

# The New York Times



## Pulp Nonfiction, Ripped From the Tabloids

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Published: December 21, 2006

Enrique Metinides photographed his first dead body before he was 12. It was as if he had caught a fever, because after that he couldn't stop. For years while he slept he kept his radio in Mexico City tuned to emergency stations so that he could be awakened by the latest news of disaster. He would often throw on his clothes and rush into the night to see yet another car wreck or fire or murder.

He found a cornucopia of gore: suicides, jumpers, accidental electrocutions and exploding gas tanks. (In that case petty thieves drove off from the pumps with the hose still inside their car.) We feel somehow we shouldn't gawk. But how can we not?

So we do. We stare at the mangled corpses and at the crowds who stare back into Mr. Metinides's camera, which means they stare at us. The cycle of voyeurism is complete.

Mexico's Weegee, as he's often called, Mr. Metinides, now 72, worked from the 1940s into the early '90s, when he retired. His *métier* was Mexico City's "nota roja," the grisly pages. He shot for pulp magazines and mostly for the newspaper *La Prensa*, making visual sense out of urban mayhem and life's general unpredictability.

These days, when the art world adopts and commodifies everything, Mr. Metinides has become something of a darling as his photographs have made the rounds of museums in Europe and galleries in the United States. Not that he claims to be an artist. But the art is there in his pictures, rough and plain as day.

A few dozen of them are now at Anton Kern in Chelsea. Like all compelling tabloid photojournalism, they provide not solace or uplift but guilty pleasure and a bit of knowledge in the face of the inexplicable. One minute you are boarding a bus; the next it slams into a tram. Or a small plane falls out of the sky.

Or the body of a teenage boy floats at the bottom of a public swimming pool into which he had jumped, naked, off the high board, breaking his neck. Mr. Metinides's black-and-white shot of the corpse suspended underwater, just above the murky pool floor, has the otherworldly quality of those grainy photographs astronauts sent from the moon.

There is never a humane reason for what has happened, only a visual logic. The body of Jesús Bazaldua Barber, a worker electrocuted by 60,000 volts installing a phone line at the top of a telephone pole, dangles backward like Jesus in a Deposition. A small boy, prone on a stretcher in the Red Cross emergency room after having been run over, prays with his arm upraised, so that he recalls the child throwing a ball into the air, face skyward as if in ecstasy, in the classic Cartier-Bresson photograph from Spain.

Sometimes there's compassion too. But not too much, because it might become maudlin. When a dressmaker named Bertha Ibarra García discovered that her estranged husband had taken their daughter to live with him and his lover, she sought out the tallest tree in Chapultepec Park and hanged herself from it, leaving behind a note, saying nobody was to blame, in a handbag slung over her shoulder.

The photograph shows her at a discreet distance (a big difference from Weegee, the American ambulance chaser and celebrity hound, who loved the glare of the flashbulb close-up); the picture stresses the tree, light dappled and in silhouette on a quiet, sunny afternoon. The dead woman does not instantly register. When she does, her head turned as if calmly gazing up into the branches, she looks as if she were out for a Sunday stroll, until you notice the white rope.

You can tell Mr. Metinides loves detective movies. It's often said that his photographs look like film stills: that they must be posed because they're so unreal. Once he arrived in the back of an ambulance at a supermarket where the police were in the middle of a shootout with robbers. The photograph he took looks like something out of "Dog Day Afternoon." Truth is we feel we can hardly distinguish what's real from what's not anymore because we don't trust photographs, and because artists have had a field day staging them.

That beautiful woman with her arm draped just so over a bent streetlamp, her face passive, open-eyed, with a delicate trickle of blood that matches her lipstick, can't really be dead, can she? She must be an actress.

Actually she is an actress: Adela Legarreta Rivas, who was struck on Avenida Chapultepec one April day in 1979 by a white Datsun. There's the car in the background, in the middle of the street, its side crumpled like paper. Mr. Metinides's picture looks too good to be true (if "good" can describe such a horrible accident), except that it isn't. It's surreal because life is.

There are also echoes of 9/11 in pictures like the one of a glass office tower: a Red Cross worker cajoles a woman who wants to leap from a window on the 27th floor of the Torre Latinoamericana. Another photograph, of someone slumped on the ground, grieving over her dead boyfriend, after he was just stabbed by robbers, looks like innumerable pictures from Baghdad.

We react to these images with curiosity and the unease of identification. They aren't war scenes. War photographers show agony to shock sympathetic viewers into action. The art critic John Berger described this dynamic as the discrepancy between what we see in these pictures and our own (more fortunate) condition.

But Mr. Metinides shoots accidents and random violence, not war, and fate is merely absurd. It can undo us any time, a fact that is best conveyed, visually speaking, coolly. Mr. Metinides discovered, for example, that a corpse is best photographed from near to the ground so that the trail of blood registers not as a shiny red pool, as it does when a photographer stands close-up and stares down, but as a wavy line of meandering liquid.

He also learned that using a daylight flash fills in shadows and creates a filmic effect, and that a wide-angle lens let him include rubbernecks.

And that subtlety is possible even in the most grotesque circumstance. It takes a second to note the emotional punch line in his shot of a young man weeping on the shoulder of an older man in a sombrero. A second young man, dazed, stands stiffly beside them. In the foreground two policemen, one turned away from the camera, the other facing forward and barely inside the picture, frame the main protagonists.

Who knows what's going on? It doesn't matter. The picture works once you recognize that there's another man barely sandwiched between the dazed one and a policeman. In profile his face is a sliver of open mouth and grimacing eyes.

It's cruel to say, but in Mr. Metinides's world his suffering becomes our reward.