

FROM THE PHOTOGRAPHER...

Nothing grows in Rinconada. There are no plants, little color, scarce heat but an abundance of gold deep in the surrounding mountains. At 17,400 feet above sea level in the Peruvian Andes, it is the highest city in the world. It is a gray world of mud, mercury and sewage blending into a toxic quagmire that lines the city's streets. 50,000 people now inhabit this mining city seeking their fortune at the base of the San Francisco glacier.

I first heard about Rinconada in an obscure German documentary in the 1990s. For the past 15 years I have had a strange almost masochistic desire to go there. In April of 2010 I finally got off the bus in the thin air of this most inhospitable place. Who could possibly want to live in such an environment!? What drives people to these extremes in order to carve out a living for themselves, for their families? I have been to a lot of tough places around the world in my career but nothing could come close to the toxicity of Rinconada.

There is no law, political representation or recourse on the boomtown's streets. Like a modern day "Deadwood" Rinconada has drawn prospectors from throughout Peru. Doctors and lawyers have abandoned their practices elsewhere because as one miner told me "nowhere in Peru can you make money like you do here." Commodities have fueled a boom in South America, economies there have been surging as they falter in the rest of the western world. China's thirst for iron, copper and gold fuel the boom in the Peruvian Andes.

I managed to stay on for a week. My head constantly felt as though it were splitting open. My heart raced just to get up a flight of stairs or scramble down the soggy polluted cliffs and into the mine entrances. A group of miners from Puno, an Andean city on the shores of Lake Titicaca, showed me their daily routine: scaling ice covered mud, working in treacherous tunnels that are known for poisonous gases and cave ins and maybe blowing off some steam with a few cervezas. I was fortunate; I had a good connection to them through a tour guide I hired from Puno. He was a cousin and had spent 6 weeks working in Rinconada. Suspicions and paranoia of outsiders runs deep amongst the miners. Soon the lack of oxygen became too much for my sea level brain and I scurried back to lower elevations.

The photographs are not a comprehensive look at this amazing and tortuous place but rather a brief look into the lives and conditions of this new El Dorado. It seems after so many centuries of looking Peruvians have finally found their city of gold.

Michael Robinson Chávez  
January 19, 2012  
Los Angeles, California

ABOUT MICHAEL ROBINSON-CHÁVEZ...

Michael Robinson Chávez has been a photographer at *The Los Angeles Times* since 2007. Prior to that, he worked for *The Washington Post*, *The Boston Globe* and the *Associated Press*. He has covered wide-ranging international assignments in over 50 countries including: the Congolese Civil War, the earthquakes and tsunamis in Indonesia and Chile, the Egyptian revolution, life in India's slums, gold mining in Peru, the 2006 Hezbollah/Israeli war, the Georgian/Russian war in 2008, the conflict in Israel/Palestine and the US led invasion and occupation of Iraq.

Michael earned second place as Photographer of the Year by Pictures of the Year International in 2010 and won an Award of Excellence in the same contest and category in 2008. In 2008 Michael won the Scripps Howard National Award for Photojournalism and has twice been cited as Photographer of the Year by The White House News Photographers' Association. He has also received awards from the National Press Photographers Association, the Atlanta Photojournalism Seminar and the Society of Newspaper Design.

His work has been exhibited widely, including the Visa Pour l'Image festival in France, which showed his 10-year project on Peru and photographs from the 2010 Chilean earthquake, as well as at the Corcoran Gallery in Washington DC, Imagenes Havana in Cuba, Orange County Center for Contemporary Art in Santa Ana, California, Los Angeles County Museum of Art, and Ojo Ajeno in Lima, Peru. His photographs from the Lebanon/Israeli war of 2006 were exhibited at the War Photo Ltd. Gallery in Dubrovnik and at the Museu Memorial de l'Exili in Spain. American Photography's 25<sup>th</sup> Anniversary book featured photographs from the Georgia/Russian war, which were also shown at the photo festival in Arles, France.

Michael has published a book of his photographs from Peru, titled *Awaiting the Rain*. In addition he teaches and lectures at workshops throughout the world including Mexico, Argentina, India, Egypt, Peru, United States and El Salvador.

Reflections on Michael Robinson-Chávez's *Rinconada de Oro*

By Jay H. Jones, Professor of Biology and Biochemistry

Photographs are powerful tools for focusing attention beyond the cocoons in which we live. Michael Robinson-Chavez's images of La Rinconada, Peru, transport the viewer to a corner of the world that few will ever visit. They capture life at the edge of physiological, ecological, sociological, and moral existence. The altitude is close to the maximum tolerated by our species. With less than two thirds the oxygen at sea level, one must prioritize use of the meager energy one can muster. Shoddy construction and piles of debris cluttering streets and open spaces, suggest that energy is directed toward other priorities. Gold, the central icon of greed, is the focus of this community. What energies exist are directed toward finding it, or catching some of it, as it trickles from the mines into the general economy. Like the tailings of the mine itself, human dignity, health, and the environment lay waste on the slopes, streets, and brothels of Rinconada. They fall prey to nature's ultimate lottery: the chance of finding gold flakes and nuggets, "leftovers" from orogenic intrusions. It is ironic that gold, an impurity excluded by nature as minerals form, is the driving force that challenges human values and reason. Psychologists tell us unpredictable reinforcement is the most powerful for maintaining a behavior. So it is in Rinconada. To risk one's life on the slippery slopes of slate, to live in an environment laced with mercury, to expose oneself to the inevitable diseases where sanitation is neglected, calls into question the rationality of human decision-making.

Rinconada de Oro illustrates well, aspects of life in this surreal environment. The richness and multidimensionality of these photographs will appeal to each of us in different ways. These images interest me for many reasons. They provide a view of an exotic environment that I will probably never see. Yet, aspects of the photos resonate with past experiences, and by extrapolation, I can imagine what Rinconada must be like. Raised on the flat plains of central Illinois, mountains have always had a special appeal. Brief summer vacations provided a taste of the effects of altitude on temperature, vegetation, and one's physical energy but perhaps insufficient to understand the stress 3500 feet higher. I am also drawn to mines, rooted in an interest in geology and childhood experiences smelting lead from galena gathered from tailings, form another path for extrapolation. Like many in Rinconada, I was oblivious of the medical impact of my actions. This link and experiences with other cultures beg exploration of the people of Rinconada. People that live in a different world, with different customs, and different points of reference. The similarities and contrasts provide ample grist for reflection and reevaluation of values and priorities. I am also drawn to the rare glimpse of plant and animal life that somehow survive the harsh environment, amidst development and waste. Like many of the people captured in the images, they survive in spite of pollution, physical assaults, and injustices associated with the pursuit of a material God.

What significance does Rinconada de Oro have for us in our familiar cocoons? Is it just an exhibit to view and appreciate? Are there parallels or contrasts between our society and that of Rinconada that beg action? These are questions I hope to answer as I revisit this rich exhibit in the coming weeks.

Surface and Depth

By Gabriela Capraroïu, Associate Professor of Spanish

On the east wall of Irene Carlson Gallery where Michael Robinson Chávez's photographs on mining for gold in Peru are exhibited, there is a photo named *Rinconada's red-light district*. The verbal description matches the black and white image in which a few men and women are part of a scene that takes place in front of a house of prostitution. This photograph, like many of the ones displayed in the gallery, makes its subject-matter explicit from the start. Most of the framed space is taken up by things that evoke a sense of social neglect: tin shacks, bare cement walls, muddy roads, and stagnant water. But as we look again, we notice that particular details leave room for other interpretations as well. Despite the deterioration of the environment and the inert atmosphere of the streets, the photo resembles a film setting or a scene in a theater play. People are captured in motion and except for one person who faces the viewer, most of them are active, unhindered by the camera. One can read *Rinconada's red-light district* or other photos such as *Central Rinconada*, in which a man is talking on a mobile phone surrounded by tin surface structures, as evidence of an attempt to document both the breakdown of a local community and the increasing rhythm of life in Rinconada.



While Robinson's photographs refer to a specific moment in our time, this moment is also part of a continuous line of artistic engagement with social matters in Peru. The texts are not in dialogue intentionally or directly. What allows for a loose association is the author's aim to speak against the way in which the social cohesiveness of native populations in the Peruvian Andes has been repeatedly undermined by the intervention of complex economic interests in the exploitation of local natural resources. Thus, by virtue of a practice of implied associations, certain gestures and literal details in Robinson's work can acquire new meanings. Street scenes and the resolute gaze of the miners in his photos may remind the viewer of Peruvian literary works written long ago. At the beginning of the 1930s, César Vallejo, who, with *Trilce*, would soon become one of the greatest poets of Latin America, was writing his novel *Tungsteno*.<sup>1</sup> In the first pages of the novel, Vallejo recreates the atmosphere of unprecedented change that characterized the town of Quivilca in the state of Cuzco once the North American corporation known as the Mining Society took charge of the tungsten mines. Vallejo describes changes visible at the surface of daily activities a hundred years ago. Many of the things Vallejo refers to have long ceased to be in use, but I am including the passage because Vallejo's text also alludes to a deeper transformation in human behavior that may still resonate with the shifts captured by Robinson's photography in Rinconada:



Everyone affected an air of being on the move. Even the manner of walking, normally slow and languid, became rapid and impatient. Men passed, dressed in khaki, in leggings and riding breeches, speaking (in voices that had also changed tone) of dollars, documents, checks, treasury seals, memoranda, cancellations, machinery, tons. Young girls from the outskirts came out to see them go by and

<sup>1</sup> César Vallejo, *Tungsteno* (Madrid: Editorial Cenit, 1931).

trembled with pleasant nervousness, thinking of the distant lode, which pulled at them irresistibly with its exotic charm. They smiled and blushed, asking,

“Are you going to Quivilca?”

“Sure. Tomorrow, very early.”

“Aren’t you something! Off to make your fortunes in the mines!”

And so began the idylls and love affairs, which later would have to find shelter in the shadowy vaults of the fabled mine (2).<sup>2</sup>



El corregidor de minas castiga cruelmente a los caciques principales (529) / The administrator of the royal mines punishes the native lords with great cruelty (529).

Felipe Guaman Poma de Ayala. 1615. *El primer nueva corónica y buen gobierno* [1615]. Gl.kgl.S. 2232, 4<sup>o</sup>. Copenhagen: Royal Library of Denmark. Reproduced by kind permission of Manuscripts and Rare Books at the Royal Library in Copenhagen.

Vallejo wrote *Tungsteno* after visiting the Soviet Union in the late 1920s. He had left Perú and settled in Paris in 1923 as many Latin American and European writers did during the interwar years. It was during those years surrounding the events and the aftermath of World War II that other Latin American writers, including Nobel Prize laureates Pablo Neruda, Miguel Ángel Asturias, and Gabriel García Márquez adhered to a left-wing worldview that informed part of their work. At the same time, Vallejo’s decision to write about the exploitation of the indigenous population working in the Peruvian mines follows a long tradition of literary engagement with social issues.

Perhaps the earliest point of reference for many of the great contemporary Latin American writers continues to be the body of works produced during the colonial period. Felipe Guaman Poma de Ayala left us a wonderful example with his work *El primer nueva corónica y buen gobierno* (1615). Guaman Poma’s text is an illustrated chronicle of Andean history from the time prior to the reign of the Inkas until the moment of the Spanish rule in the Andes. Guaman Poma was a native Andean in service to the colonial administration. With his illustrated chronicle, Guaman Poma aimed to inform King Phillip III of Spain about the social problems that Spanish colonization was causing to the native Andean society. The image to the left accompanies a chapter in which Guaman Poma gives an account of the abuse of the native Andeans who worked in the mines. Guaman Poma inserted 398 drawings in his chronicle. As Rolena Adorno has pointed out, although the author justified the creation of drawings by stating that he knew that Phillip III

<sup>2</sup> César Vallejo, *Tungsten*, trans. Robert Mezey (Syracuse, New York: Syracuse University Press, 1988).

appreciated visual art, his persistent use of images throughout the text “suggests instead that he considered his drawings to be the most direct and effective way of communicating his ideas to the king and persuading him to take remedial action” (16).<sup>3</sup>

The texts and authors I have included in this conversation about Robinson’s photography can be brought together at the same table because at different times they were witnesses to the destruction of a human and natural environment as a result of mining for gold in the Peruvian Andes. In his reflection on *Rinconada de Oro*, my colleague Jay H. Jones aptly reminds us how ironic it is that “gold, an impurity excluded by nature as minerals form, is the driving force that challenges human values and reason.” Much of Robinson’s work on display at the Carlson Gallery speaks directly of its subject-matter which is a catalog of dire consequences of poverty and abuse. In other photographs, though, the subject loses its immediate connection with time and place and the image speaks to a universal condition. On the west wall, fourth panel, a photograph whose caption reads *Once a city of men, women and families have begun populating the city* shows, contrary to its description, a solitary man and a woman sitting at a window. They are so close to us that we, the viewer, feel that we’re taking the photo at this very moment. Yet they seem to be suspended in a timeless spot. We guess the presence of what we believe to be a man when we look at the hat. The part for the whole. Or is the absence of the man a strategy by which the woman gains protagonism in front of the camera? Light falls on the woman’s face in such a way that we can feel her skin, the fading hair, and the names carved on the window frame. This image speaks about recent demographic changes in Rinconada, a gold-mining town at more than 17,000 feet above sea level. It also speaks, like the rest of Michael Robinson’s photographs, about a reality beyond the flat surface whose meanings we recreate every time we look.



<sup>3</sup> Rolena Adorno, *Guaman Poma and His Illustrated Chronicle from Colonial Peru: From a Century of Scholarship to a New Era of Reading-Guaman Poma y su crónica ilustrada del Perú colonial: Un siglo de investigaciones hacia una nueva era de lectura* (Copenhagen: Museum Tusculanum Press, University of Copenhagen & the Royal Library, 2001).

East wall, north end, first panel



Working at the edge of the San Francisco Glacier.



Parents and students gather outside Rinconada's only school.



Rinconada's red light district.



Miners drill deep under the mountain with very few safeguards.

East wall, second panel



Tin shacks spread across the frozen mountainside on the outskirts of Rinconada.



Street scene in the center of town. Roads through town are little more than toxic mud paths, a quagmire of contamination: sewage, mud and mercury.



Mercury and water flow out of a bowl directly into the water table. The mercury is used to separate the gold from stone.



Drunken miner in the red light district.



People make their way across a mountain pass to the main mine entrances at the foot of the glacier.



Miners readying for the dawn shift.

East wall, third panel



Miners drag equipment through town.



Break time deep in the mines.



Coca leaves line the floor of one of the tunnels. The miners chew the leaf for its appetite suppressive properties and the energy jolt it gives them.



Beer gardens in the city's red light district are perpetually busy with miners.

East wall, fourth panel



Blood stains snow outside of a brothel. Prostitution in Rinconada is a booming business.

West wall, south end, first panel



Pollution has turned the San Francisco glacier from white to gray.

West wall, second panel from the south



His face etched by years of hard labor at high altitude, Juan Caritachamba has worked in Rinconada for 20 years but does not venture into the mines any more.



Central Rinconada.



Newly constructed tin shacks at the edge of town await a growing population. In the past 4 years it has doubled to 50,000.



Women have some of the toughest duties, like scaling shale rock looking for gold nuggets overlooked in the mines.

West wall, third panel



Bus terminal.

West wall, fourth panel



Once a city of men, women and families have begun populating the city.

Michael Robinson-Chávez  
*Rinconada de Oro*

Irene Carlson Gallery of Photography  
January 30 through March 30, 2012

An exhibition of photographs

Miller Hall, University of La Verne

---

West wall, fifth panel



Dozens of people scale a slope of shale rock searching for small gold traces amongst the millions of rocks.



A woman carries a 60-pound bag of stones up the mountainside.



A view of the Rinconada sprawl from one of the tunnel entrances.