

THE DRIEST SEASONS: CALIFORNIA'S DUST BOWL

Photography by Michael Robinson Chávez

Exhibition reflection essays by

Karen M. Beavers
Librarian, Research and Instruction / Associate Professor

and

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Irene Carlson Gallery of Photography
February 1 through March 24, 2016

A lecture by the photographer will take place at 4:30 p.m. Thursday, February 18, 2016, Ballroom A, Abraham Campus Center. A reception will follow after the lecture in the Irene Carlson Gallery of Photography, Miller Hall.

Michael Robinson Chávez describes this work...

When the rains didn't fall and the snows didn't stay, life in the hard-luck Central Valley got harder. Small towns died. Dreams dried up. And the very ground was sinking.

The Central Valley is the breadbasket for not just California but increasingly the world. Three years of severe drought however have imperiled the hopes and dreams of a vast portion of the valley's population. Workers, accustomed to steady yearlong employment are leaving dusty agricultural towns deserted as they migrate north to wetter climes. Middle class farmers hoping for retirement in the countryside have watched their investments wither and die.

Throughout 2014 I photographed the plight of people's everyday battles against a devastating drought that continues to alter life in the Central Valley. Reporter Diana Marcum and I produced a series of stories about people like Francisco Galvez who was trying to keep his family together and a roof over their head. As a result of our coverage readers wrote emails asking how they could help the Galvez family. Donations upward of \$1000 were sent to the family.

In East Porterville 72-year-old Donna Johnson began counting how many of her neighbors were without water, their wells dried up. She counted over 800. She then organized water donations and jumpstarted Tulare County into donating tanks to those without water. After our story ran, emails and phone calls poured in on how to help Ms. Johnson with donations, water infrastructure and transportation. It was overwhelming and very welcome for a town as poor and hard struck as East Porterville.

The town of Stratford opened their taps three months ago and sand poured out. Once a popular road stop for Valley residents en route to the coast Stratford has no restaurants, gas stations, hardware stores and just one tiny market run by Mahmod Alrihimi, a Yemeni immigrant who still firmly believes in the town. Most of his customers live on credit, using IOUs to purchase sodas and cigarettes. Mr. Alrihimi had a stack of 800 IOUs when we visited him. As a result of the story all of the IOUs were paid off and Mr. Alrihimi called us, weeping into the phone, about the hundreds of dollars he received in donations.

The drought isn't over but we hope that our series of stories not only helped those directly involved in our stories but raised awareness to the severity of this terrible plight for California.

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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 assignments in over 50 countries including: the Congolese Civil War, the tsunamis in Indonesia and Chile, the Egyptian revolution, life in Brazil's slums, gold mining in Peru, the 2006 Hezbollah/Israeli war, the conflict in Israel/Palestine and the US led invasion and occupation of Iraq.

Michael is a two time Robert F. Kennedy Journalism Award for Photojournalism winner, in 2015 and 2012 and was twice named second place Photographer of the Year by Pictures of the Year International in 2014 and 2010. In 2015 Michael received a silver prize from the China International Press Photo Contest and a Judge's Special Recognition in the Environmental Vision Award for his work on the California drought. Michael won the Scripps Howard National Award for Photojournalism and has also twice been named Photographer of the Year by The White House News Photographers' Association.

His work has been exhibited widely, including the Visa Pour l'image festival in France, the Corcoran Gallery in Washington DC, Imagenes Havana in Cuba, the Head On Photo Festival in Sydney, the War Photo Ltd. Gallery in Dubrovnik and at the Museu Memorial de l'Exili in Spain.

He is publishing a book of his photographs from Peru: "Awaiting the Rain," next year. In addition he teaches and lectures at workshops throughout the world including Mexico, Argentina, India, Thailand, Egypt, Peru, Australia, the United States and El Salvador.

Reflections on Michael Robinson Chávez's
Photographs of the San Joaquin Valley Drought

Karen M. Beavers, PhD, Critical Studies

Chavez's photographs represent drought. On my first look, I was immediately struck by the different ways he makes the absence of water visible. Chavez shows us the earth kicked up in a dust devil, field workers weeding an almond orchard outside Huron, and Porterville residents making do with limited water. The images drew me in with their beauty and striking composition. They also left me with a lot of questions. What is a dust devil exactly? How much water does almond farming use? Who are the people in the central valley who must live without access to the water that is basic to our everyday needs? How do people create networks that make sure their neighbors have access to a bare minimum of water? Why is the economic and social impact of the drought visible in some neighborhoods and not others?

Chavez's photos document how people live in the drought. People line up for work, children climb on a trash dumpster, and vendors stand in the marketplace. The photographs also suggest a range of private and public emotions. I am drawn to the people who seem self-contained; the ones who stand off to the side, the children who look down or past the camera and the person who covers their eyes. The camera frame, however, emphasizes everyone in relationship; to the landscape, to other workers, and to their neighbors.

Chavez captures multiple narratives. Diana Marcum, the L.A. Times features writer who collaborated with Chavez, calls them the "little-told" stories.¹ Marcum's writing accompanied many of the photos as they appeared in the Times, but I am reading a mix of things while I keep returning to Chavez's catalog. On Twitter I read the #OscarsSoWhite hashtag and immediately think back to Chavez's work. He documents the people and stories that are underrepresented in popular media. So much is communicated in photos like the Porterville volunteers delivering water and Dalila Orozco bathing in the barrel. Chavez's images of particular people and landscapes make visible the way that individuals and communities are impacted by environmental and human forces; the drought, but also unequal labor markets, disinvestment in public infrastructures, and racially exclusionary housing policies.

¹ Clark, Roy P. "The Winner for the Best Pulitzer Prize Lead Is...." Poynter. 2015. Web. 25 Jan. 2016.

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Personal Thoughts Regarding the Photographs of the
San Joaquin Valley Drought by Michael Robinson Chávez

Kent H. Badger, DPA

I grew up listening to Woody Guthrie' and Pete Segar's songs of the great Dust Bowl and Depression era of the 1930s. Those songs along with the vivid descriptions included in John Steinbeck's *Grapes of Wrath* and James Agee' and Walker Evans' *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* made an indelible impression on me of the hapless lives of impoverished pickers and sharecroppers during that time in American history.

The photographs in the current exhibit by Michael Robinson Chavez, taken in Huron, East Porterville, and other nearby farming communities of California, vividly convey to me the same earthly plight and human condition brought about by the drought in the 1930s. This time the drought is turning the San Joaquin Valley here in California into another dustbowl.

Chavez, with his vividly striking, and subliminally subtle photographic technique, offers images that first evoke in me a strong emotional and visceral response followed by a more thoughtful reflection on their meaning and implications. For example, the photograph "dust devil" of an ominous dust devil spouting up over Stratford appears to me as a giant foot of some great three towed monster kicking up dust and debris and is about to crush the earth beneath it. Chavez's image evokes the sense of nature's absolute power pressing upon the now parched and barren furrows of earth that once used to be fertile crop fields. I feel small looking at this image as its implications nearly overwhelm my senses with a feeling of irretrievable loss. Chavez introduces the same sense of powerlessness and plight that emerge from the image of the man, woman, and child blowing a horn in the photograph, "Terra Bella." However, here I feel the strong sense of hopelessness accompanied by hopefulness expressed in this engrossing image. I see life weighing heavily upon the man growing old before his time while it also encourages the young girl to make music. An indomitable spirit rises in the midst of greatest adversity!

I feel almost an invasion of privacy as I am looking at this photograph, "Temple of Mount of Olives" where two men stand in solemn prayer, and where once in better times, the church would be filled with parishioners. I am deeply moved by this captured moment of reverent thanks or supplication. We see the conditions of their lives laid bare in this private and personal disclosure -- those corrosive conditions of uncertainty and the inability to control, or even understand the forces at play upon their lives. Those forces that brought them here I am certain were created in no small part by the economic hardship each must face in his own way as he seeks guidance and help from a source of ultimate compassion.

Here I see in the photograph, "workers hoping for work" men from Huron gathered in the early morning hours waiting or hoping to go to the fields to work. Chavez captures the simultaneous sense of expectancy and uncertainty in this picture of men locked in time by hope and necessity. I can't help but wonder what they are saying among themselves and what they are feeling personally. Likewise, the photograph, "women waiting" offers a powerful image of these three women waiting, not just at the tienda to buy something, but for life to offer more than just dust and uncertainty. I see no look of despair on their faces, but rather resigned determination: "we will make the best of it." I wonder where that determination will lead them in the future.

Chavez depicts death in this photograph, "memorial." We will never know anything about Juan Acosta whose memorial sits on this barren spot beside the road on which he was probably killed. We know only

that he lived for awhile and died near Huron in the San Joaquin Valley. The photograph tells us that he was loved as a husband and father, and by those who wanted to honor and cherish his memory and have others do the same. This photograph makes me wonder how Juan Acosta was affected by this drought; what part it played in his life, his death? It is most likely that in the near future his family will have to move somewhere far away to find work as more local wells go dry, thus leaving Juan Acosta and his memorial behind to become another forgotten part of the abandoned land he probably once helped harvest.

I see life etched deeply upon the kind face of the man depicted with the hat, "Hector Ramirez," his hands telling the story of hard labor, with a demeanor not of dejection or resignation, but of endurance. Here is a man doing what needs to be done. He is holding onto two things he knows so well, his hat and his harvest -- both essential to his well being. I wonder where he will be in another year, holding onto the same hat, but the yield of a different harvest.

It is what I don't see in this photograph of an empty corral, "abandoned dairy," that tells the story: cattle filling the corral and shuffling through the shoots. The corral is as empty and barren as the fields that can no longer be used for grazing. Here Chavez shows another industry being choked dry in the dust of this drought.

The child's empty make-shift log swing hanging over the dry and desolate ground offers a sober reminder of what was once a scene of exuberant play and children's laughter in Chavez's photograph, "little left behind." Tables in the field are now bare and dilapidated where once I imagine they were covered with food and surrounded by a family in animated joviality. In the distance sits a house, perhaps still occupied, but appearing abandoned just as so many others in the region where people have had to leave to find work elsewhere. To me the shadow of the swing now represents the swing itself -- something that is no longer real in the life of some child, only a distant memory cast as a shadow in the mind's eye. Much as the once verdant fields and orchards that abounded here in East Porterville and throughout the San Joaquin Valley.

Chavez shows in this photograph, "bathing in a barrel," the simple pleasure of a little girl submerging herself in the storage barrel of precious water no longer plentiful enough to irrigate all the crops of the San Joaquin valley. I can't help but think, with so many of the water wells drying up, of how increasingly rare even this simple pastime will become. The children, what is to become of these children? -- same as with the crops and cattle? In the words of Woody Guthrie, "We come with the dust, and we go with the wind..."

We end on an asphalt road, "empty highway near Avenal," coming from ... going to, where? The image epitomizes what I believe to be the essence of the feelings and issues raised by these powerful photographs. It is impossible for me to look at this image and not feel the utter desolation, made even more striking by my personal memory of the vibrant, verdant nature of this valley only a few years earlier. Here is a visual microcosm of what we have directly and indirectly done to our environment. Note the painted words wearing away on the asphalt surface: "STOP AHEAD." Somewhat of a prophetic commentary I would say!

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A "dust devil" whirls across the parched landscape outside of Stratford, a town reeling from the drought. Stratford, California, September, 2014.



Workers weed an almond orchard outside Huron. Wages for workers have plummeted. Huron, California, 2014.



People sell their wares in the drought ravaged town of Terra Bella, California. March 2014



91-year-old James Turner sits in his home which is now without water. Turner's well has run dry. Madera, California, December, 2014.

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Market vendor, Terra Bella, California. March 2014



Pistachio farmer who has been without water for months, Terra Bella, California. April 2014



The Garcia family is afraid they will have to leave Terra Bella, their home for two generations, due to the drought. Terra Bella, California. April 2014



Children play on a trash dumpster, Terra Bella, California. April 2014

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The Temple of Mount of Olives, an evangelical church, is watching its congregation evaporate as they move away. Terra Bella, California. March, 2014.



Street scene, Terra Bella, California. April, 2014.



Target practice stand in a pistachio orchard, Terra Bella, California. April, 2014.



Workers, hoping for work, gather before dawn in a parking lot, Huron, California. May, 2014.

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The main commercial corridor of Huron is largely abandoned and shuttered, a victim of recession and drought. Huron, California, May 2014.



Football practice, Huron, California, 2014.



Farmworkers wait for their food in a local taqueria, Huron, California, May 2014.



A memorial lies on the edge of Huron, a town whose economy is withering as a result of the current historic drought. Huron, California, May 2014.

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Farmland, left fallow, bakes in the sun. Huron, California, May 2014.



A man eats his lunch at a diner which has seen an 80 percent decline in business over the last year. Huron, California, May 2014.



Hector Ramirez has worked the fields for nearly 60 years but fears the drought will render him unemployed. Outside Huron, California, May 2014.



A woman, with her food rations atop a cart, stands in the empty streets of Stratford, California, September, 2014.

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Abandoned dairy farm, Stratford, California, September, 2014.



A dry irrigation canal lies parched along a highway in the southern portion of the valley outside Buttonwillow, California, September, 2014.



Volunteers deliver water to people without water, some, like these sisters have been without water for over 6 months. East Porterville, California, September, 2014.



The drought drove some people to leave towns altogether, leaving little behind. East Porterville, California, September, 2014.

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Dalila Orozco bathes in a barrel. Her family has been without water for nearly 8 months and must have it brought in. East Porterville, California, September, 2014.



Empty highway, near Avenal, California, May, 2014.