

Women on the Verge: Vida Yovanovich's Prison Photographs/ Elizabeth Ferrer

Many of the photographs in Vida Yovanovich's series on imprisoned women depict a single woman inhabiting the picture frame, often absorbed in anxious thought or simply enduring the banality of yet another day. One of the starkest images, however, presents two women, their bodies compartmentalized by the concrete bunk bed they share. The young woman reclining on the upper bunk peers directly at the photographer, unconcerned by her presence. The other has brought her hand to her cheek, as if to express dismay at the situation in which she finds herself. It is these disparate sensibilities that characterize the subjects who gave rise to this powerful body of work. On the one hand, there are the women who forthrightly submit themselves to the camera's penetrating gaze. Some flaunt their bodies, show off a gaudy piece of clothing, or peer defiantly into the camera. These are outnumbered, however, by those who bow their heads, cover their faces, or perform some other act that represents a negation of the self. In prison, condemned by society and even more painfully, rejected by families, maintaining a firm sense of one's value becomes a tenuous proposition at best.

Yovanovich has long dedicated her oeuvre to an exploration of women's lives and identities. Female prisoners became the focus of her attention in the late 1990s when she realized that it was a subject to which she was being ineluctably drawn. Yovanovich has spoken of recognizing a need at this point in her career to pursue this project, regardless of the difficulties she might encounter. As a result of the sensibilities she has brought to her earlier work – both as an artist and as a humanist – it was also clear that this was a project for which she was ideally prepared. By habit, she works slowly, becoming involved in the lives of her subjects long before taking a single photograph. Upon entering the various prisons to which she gained access for this series, she spent time getting to know the women, learning about their backgrounds and families, and understanding the typically complex set of circumstances and decisions that brought them to this point in their lives. As a result of the close relationships that Yovanovich developed, the prisoners allowed her to capture truly revelatory moments, producing works that bespeak a sense of trust that the women placed in her, and she, in them.

The images comprising *Soledades Sonoras* also demonstrate that Yovanovich's usual artistic format – 35 mm black-and-white photography – is well suited for reflecting

the stark realities of prison life. The picture frame delineated by a standard camera lens can uncannily mirror the unrelenting sense of enclosure afforded by the constricted spaces in which the prisoners live. Scenes of open, expansive space are wholly absent in these works, and only a handful of photographs allow a glimpse of sky. By necessity, Yovanovich depicted the women at close range. In fact, rarely could she sufficiently distance herself from her subjects to picture their entire bodies. Instead, the picture frames are often crowded, frequently dominated by the bunks that are their sole personal spaces. The prisoners' faces are often only half visible, obscured by shadows and by the murky light that illuminates their claustrophobic spaces. Most poignantly, they are shown literally enframed by metal bars, their bodies fragmented and their faces crossed by shadows. With such modes of portrayal, these photographs function as apt metaphors for the dual conditions that define their lives – marginalization and alienation.

As Yovanovich's photographs portray, the women make do with little. Material life is stripped to bare essentials – a mattress or bunk, a few articles of clothing, and a small table or shelf to store personal possessions. Their cells, if decorated at all, contain images of Christ or the Virgin Mary and occasionally, posters of muscular men. Indeed, the women appear to be either unable, or unwilling, to infuse even a modicum of domestic warmth in these austere surroundings. But some of the women, especially younger ones, have turned to their bodies as sites of adornment and creative expression. They freely bare breasts and stomachs, revealing tattoos of birds and other animals, or initials of loved ones. One woman pulls down her shirt to display a dark spider web emblazoned over one breast; another shows a large sun radiating around her navel. For these women, the tattoo becomes a means of distinguishing the one sphere that is truly their own, of visually asserting difference and individuality.

The preoccupation with the body that is seen repeatedly in such photographs hints at a larger theme, the frank sexuality that permeates the day-to-day life of female prisoners. With little to do and nowhere to go, the women are often in a state of half-dress. Some exhibit their bodies or hold up a piece of underwear, as if to use one of the few means at hand to express their femininity. Many demonstrate an uninhibited absorption in the physical body, whether their own or others'. Women hold up their breasts for the photographer, pose provocatively in lacy underwear, or with their pants

pulled down. In several images, Yovanovich depicts furtive moments of intimacy between women, suggesting relationships of mutual solace and support. She speaks, however, of the fierce jealousies that typically characterize such relations. Ultimately, the closed life of a couple may offer nearly as much loneliness as that of a woman who chooses to live in solitude.

These photographs reveal the women's lives to be at turns humiliating, lonely, and monotonous. Among all of the images, most striking are the close ups of faces and the emotions they lay bare. Many of Yovanovich's subjects seem to possess an air of exhaustion, despite the fact that little activity occupies their daily lives.¹ If some stare blankly into the camera (simultaneously disclosing everything and nothing), for others, the camera seems to act as a trigger that unleashes the deepest of emotions, as if a single expression could summarize the abject quality of their lives. Especially among the older women, their faces display less the sharp pain of anger and loss than of psyches blunted by years of unremitting isolation and impotence.

In conceptualizing this body of work, Yovanovich wanted her subjects to play an active role in their representation. This certainly takes place in the photographs. Whether or not they directly interact with the camera, they were fully aware of her presence, gave permission to be photographed, and contributed in one way or another to the mode in which they were portrayed. Another key aspect of the project, the oral testimonies that loosely accompany the photographs, provided the women with an even more direct level of self-representation. Early on, Yovanovich found that many were eager to share their stories with her. She eventually recorded hundreds of hours of tape that repeatedly chronicle accounts of alcoholism, drug addiction, broken families, violent husbands, and children left behind. The women also spoke of their outlooks on life:

*"I won't accept I'm human scum... I am not! You know what I am? I'm like a butterfly. Only at this moment, for whatever reason, who just happens to be in captivity."*²

And another:

"... I got to the limit. I would ask myself all the time, how I had been able to get so low, to let myself be trampled over so much by that man. And I started hating him... I don't know what happened to me, I lost control and

I did it. And until I saw him dead, I couldn't stop beating him. It's terrible to carry the weight of the dead, it really is. I'm really sorry... But now, everything is hopeless.”³

Such stories led Yovanovich to present *Soledades Sonoras* in the form of an installation that combines images and spoken words. Significantly, the voices that fill the exhibition space are the women's own. As experienced in the installation, the stories do not narrate specific images; rather, they exist side by side to illuminate varied aspects of complicated histories.⁴ In hearing the women speak, most striking is the sense of circularity conveyed, of cycles of poverty, violence, and addictions that move with fierce inevitability from one generation to the next.

“... And the truth is, my parents are in prison too. And, well, I go see them, right? I go see them and it's really tough, right? ... Having my whole family locked up ... And I'm doing the best I can, really. I want to go out and help them. I think they didn't learn from someone else's mistakes, they had to learn from their own, because, well, the truth is, my whole family is addicted, right?”⁵

In discussing this work, Yovanovich notes that her primary goal is not to photograph the life of women in prison. Rather, she underscores her broader project of photographing women, regardless of their specific circumstances. This fact is more fully understood by reviewing her work of the last two decades. In the mid 1980s she began a body of photographs that culminated in the 1997 publication, *Cárcel de los Sueños* (Prison of Dreams). The majority of the book is devoted to Yovanovich's unflinching portrayals of fragile, elderly women at the end of their lives. She pictured them in the confines of a home for the aged, where they pass each day slowly, trapped in nearly useless bodies and ultimately, lost in their thoughts and memories. Yovanovich devoted the book's last pages to a series of dream-like self-portraits made in the same home, thus casting this meditation on old age as the artist's frank confrontation with her own mortality. In other bodies of work she has photographed young girls, mothers, and women at varied stages of life. Yovanovich herself points out that her oeuvre is

permeated with representations of abandonment, enclosure, and the passage of time, themes that find their apogee in her studies of the incarcerated.

Yovanovich's broader interest in representing women also denotes a creative intent that goes beyond that of the traditional documentarian. While *Soledades Sonoras* shows us numerous scenes that detail institutionalized life, her primary aim is not to narrate a story or to gather facts that would objectively illustrate this aspect of society. Yovanovich's deeper motivation is to evocatively capture the essence of individuals she has come to know, to illuminate the character of their humanity. These images reflect an intense and trusting photographer-subject relationship, one in which the camera becomes a remarkable witness to a realm that is often sensationalized, and more often, simply ignored. The artist's gift is in to extend that relation outward to embrace the spectator. But in doing so Yovanovich denies us the possibility of neutrality. Ultimately, we must decide whether we view the imprisoned as existing far outside and unrelated to our experience, or, if we identify something of ourselves in figures that embody life at its most precarious, most vulnerable.

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Endnotes

¹ Only a small percentage of inmates work at prison jobs that pay extremely low wages. Some women knit or produce other items of *artesanía* that they attempt to sell to outsiders and a few, especially those in urban prisons, pursue educational opportunities. For the rest, life is taken up with personal chores and simply passing time.

² Stated by Rocio, 35 years old, 12-year sentence. Yovanovich wishes to protect the identities of her speakers, so only first names are given here.

³ Stated by Refugio, not yet sentenced at time of her interview with Yovanovich.

⁴ In the installation, both images and audio recordings are presented as random loops. Visitors who enter the projection space at distinct times will see different sets of photographs projected on a wall and will hear different selections of testimonies.

⁵ Stated by Tea, 23 years old, 6-year sentence.