



## Harvesting images

### Exhibit provides glimpses into lives of migrant farm workers

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In the photograph, the dirt-crusted palm of a migrant worker holds seven tokens, each placed there as payment for a day spent picking tomatoes in Stockton.

Rick Nahmias took this photograph of a group of women who travel from Mexicali to Calexico, where they await buses to take them to Imperial Valley cantaloupe fields. His work will be on display at the California Center for the Arts, Escondido starting tomorrow. Courtesy photo

"For every 30 pounds of tomatoes they drag up to the truck, they get a token," explained the photographer, Rick Nahmias. "Each token is worth about 95 cents."

Nahmias' emotive image is part of "The Migrant Project," a series of black-and-white photographs documenting the lives of farm workers across California.

Families in rural encampments from Calexico to Sacramento invited Nahmias to record on film their daily lives, from mundane activities to religious observances, birthdays and soccer games.

Nahmias hopes the traveling exhibit will generate empathy and understanding of the workers' situation and remind people of the benefits received from their labor.

The photographs will be displayed through Jan. 28 at the California Center for the Arts, Escondido, Museum. Also on exhibit will be the glass sculpture of Hugo Heredia and oil paintings by Anna Zappoli Jenkins. An opening reception with the artists will be from 6 to 8 p.m. tomorrow at the museum.

In "The Migrant Project," Nahmias captures a vast spectrum of human emotion, from the dignified expressions of female cantaloupe harvesters as they wait to board a bus in the pre-dawn darkness to the fragile wonder in a young boy's eyes as he peers out from a vineyard's fruit-bearing foliage.

However, some of Nahmias' most compelling work is devoid of people. Though absent from the lens frame, their presence beyond its borders is palpable and heart-wrenching. One print shows the grave of an unclaimed migrant's body found close to the border, while another focuses on mud-caked shoes piled beside a motel room door.

"Resident motels meant for one or two people were holding 10," Nahmias said. "For me, those kinds of images often tell more than the faces of the people."

Nahmias' passion for social justice was sparked while working as a writer and researcher for political commentator Arianna Huffington. After quitting his job, he enrolled in a weeklong seminar at the Culinary Institute of America in Napa Valley.

"As much as I enjoyed it, in the back of my head I couldn't help thinking, 'What is the human cost of this food?'" he said.

"I had seen some amazing work done on the subject of farm workers historically, but nothing that addressed the three dimensions: family life, the elderly and children."

With financial sponsorship and grant money, Nahmias traveled to 50 rural communities, gaining access to migrant camps through a worker at a local clinic or a member of the American Friends Service Committee, a Quaker-run humanitarian organization.

The resulting photographs previewed in Los Angeles as an affiliate exhibit of the California Council on the Humanities "Grapes of Wrath/California Stories" program.

Also represented in the work is a growing number of self-identified gay and lesbian farm workers, Nahmias said, as well as a small community rodeo event known as a charreada.

Strict dress codes require that all items worn during a charreada, from spurs to sombreros, be made in Mexico. Velcro is strictly forbidden. Competitors do not win money, only titles.

"A lot of farm workers will compete on the weekend or their day off," Nahmias said. "It's the only sport I'm aware of where three generations of a family can all compete in the same event. . . . There's a great sense of honor and historic significance."

Throughout his travels, Nahmias said, he was overwhelmed by the generosity of his subjects.

As he was leaving an encampment, people would run up to him with bags of corn or a tray of strawberries.

"Sure, there were people that didn't want their pictures taken," Nahmias said. "But when people can barely pay their rent and they're offering you a bed or food, it's symbolically an amazing gesture."