my **ChatterDozen** quick fire questions with Monika's responses:

- 1) What would you do if you weren't a photographer? "It's a toss up between being an interior designer and owning a children's clothing boutique. But I would for sure have a huge photography collection!"
- 2) Who (dead or alive) do you admire? "My famous person would be Helen Keller. For people who I actually know it would be my parents and grandparents for surviving the 1956 Hungarian Revolution."
- 3) What was the last movie you saw? "Hanna in the theater and 'Guest of Cindy Sherman' on DVD in bed."
- 4) What is your favorite TV show? "It's a toss up between Mad Men and Nurse Jackie. Can I have both of them since they air during different seasons?"
- 5) What is your favorite food? "My mom's chicken soup, but we don't live in the same city so I'll say seafood accompanied with a cold crisp white wine."
- 6) What is your favorite animal? "Rabbits. We have one for a pet. He makes me a little crazy when he doesn't go in his litter box, but he's so darn soft and handsome."
- 7) What is your favorite color? "Orange and purple - I love colors!"
- 8) What is your favorite day of the week, and why? "It would have to be Friday at 5pm. it's the beginning of the weekend and I know I won't have to wake up early. But my favorite reason is I love having friends and family over for dinner parties and they tend to run late, so I need the sleep the next day. (Which I never seem to get because I have a five year old.)"
- 9) What is your favorite music, song, or band? "I love music from the 60's and 70's. Blues, soul and funk. I can always listen to Prince."
- 10) If you could be born in another period of history, when would that be and why? "At the turn of the 20th Century in Paris - I would of loved to have been around the art world then."
- 11) If you could get on a plane tomorrow, perhaps to somewhere you have never been to before, where would you fly to and why? "India. I would want to spend quite some time there since it is so massive and diverse. I'm pretty sure I would lose my mind over all the colorful fabrics and beautiful jewelry. Plus I have a relative who married an Indian man and they have been asking us to visit."
- 12) If I handed you an Oscar for photography, whom would you be thanking in your acceptance speech? "You, of course! (Aw shucks, no one ever said that before!) My family for all their love and support and every person I have photographed."