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Photographing Mexico's Ultra-Wealthy: Daniela Rossell's Ricas y Famosas

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Aller au sommaire du numéro

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Résumé de l'article

This paper engages with the visual strategies the photographer Daniela Rossell employed in her groundbreaking book on Mexico's ultra-wealthy: Ricas y Famosas. This essay applies photography theory in new directions to suggest explanations for the strong public backlash that this documentary narrative provoked when it was released. To that end, an analysis of the visual narrative reveals the symbols and themes within the photo essay. It also identifies a specific narrative strategy that foregrounds a strong critique of the subject matter and important considerations connected to photography's truth claims and how the economically advantaged have been portrayed.

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Photographing Mexico's Ultra-Wealthy: Daniela Rossell's *Ricas y Famosas*

This paper engages with the visual strategies the photographer Daniela Rossell employed in her groundbreaking book on Mexico's ultra-wealthy: Ricas y Famosas*. This essay applies photography theory in new directions to suggest explanations for the strong public backlash that this documentary narrative provoked when it was released. To that end, an analysis of the visual narrative reveals the symbols and themes within the photo essay. It also identifies a specific narrative strategy that foregrounds a strong critique of the subject matter and important considerations connected to photography's truth claims and how the economically advantaged have been portrayed.*

Palabras clave: *Daniela Rossell, Susan Sontag,* Regarding the Pain of Others*, photography of minorities, photography of the rich*

Este trabajo analiza las estrategias visuales de la fotógrafa Daniela Rossell en su libro innovador sobre los súper ricos: Ricas y Famosas*. Este ensayo entra en nuevo terreno de la aplicación de la teoría de la fotografía con el fin de explicar el rechazo público que esta narrativa documental provocó con su publicación. Para este fin, un análisis de la narrativa visual revela los símbolos y los temas dentro de este ensayo visual. También señala la estrategia de la narrativa que propone ser una fuerte crítica del material visual y unas consideraciones importantes relacionadas con la veracidad que se da al contenido de las fotografías y la forma en que los que poseen ventajas económicas se retratan.*

Keywords: *Daniela Rossell, Susan Sontag,* Ante el dolor de los demás*, fotografía de las minorías, fotografía de los ricos*

In 2002 a young and relatively unknown Mexican photographer, Daniela Rossell, introduced a book and exhibition that launched her into the spotlight. In contrast to the growing tendency among writers, photographers, and other intellectuals to document disenfranchised sectors

of society, *Ricas y Famosas* focused on the opposite end of the spectrum. Employing her personal connections to the super-wealthy in Mexico, she entered the homes of family, friends, and acquaintances to document one of the smallest social groups in Mexico: the economic elite (Tuckman; Brooksbank Jones 80). Indeed, Rossell's "non-tourist" photography, to borrow a term from Blanely and Chinar (12), goes beyond the "glossy magazine photographs" (Blanely and Chinar 16) to give the viewer a different type of anti-picturesque Mexican photography. Indeed, her work sets a new anti-picturesque trend that differentiates her from Manuel Álvarez Bravo and other photographers that have come from that long-standing photography trend in Mexico (Mraz 8). Just as Marya Martell's essay on the disappearance of women in Ciudad Juárez brings the private into a public space to offer a more nuanced understanding of frequently hidden realities (Triquell 63), Rossell's work also allows the viewer to contemplate a largely unseen Mexico.

A book with very limited (though essential) written context, this catalogue of the extremely rich in Mexico received a strong critical backlash in the media in Mexico and abroad. Rubén Gallo's *New Tendencies in Mexican Art* dedicates the third chapter to Rossell's work and documents the growing tide of discontent manifested by Mexico's intellectuals and other criticism of the project (Gallo 49-58). Aside from his detailed review of the public reaction to the series and a careful and robust explanation of the social and political context in Mexico, Gallo suggests that Rossell's collection of images manifests noteworthy voyeuristic tendencies. Susan Sontag's ideas on the links between voyeurism and photography support such an analysis (Sontag, *On Photography* 12). Furthermore, David Foster's analysis underlines the denunciation of the ultra-wealthy that these photographs constitute and echoes Gallo's cultural and political context-building.[1]

Positive views of the rich in the Spanish-speaking world are not hard to find. For example, *Hola* magazine has a long-standing tradition of portraying the lives of the rich and famous in socially acceptable ways. Notably, they show pathways to wealth: fortunes and nobility titles inherited; companies founded; important hits in the art, music, literary, entertainment industries; and so forth. Rossell's book is one of the few artistic projects in Mexico from the 2000s dedicated to revealing the intimate lives of the wealthy in a way that leaves them open to interrogation and criticism.

Notwithstanding, Rossell is not the only woman photographer in Mexico to focus on the wealthy in Mexico. Yvonne Venegas, another contemporary photographer, has produced an important book/photo album on the wealthy in Mexico: *María Elvia de Hank* offers us an intimate portrait of an extremely rich family in Tijuana. Dominika Gasiorowski has

recently identified some of the similarities between the work of Rossell and Venegas (46-47). However, there are clear and important differences also that lead us to different interpretations of their work. Rossell has always been connected to wealth and power in Mexico City. Venegas grew up without wealth in Tijuana (though fame has come into her life via her photography and by being the identical twin sister of the singer Julieta Venegas). Rossell focuses on a variety of individuals, while Venegas focused on one family. Venegas opens a window that sheds light onto a very rich and powerful family, but what she reveals is not highly critical. Her album shares the quotidian of the rich (flamenco dancing, wedding attending, horseback riding, and more) that shows us how youth and teenagers enjoy the commodities and privileges that their life affords (minus the kitsch elements Rossell foregrounds). Complicity was needed for both projects, and whilst Rossell's lends itself to a more critical stance, Venegas's appears more favorable.

Rossell's book enables us to apply Susan Sontag's *On Photography* and *Regarding the Pain of Others* in a different direction: to explain reactions to enjoyment or opulence. To that end, I evidence visual strategies that Rossell employed in her portrayal of this topic. These strategies create areas of emphasis that are central to our understanding of the critical directions of her documentary narrative. I discuss how these photographs portray the fortunes on display. I identify the aesthetics, signs, and visual strategies that are evident in the depicting of this "new wealth," as the journalist Guadalupe Loaeza described it (qtd. in Brooksbank Jones 69).[2] When we analyze the way in which women, objects, and religious iconography are underlined, it is possible to observe key differences within those topics that nuance our understanding of Rossell's critique and her documentary project.

We started with a few general remarks about this work. As a preliminary step to the analysis, it is important to establish ground rules that help delineate the intended focus to enrich the analytical potential of the material. The first concerns the title of the project: *Ricas y Famosas*, "rich and famous."[3] While the individuals pictured here are rich, most of them are not famous. Carlos Monsiváis made that point with the title of his review of the book, "Ricas (ni quien lo niegue), famosas (tal vez alguna llegue a serlo)." Additionally, prior to the publication of this book, most of the subjects were not even well known outside of their own sphere of influence (and, as Gallo documents in his chapter, when they did become *in*/famous they were not happy with the type of attention they received) (55-56). Hence, since the term famous is used ironically and the true intention of the artist appears to be to reveal the lives of wealthy individuals who had previously not been in the public eye, I will not focus on the minor celebrities included in the book.[4]

Indeed, those photos that contain them tend to flow against the general aesthetic of the photo narrative and reinforce the general visual strategies that this photographic essay underscores.

The men (or those who appear to be men) of *Ricas y Famosas* will not be at the center of the analysis. Though Spanish does not necessarily need to be spoken by the reader in order to understand this essay because the introductory and concluding comments are translated into English and the key textual phrases that are important to our understanding of this visual essay (to be discussed later) are in English, the Spanish-speaker will immediately recognize that the use of the adjectives in their feminine form (*Ricas y Famosas)* directly suggests that this visual essay is truly focused on the presentation of the women and the contexts in which the observer encounters them.[5] For that reason, this discussion will center on the women of the book and their representation.

TRUTH CLAIMS

Documentary photography normally has strong links to the written word (Price 80). Rossell's visual narrative uses minimal, but pointed, textual evidence to focus on and support truth claims as an introduction to her visual essay: "The following images depict actual settings. The photographic subjects are representing themselves. Any resemblance with real events is not coincidental" (Rossell, *Ricas* iii). This brief introductory and context-building quote guides the reading of the images in two ways: it places the representation of these women in their own hands (a point that Rossell emphasizes in the interview "How Daniela Rossell's photographs came to be viewed as images of Mexico's 'poster girls of corruption'")[6] and claims that these photos offer us a truth regarding real events. Indeed, Rossell directly invites the viewer to find the "truth that you see" when considering how the women represent themselves for this collection of photos ("Rossell questions"). This appeal to discover the truth within the photographs guides how we understand the documentary approach of this visual essay. As we consider the performative force of photography offered by Rossell's photographs (Levin 2009), the truth claims Rossell invites the viewer to seek in her work include exposing the way the subjects represent themselves and the signs and symbols that representation offers the viewer (Güemes 2002).

CRITICAL INSIGHTS FROM SONTAG REGARDING *RICAS Y FAMOSAS*

Contemporary to Rossell's project is Susan Sontag's *Regarding the Pain of Others* (2003), which builds upon her seminal piece *On Photography.* Both books enrich our understanding of the relationship between photographs

and how conflict is processed in the individual and society. At the heart of Sontag's thoughts in *Regarding the Pain of Others* is understanding how we engage with the witnessing of suffering. She develops these ideas by referencing war photographs and art depicting suffering by the Spanish artist Goya. Both portray conflict as they consider suffering. Rossell's work also suggests conflict as she foregrounds the winners of the class war, those that possess and command the vast amount of wealth held by a miniscule percentage of society. Sontag argues that as we feel sympathy while we observe those who suffer, we distance ourselves from these negative experiences, "So far as we feel sympathy, we feel we are not accomplices to what caused the suffering. Our sympathy proclaims our innocence as well as our importance" (*Regarding the Pain* 91). Read in another direction, these ideas could be used to explain the lack the sympathy on behalf of the viewing public who did not want to be accomplices to the ill-gained wealth in Rossell's photographs, allegedly the product of political corruption in Mexico.

If we read these reactions to Rossell's photographs as an inversion of Sontag's analytical paradigm, Sontag's writings suggest explanations for the negative reactions to the photographs as recorded by Gallo, Brooksbank, and Foster, and go beyond their social and political explanations for the same. Sontag's writings suggest that the root of these reactions exists on two levels: why the photos cause feelings, and why those feelings are negative. "Sentiment", argues Sontag, "is more likely to crystallize around a photograph" (*Regarding the Pain* 76). This is exactly what happens as the viewers use the photographs as "the principal device for experiencing something" (Sontag, *On Photography* 10). In this case, it is wealth so great that most of the viewers will only experience this via photography, as Carlos Monsiváis argues in "Ricas (ni quien lo niegue)." However, the different emotional reactions can be explained because these images appear to center around what is perceived to be undeserved wealth as opposed to underserved misfortune. Sontag argues that photographs of the endurance of undeserved misfortune can cause a reaction of pity in the viewer (*Regarding the Pain* 67). Rossell's photographs suggest that the enjoyment of underserved fortune appears to cause the indignation in the viewer that Gallo, Brooksbank, and Foster describe so well in their reviews of the critical reactions and political contextualization. Sontag suggests that art transforms and photographs bear witness (*Regarding the Pain* 68). The witness borne of apparent undeserved wealth and fortune provokes the angered reaction in Mexico and abroad.

In *Regarding the Pain of Others,* Sontag builds upon her ideas regarding voyeurism and photography she outlined in *On Photography*, and she

questions who should witness the horrors of life found in photographs. Sontag suggests that those not authorized are simply voyeurs, a term that becomes the focus of Gallo's critical approach towards the book. Gallo's use of the term voyeur proposes that those who look might have no right to do so; however, the contextual information he and other critics offer also suggests that the Mexican public have a vested interest in the visual material. This is because much of the wealth exhibited was acquired during public service in the government, making the Mexican viewers the opposite of a voyeur. Sontag diagrams possible reactions to materials to which the voyeur is attracted: "For all the voyeuristic lure and the possible satisfaction of knowing. This is not happening to me, I'm not dying, I'm not trapped in a war – it seems normal for people to fend off thinking about the ordeals of others, even others with whom it would be easy to identify" (*Regarding the Pain* 88-89). In the case of Rossell's photographs, the reaction of "it's not happening to me" occurs, but instead of the happenings being misfortunes, they refer to fortunes. Indeed, it points to their status as losers in the conflict of social class. Hence, in this case, Sontag's paradigm can be applied in a new direction. Instead of being a voyeur, the viewer is a concerned observer. Instead of relief, the viewer experiences outrage. Rossell's photo essay provokes the following question among the concerned critics: why are these people allowed this luxury when I am (or rather, *we are*) not? The lack of identity, the possibility of witnessing and the impossibility of knowing explains why the supposed satisfaction of voyeurism is replaced by rejection and reproach. Rossell's visual strategies in *Ricas y Famosas* are key to understanding how the wealth's display is significant.

The categories of photography outlined by David Bate with his concepts on voluntary and involuntary memory in relation to photography are useful in further explaining the public's reactions to Rossell's work. He explains that photographs like Rossell's can be described as an archive of an "independent social group" (Bate 248). In this case, that group is the ultra-wealthy. Bate points out that those specific archives can conflict with public media archives (248). Rossell's photographs conflict with the social reality found in Mexico (Lorenzo Meyer, qtd. in Gallo 50). Building upon Barthes's ideas regarding *punctum* and *studium*, Bate's writings on voluntary memory (linked to history) and involuntary memory (linked to personal affect) also help explain the negative reactions connected to Rossell's work. Bate's writings suggest that the distant realities portrayed in Rossell's photographs would make it difficult to build upon the voluntary since the general viewer would have little or no connection to the reality these photographs portray. The fact that they show wealth without any suggestion of its origin (except for ghostly references to politics) exhibits

poor visual aesthetics and turns revered national rituals linked to the sublime on their head and can easily explain a negative involuntary memory. This is because many of the photographs reinforce a moral position connected to the seven social sins, one of those being "wealth without work," a key topic that the visual narrative underlines with great emphasis.[7] This visual reinforcement of a moral position is a natural byproduct of photography (Sontag, *On Photography* 17).

CONSIDERING THE VISUAL BACKGROUND: THE HOMES

As *Ricas y Famosas* photographs women within domestic settings, it is important to understand the visual strategies employed in their representation. Objects are of great importance because of their context-building nature. Like the brief introductory comments that set the tone for the narrative, as discussed earlier, written texts within the photographic narrative are some of the objects that are of key importance to our understanding of the narrative strategy. Recent scholarly writings on photography also underline the importance of written texts within an image. Agustina Triquell's essay on the photographic representation of the disappeared in Ciudad Juarez, Mexico reminds the reader of the effectiveness that reading the text within an image can have on our interpretation of it (59). Rossell's visual essay contains similar internal written messages that also reveal useful insights. As suggested by Walter Benjamin, these texts can be read as signposts that can help the viewer more fully understand the direction of the narrative. In "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," Benjamin explained that captions are important signposts that can accompany photographs and direct our reading of them. He argues that they are obligatory directions that help us acquire an image's intended meaning (Benjamin 109). However, in the case of *Ricas y Famosas,* the captions are very brief and physically distant from the images. The written text within Rossell's photos can been seen as internal texts with the capacity to guide our readings of the images. In this case, I am referring to three phrases that appear within the photographs from her visual narrative. I will now discuss the importance of those phrases.

"VELIDEDEOGLU DIRECTS THE DECORATION OF HIS HOMES JUST AS HE WOULD A COMMERCIAL"

Consider the above quote that has been lifted from the title of an article within the photograph (Rossell 102). An image that appears to be an interloper within the visual narrative provides a suggestion as to how the homes portrayed were meant to be seen. In that photograph we observe a

man who might be Alinur Velidedeoglu, a US-born Turkish millionaire who amassed his fortune via the creation of a highly successful advertising company. Why is his image in a photo essay on rich Mexican women and their homes? While it is not clear if the home presented in the image is located in the USA, Turkey, or elsewhere (though an earlier photo in the essay suggests it might have been taken in Manhattan), the photo that appears to feature the advertiser contains an unusual ceiling decoration of newspaper articles that reference Velidedeoglu's feats.[8] The juxtaposition of this photograph with the rest of the series suggests that the image might have a special meaning. Since it is the only photograph that offers written text that suggests the modus operandi regarding the decoration of the homes, that message can be read as one of the lenses through which the series can be understood. Hence, just as a commercial is meant to present us with a product and promote it so that the viewer desires to acquire it, so might these homes have been decorated to make the viewer want to obtain their contents. Similar to what the ceiling quote proposes, the notion of creating domestic spaces that are highly planned (like a commercial), falls in line with Rossell's descriptions of the spaces. In an interview, she describes these homes as highly planned spaces that were like "movie sets" ("How Daniela"). Hence, the objects within these spaces are meant to be brought to our attention and merit further consideration. Visually, the strong use of color and glossy photos (as opposed to the more common usage of black and white photos to create documentary narratives) plays to this suggestion of an advertising theme within the documentary narrative as well (Ramamurth 250). However, a key difference between the homes and a commercial would be that a commercial is very clear regarding where and how products can be acquired. Rossell's photos offer no such clarity, lending itself to a frustrating read for the viewer.

"THE WORLD IS YOURS"

Approximately mid-way through the visual essay (Rossell, *Ricas* 65-66) appears the picture of a woman dressed in a zebra print dress on a zebra-skin rug in a room decorated with other African-themed products (the bust of an African woman, a stuffed cheetah, and so forth) (fig. 1). Behind her is a television that is turned on and features a globe on a pedestal that has the words "The World is Yours" wrapped around it. This phrase suggests a mantra for the homes and the women that we see featured in them: the world and its material possessions are theirs for the taking. It explains the abundance of decorations. Indeed, the entire photo essay revolves around the notion of possession for sport, possession as purpose, and possession without limit or direction. This ostentation directly suggests that there does

not seem to be any limit to what can be placed within the homes. It is within this theme that other themes begin to appear. We will now turn our attention to them.

"HE WHO DIES WITH THE MOST TOYS WINS"

Finally, this last written phrase is the one most commented on in the previous critical essays on *Ricas y Famosas*.[9] It is a very overt message that is held up by one of the girls who has been featured several times over the course of the visual narrative. Standing behind a bar, she holds up a golden plaque on which the phrase is embossed: "He who dies with the most toys wins." The fact that all the phrases that are featured in this essay are in English invites the question of the intended audience of this visual essay: was this intended for an English-speaking audience? Or are the phrases in English references to the strong influence of the USA or the emphasis on bilingual education in private schools in Mexico? A direct interpretation of this could be a reference to the rampant consumerism that is featured within the homes that we see, a phenomenon that photography documents with great success (Sontag, *On Photography* 9). Homes brim with art, furniture, ornaments, and decorations. While overtly there is no competition among the homes as most manifest similar levels of abundance, this plaque draws attention to the fact that minimalism is entirely absent; possibly because this would hide the wealth that has provided an archive on the excesses of materialism, a strong theme in Rossell's essay. A clear example of this is the picturing of not one, nor two, but six dog houses (though no dog is to be seen in the picture) that are placed in the patio of a massive salmon-colored home (Rossell, *Ricas* 121). Here, more is simply more and provides a way of overtly proclaiming the wealth of the protagonists in their attempt to win the game of dying with the most toys.

TOYS

The final written message of *Ricas y Famosas* invites us to consider the actual role toys play in this book. Featured in no less than fourteen photos of the eighty-three photos in total (including Rossell's unique self-portrait that suggests her ties to the PRI government), the representation of toys is an important part of the visual strategy. Normally children are associated with toys, but when we consider how the narrative features children in relation to toys, this does not appear to be the case. Consider two instances that provide an important contrast.

In the first instance, we observe a child in a room literally filled with toys (Rossell, *Ricas* 86). The young girl is standing in an awkward position on the windowsill and pushes herself up against the window as if the toys

were crowding her out of the room. In the second instance, we see a very young girl who is the nicely dressed and seated on a small stool in the corner of a well-decorated room (88). The oblique lighting contrasts with the oblique camera angle (suggesting a highly directed photo, just like a commercial might be) and invites the viewer to focus on the little girl and her location in the very corner of the photograph. Absolutely no toys are present in this photograph, emphasizing once again a disconnect between toys and children in this photo essay.

On the other hand, toys are abundant decorations in other photos in the visual narrative. In some cases, their abundance within the bedroom seems to reference a time of youth when such toys would have been gifts or acquired purchases in the ways they are portrayed on pages 103-04, with abundant stuffed animals and other toys common among small children. Their presence appears to document the disorder of the intimate in contrast to the highly curated living rooms, lounges, and other common spaces within the home that are exhibited in other parts of the visual narrative. However, in some cases, the stuffed toys are abundant and themed (such as is the proliferation of stuffed piggies) (Rossell, *Ricas* 37-38), or the large collection of stuffed bears and Trolls (Dam dolls) as seen in figure 2. Other photos picture a cornucopia of stuffed animals and other dolls in spaces where they might not usually be featured.

One possible explanation for the presence of the toys might be linked to Rossell's self-portrait in the book. Building on the social and political context, Rossell ("How Daniela Rossell's Photographs"), Gallo (49), and Foster (71) note how many of the women featured in this photo essay are directly related to the PRI government. Critics see these women as the "poster-girls of corruption," as was mentioned during Rossell's online interviews referenced earlier. The PRI presides as a ghostly presence over the narrative as we witness the opulence that obtaining political power in Mexico can harvest in terms of material wealth. Specifically documenting the lives of women alongside childhood toys, the abundance of such objects could be an attempt to proclaim these women's innocence. Nonetheless, this reading could also be turned on its head, as the juxtaposition of the toys and overt demonstrations of wealth simply do not congeal and can be read as poor aesthetics or an unsuccessful narrative strategy. Likewise, reminiscent of *A Doll's House* by Henrik Ibsen, the presence of toys could also be a reference to patriarchy keeping women as children. This reference to theater acquires even greater strength if one considers Rossell's background in theater studies and her artistic creations of "silent operas" (photographs that tell stories) (Güemes). However, this previous

interpretation encounters difficulties accounting for the highly sexualized portrayal of the women that also abounds.

SERVITUDE AND THE EXOTIC OTHER

Over the course of the visual essay, it becomes evident that the many homes featured exhibit a wide variety of spaces that reflect a certain degree of each owner's individual tastes. Nonetheless, Rossell's photographic vision also evidences the common themes previously mentioned. These create an index that enables us to analyze the common visual references shared by the photographer's subjects further. Two of them that come to the surface are the suggestion of servitude and the "exotic other."

The attraction of the Other and their artifacts has long been documented by academics such as Edward Said, Homi Bhabha, and Gayatri Spivak. Examples of the ultra-wealthy's interest in them are not difficult to find.[10] The homes of the women of *Ricas y Famosas*, and even the women themselves (as is evident in their clothing on occasion), feature an aesthetic that foregrounds an interest in the non-Latin America Other from the Global South, especially Africa and occasionally the Middle East. The African references are most apparent via an abundance of animal pelts and other animal trophies. Gallo (54) and Brooksbank Jones (72) have already analyzed the photograph of Paulina Díaz Ordaz, who rests her foot on a stuffed lion at depth. I mentioned the woman dressed in a zebra print dress on a zebra-skin rug. An image taken from above and looking down onto a room meant for leisure features a woman who is draped over a pool table, gazing up at the camera and adopting a pose that mimics the skins of other wild animals that are present within the room (Rossell, *Ricas* 79-80). On the floor next to her is a zebra-skin rug, a recurring motif. Next to it is a stuffed leopard as well the pelts of other wild game. As further evidence of this trend still, a closeup of another woman in her Manhattan apartment that overlooks Central Park has a miniature leopard in the corner and promotes the African aesthetic (Rossell, *Ricas* 6-7). This decoration portrays a dominion over animals that represents power or highlights that these are luxury items that are difficult to obtain (as evidenced by a stool made from an elephant foot (105-06), (fig. 3). They also reference safari excursions and big game hunting carried out in the Global South by the world's elite: a known rite of passage within the world of the ultra-wealthy (Stack).

In addition to the African-themed decoration, another representation of the Other that is captured within this visual narrative is the Arab world. This one depicts a young woman captured her in a home decorated with leopards, elephant tusks, and Middle Eastern rugs, pillows, tapestries, and furniture (Rossell *Ricas* 49-52). Indeed, the acknowledgements located at the

end of the book thank the *Villa Arabesque* ("the Arab Chateau") for its participation in the book. That Mexican house features references to camels, elephant tusks, and abundant Arab architecture motifs, one of the ways in which its residents reference travel and the exotic as a part of their lifestyle or interests. The recreation of a harem that includes seven women who cover themselves with colorful silken sheets (complete with the head woman playing a servant bearing alcohol) within a harem-themed room offers another example of the role-playing as they pretend to be the exotic Other.

The harem just referenced contains candlestick holders depicting black servants. The fact that these items hold either nothing or pieces of asparagus – an overt phallic symbol in the Hispanic world (Allende 197) – references the sexually-charged atmosphere within the harem (and the narrative in general) and should not draw the viewer away from the fact that the statues of black individuals are repeated within the narrative. In every case (except one) these statues always portray servants. In the other instance the statue features a young black entertainer. This visual reference is cause for pause and reflection given Mexico's own fraught past with servitude and peonage as a Spanish colony and a young republic (Seijas; Sierra Silva; Turner). The link between servitude and the women portrayed in this visual essay is also reinforced by the fact that hired domestic workers regularly feature within the photographic narrative. Their exact role will be analyzed in greater depth below.

FEMALE REPRESENTATION

Considering the role of the physical context now prepares us to discuss how these homes can be read as specially designed spaces that promote wealth. How they negotiate their presence within the photographs merits discussion. In her thoughts on the narrative, Rossell focuses on how the women objectify themselves by promoting what she has called a "red light district aesthetic" (Rossell, "Rossell Questions"), but what these women do *not* show in terms of family and occupation is as revealing as what they *do* show and how they represent themselves within the visual narrative. In line with this new application of Sontag's writings discussed earlier, the invisibility of the pathway to acquisition of what these commercials promote foments frustration with the images and what they represent.

When considering the photographic portrayal of the women, contrasts within the home environment are used to make the demarcations more real to the viewer (Sontag, *On Photography* 20). This specific emphasis is evident from the very first image. In it, a young domestic employee stands alone and center stage within a large home. Her cleaning implements are in hand, and

she strikes a pose, though not one that appears natural. Her uniform emphasizes her status as an employee. The final photo of the series replicates this idea of domestic employees, as it shows us a photo of the entire staff (thirty-nine people) of *Villa Arabesque*. Their employment within the home is underscored by the image of each employee holding up a specific tool of their trade (e. g., the gardener holds up a pair of pruning shears). Even when the domestic help is placed in the center of the photograph, the awkwardness of the individuals is still foregrounded in their stance, dimension, gaze, and contrast to the environment in which they work. This emphasis on employment being the reason for their presence in the homes of the wealthy is repeated in every photograph in which employees appear and is a visual strategy used to separate domestic employees from those who reside permanently within these spaces and are directly linked to wealth displayed.

The women of the home are portrayed at rest or as overseers of activity. They recline on couches. They lie on beds. They pose by fountains or pools. They are frequently seen at bars within the homes. In evening dresses, dressing gowns, or what could be described as nightclub attire, these women wear the costumes of leisure or pleasure. Often their clothing is shiny or made of other material that is intended to draw the viewer's attention. Nonetheless, no matter what they may be doing, there is never any indication of a profession or occupation (with, perhaps, the exception of actress or model). This emphasis on lack of professional occupation is created thanks to the contrast between those who do work (and are often blurred or out of focus in the photographs) and those who do not (who are clearly centered and sharply in focus). In one case, it is a woman in sports gear who poses in front of her home in such a way as to maximize her cleavage while a driver from the property gazes upon her (Rossell, *Ricas* 12). In another photo we observe an out-of-focus woman dusting the books behind the sharply portrayed woman who poses on a table (54). Not only does the contrast bring out the difference between those that work and those that do not; it also highlights the uniform of those who work and the uniform of those who live a life of luxury. This emphasis is furthered by the fact that the employee dusts the books in the home, suggesting that those items are simply part of the decor, rather than for active use or education. Another photograph in which a child's playhouse blocks access to a bookshelf also emphasizes the role of play or leisure over education or work (84).

The women Rossell selects for her photography narrative replicate many of the stances outlined by John Berger in *Ways of Seeing*: "Men look at women. Women watch themselves being looked at. This determines not

only most relations between men and women, but also the relation of women to themselves" (47). In most cases, when men are present within the photographs, they are overtly observing the women. This is especially the case when the men do not appear to be directly employed in the home. Such visualization encourages the reading of the voyeur that Gallo underlined in his interpretation of the visual essay. However, the notion of the concerned observer outside the photographs explains the public and critical reactions to these stances. Consider two examples. Figure 4 features a woman dressed in stiletto heels, a mini skirt, and a halter top posing on the roof of a home. Her index finger pressed against her puckered lips and her other hand pulling her hair back, she angles herself at the camera and engages directly with the viewer as if she were a nightclub dancer. A man working on the construction of a high rise building in the background observes her from afar. Another photo of a woman in a zebra-patterned cat suit positions herself on a bed with a zebra bedspread, zebra statues, and ostrich eggs with zebras painted on them (Rossell *Ricas* 23-24). She wags her outstretched tongue at the camera as she faces the viewer. Behind her, a man working with a separate camera crew casts his gaze over her, apparently oblivious to the concerned observer. The woman is the object of our concerned attention and his voyeuristic viewing.

The play and leisure in addition to the lack of any reference to work, education, or profession within the domestic space hides any trace of a source of wealth. Unlike popular magazines such as *Hola!* (or its counterparts in other languages), there is no indication of a pathway to wealth, no movies made, music played, or industries led that suggest to readers the roads to wealth or the justification for it. Those widely accepted magazines allow us to access and celebrate the economic abundance of the famous as well as to the famous themselves (on their terms), but this contact allows the reader the idea that they somehow participate in the narrative, offering the notion that these celebrated individuals have some type of link or connection to the reader. In the case of Rossell's images, this is not so. The only written signposts distance their environment from the viewer. Those portrayed are only identified via the investigative and contextual work of critics that, in many cases, lead them to see that they have given these riches to them by electing their families to government office (Villoro, quoted in Gallo 49). The public male face of politics in Mexico that might have been recognized has been erased so that only a ghostly political presence is visible via their wealth and the women in their lives. We are only left with token visual references such as political insignias, pamphlets, and Zapata-related artwork as referenced by Gallo (60-62). The pathway to the luxury portrayed by Rossell appears obscured, frustrating the "media-commercial"

aspect of this narrative that might allow those enticed by what they see to detect a way leading to the acquisition of the desired objects.

With the knowledge that many of the women pictured here are members of the PRI political family, the reader can make another and important contrast. In its branding, the PRI stresses the image of the family (Poniatowska 557). Nonetheless, Rossell's images move in an opposite direction. In them, we see only isolated individuals. Fathers are absent. Children are alone and fit awkwardly within the photographic frame while the women are not portrayed as mothers and wives. They are commodified and sexualized. Snapshots within the photographs provide further evidence that this image of the family is not just an act for the camera, but an outlook that Rossell shares with these women thanks to her collaboration with them. The few pictures present in the background do not show families; rather they offer the viewer isolated portraits, except in Lyn May's photo (Rossell, *Ricas* 125-26), but she is one of truly famous and is an exception that proves the rule. This is also the case for pictures of women with friends or boyfriends. The only family photo pictured is devoid of men (Rossell *Ricas* 99-100). Genealogy is blurred. Families are disjointed. The images of rampant consumerism of the ultra-rich also promotes individualism and isolation in its aesthetic. Hence, confronted with a reality so removed from the visual politics used by the government, it not surprising that concerned observers subjected the images to harsh criticism. Rossell's truth claims regarding the ultra-wealthy in Mexico simply presented images that contradicted official visual (and verbal) rhetoric associated with the political party. If the viewing public had previously assumed that political leaders committed the moral sin of acquiring "wealth without work", the photographer and her truth claims regarding her images offer the viewers a smoking gun and reinforce the moral position of those that contemplate this visual essay (Sontag, *On Photography* 17).

THE SUBLIME AND ITS MISAPPROPRIATION, THE INTIMATE, AND GENERAL MEXICAN AESTHETIC

One repeated element that has gone unexplored by the critics and by Rossell in their discussions regarding *Ricas y Famosas* are the overt references to religion or religious icons in this narrative. Bearing in mind the essay's focus on the exotic Other discussed earlier, it is wise to note that much of the aesthetic of these homes has very little reference to Mexico itself (aside from the people who pose or are captured at work in the photos). One clear exception are the many references to religion and religious articles. In his essay, Gallo briefly refers to this aspect of the aesthetic by describing it as "Catholicism run amok" (57). Looking closer, the visual strategy of the

repeated use of religion or religious objects can be divided into three areas: general Mexican aesthetic, references to the intimate and the personal, and misappropriation of rituals.

In *Ricas y Famosas*, the use of religious objects can simply be decoration. One example of this is a rosary worn by the woman on pages forty-seven and forty-eight as she looks from her rooftop jacuzzi out onto central Mexico City. Another is the large crucifix earring worn by the woman who contemplates the large number of hunting trophies (Rossell, *Ricas* 105-06), (fig. 3). This type of jewelry with religious reference is worn widely in Mexico and throughout other countries that profess Christianity. On the one hand, it could be interpreted as a way in which the women adopt styles that cut across Mexican society as, when used as intended, it is an object of devotion within the Catholic tradition. On the other, the fact that the huge rosary is worn by an overtly seductive woman, could be viewed as sacrilegious; or the small cross, in contrast to the big game animals in figure 3, could be read as symbolic in terms of how the religious objects shrink in comparison to worldly material possessions in Rossell's narrative.

Other religious objects that also are objects of devotion within the Catholic tradition (i.e., crosses on walls and images of the Virgin of Guadalupe) appear to demarcate the bedroom or other intimate spaces. A ubiquitous and long-standing tradition in Mexico, crosses or images of the Virgin on the walls of the bedroom are an overt reference to the intimate spaces captured by Rossell in her photo essay, such as the one in which we find a woman provocatively dressed with a Virgin of Guadalupe and an Oscar statue behind her (Rossell *Ricas* 37-38). The contrast between the Oscar statue and the Virgin of Guadalupe has already been noted by Martin Camps who argues that such contrasts should not be considered unusual in the homes of the ultra-wealthy (169). The combination of references to Hollywood and the Catholic saint speaks volumes about the interests of the interior designer. To that, I add that the representation of Mary is a clear sign that we are in the bedroom and not some other room in the home. The same can be said for figure 5, in which a door that is slightly open in the background of the photograph reveals a cross on the wall above a bed, or the crucifixes or Virgin Mary images found in figure 2. These references are the small but ubiquitous manifestations of *Mexicanness* within this visual narrative that foregrounds luxury and excess. These are the elements within the visual essay that anchor the narrative to a specific geographic location, much more than the women featured (many of which, like television personalities in Mexico, have a narrow range of aesthetic in look and context, as Mark Pedelty and others have argued when writing about national Mexican television).

Several photos evidence the presence of religion in the private space and lives of the individuals portrayed. These feature chapels, one improvised in the garden space of a home and another a chapel that forms a physical part of the home, both apparently for the purposes of private worship. Rossell captures other rituals in these spaces that suggest a consumerist ideology at work. Let us consider them to show how these young women distance themselves from the viewer. They feature two photographs of a group of four women, and the girls are in an outdoor chapel that has been prepared for Mass (Rossell *Ricas* 13-16). The first picture features them in dresses that suggest that their outfits have been coordinated for whatever role they might play during an event that will take place there. These four girls pose as if they were models in front of the altar. Their over-the-shoulder poses that allow their gaze to directly engage with the viewer suggest that they and their attire should be the center of attention. We are the audience looking at the women who obscure the altar where the normal ritual would take place. The next photo shows the same four women from the other side of the altar as the camera occupies the place of the priest who officiates. We observe that they are alone in the chapel. The photograph captures them consuming the host, while a chalice with liquid that might be sacramental wine shares the frame as well. A picture of the Pope from that time, John Paul II, lies casually on the table on the edge of the photograph. The women do not wait for Communion to happen in the traditional fashion. They take it upon themselves to officiate their own ritual in which Holy Communion is consumed in a manner that is reminiscent of children raiding a cookie jar: grabbing multiple wafers and filling their mouth with them. A single detail, the addition of a ring on the finger of the girl in center focus, has been added to this woman's attire. This detail is noteworthy because it is the only visible difference in the attire of the four women between the two photographs which appears to have taken place in the same photo session. The centrally located ring emphasizes the foregrounding of wealth and ostentation in this performance, underlining one of the core elements of this visual narrative – one with which the concerned observer would not empathize.

Another ritual featured is of a more jarring nature. In this photograph, we have what appears to possibly be one of the same girls featured from the earlier pictures already mentioned. She is in a private chapel in one of the homes featured. In it, we see all the basic elements that feature in a standard room of worship of this kind: an altar, religious decoration that includes a Bible, sacramental cups, a crucifix, a Santo Niño de Atocha, a Virgin of Guadalupe, pews for prayer and contemplation, others for sitting, and so forth. In front of the finely constructed main altar, a woman wearing heavy

makeup and a dressing gown made of a fabric that features 100-dollar bills is sitting cross-legged on the floor. She oversees another ritual. The woman smiles broadly as she supervises the active copulation of two dachshunds (another partially hidden one peers out from behind her). As she watches over the consummation of the canines' carnal desires, the overt references to consumerism in the clothing worn and the actions of those participating in this ritual are unmistakable. While the four girls in the previously mentioned photograph posed in a way that highlights their derriere, flaunting their sexuality in a religious setting, the poses within this photograph could be read as a type of pet pornography that takes place in a location where the viewer might least expect it, adding a sacrilegious connotation to the event. It is a hymn that sings to the replacement of the rituals of the sublime with the physical or the carnal, and it underlines with greater emphasis the red-light aesthetic already described by Rossell ("Female territories"), focusing on consumption. This puts it at odds with the sublime. Such direct criticism via the desecration of the shared sacred, perhaps one of the few areas that cross-sections Mexican society, suggests a rejection of this common bond and alienates the viewer as in other parts of this visual narrative.

CONCLUSION

Regarding the Pain of Others suggests that we often look at suffering to experience it and then feel less bad. Pictures can provide a cathartic experience for the viewer that make the reality portrayed more real for the viewer (Sontag *On Photography* 20). However, Rossell's photographs have not provided this experience for most spectators. There is no suffering to behold, only unexplained luxury with little apparent history or suggested pathway of acquisition of wealth or power. For all but a few, this is an unfamiliar and somewhat bizarre Mexico; a place that invites concerned observation more than voyeurism. It is a Mexico that is not normally captured by its renowned photographers (foreign or national). This uniqueness is what makes this visual essay rare and valuable. It is what invites an alternate application of Sontag's ideas that teach us via luxury instead of pain. Because the book portrays an extreme version of Mexico, one could argue that Mexico is poorly represented, or not at all. Its sacred is profaned. Women are objectified either as servants or objects to be possessed or carnally consumed. When Rossell encouraged her viewers to search out the truth her photos contain, what they encountered was a bitter pill to swallow and a valuable lesson on the power of photography to provoke certain reactions through specific contexts and aesthetics.[11]

Rubén Gallo's review of the storm of criticism that followed the publication of *Ricas y Famosas* suggested that it played out in accordance to Rossell's prediction: over time, the strong backlash against this unique book would eventually quiet down. As we reflect upon the narrative and its effects, it is key to remember that Rossell's own wealth and privilege allowed her exclusive glimpses offering unique insights into the lives of the rich.[12] This specific collaboration documented the lives of the rich in a way that has long been familiar to, namely, a more intimate portrayal that does not favor the wealthy. It is possible that, because Rossell belonged to the same class as her subjects, that facilitated the display of a more playful side, revealing aspects that were less than flattering to the individuals documented. Photography scholar and historian John Mraz's observations on how the rich are photographed remind us of the singularity of Rossell's representation: "it is very difficult to photograph the Mexican upper classes in any other way than as they want it done" (218). The photographs in this book suggest that Rossell had enough of their trust to allow them to do something different because she documented a side of their life that she has labeled to be true to reality and is very different from the norm. What does this reality reveal? The physical surroundings and context uncover an abundance of space, material goods, and a focus on the faraway Other from the Global South that references servitude, exclusivity, and the exotic. The women themselves evidence solitude, sexuality, and a disconnection from both their national social surroundings as well as the source of their wealth. Religious iconography connects these women and their environment to Mexico as well as identifying their intimate spaces. Nonetheless, spaces of religious ritual are also used in ways that suggest a disregard for Mexican tradition and a disconnect from their national context, as they are replaced by other rituals more closely connected to self-gratification. As we consider the impact of *Ricas y Famosas*, it is worth noting that the book generated a cultural impact, but there have been no reports that this caused the subjects to be portrayed as losing their power or wealth. This reminds the reader that "like sexual voyeurism, [photographing] is a way of at least tacitly, often explicitly, encouraging whatever is going on to keep happening" (Sontag, *On Photography* 12). The status quo is maintained.

Sontag's writings predict the reactions to *Ricas y Famosas*. At the time of their appearance Rossell's photographs did "turn the tables on reality" (Sontag, *On Photography* 120); however, just as Sontag reminds us "the shock of seeing suffering eventually wears off" (20), so did the reactions towards material excess fade. However, in his analysis Gallo reminds us that the effect took longer to wear off than the photographer initially predicted (56), suggesting that their impact was greater than Rossell had thought. The

changing nature of the place of the PRI party in Mexican politics in recent years suggests that the tide is shifting. In the face of such changes, Rossell's images become a symbol, a history, and a present as well as a foretelling in the initial critical reactions associated to it.

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NOTES

1 This essay also explores how the photographs explore homoeroticism.
2 As evident in Gallo's review and contextual work, critical reactions to the book emphasized that many photographed profited from new wealth generated by political power.
3 An Argentine *telenovela* by a similar title, *Ricos y famosos* (1997-1998), aired during the same time in which this photo narrative was created, and focused on rich people who did not deserve their position in society, but this telenovela was not openly circulated in Mexico and Daniela Rossell was not aware of it at the time ("Communication with Nathanial Gardner").
4 Examples include actress Lyn May (Lilia Mendiola Mayanez) and the singer Daniela Magún.
5 There are certain themes that the scholar could explore regarding the role of the men in the essay; the ghostly representation of men would be one example.
6 Lighting and camera angles appear to have been chosen by the photographer.
7 Fredrick Lewis Donaldson coined these phrases, but they were promoted by Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi (Woolever 10-12).
8 It is unclear if these new articles are fictional or not. A search for the articles in the newspaper decorations do not turn up any of the articles featured in the photograph.
9 This photo could be viewed as an epilogue, as it is separate from the main body of the photo essay.
10 For example, Carlos Espejel's *The Nelson A. Rockefeller Collection of Mexican Folk Art* documents the Rockefeller family's interest in Mexican art.
11 Since the publication of *Ricas y Famosas*, another photographer, Anna Skladmann, created a book, *Little Adults*, that appears to be inspired by Rossell's project and is based on the lives of the ultra-wealthy in Russia.
12 This is something that she has never denied. During an interview at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, the interviewer asked Rossell if she had ever run out of money and she responded to the question in the negative, twice (Brian).

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ANEXOS

Figure 1. Daniela Rossell
Untitled (*Ricas y Famosas*), 1999
C-print
50"x 60"

Courtesy of the artist and Greene Naftali, New York.

Figure 2. Daniela Rossell
Untitled (*Ricas y Famosas*), 1999
C-print
50"x 60"

Courtesy of the artist and Greene Naftali, New York.

Figure 3. Daniela Rossell
Untitled (*Ricas y Famosas*), 1999
C-print
50"x 60"

Courtesy of the artist and Greene Naftali, New York.

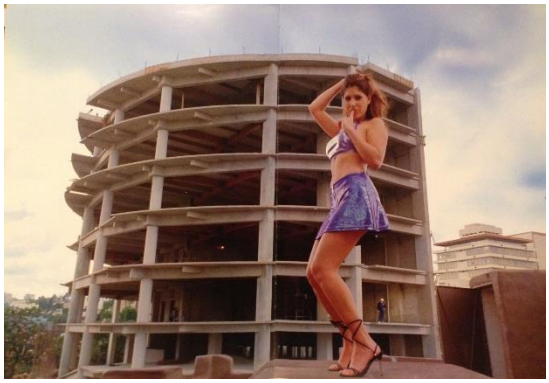

Figure 4. Daniela Rossell
Untitled (*Ricas y Famosas*), 1999
C-print
50"x 60"

Courtesy of the artist and Greene Naftali, New York.

Figure 5. Daniela Rossell
Untitled (*Ricas y Famosas*), 1999
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