



HEROES: ENRIQUE METINIDES

ENRIQUE METINIDES SHOT THE GRUESOME ACCIDENTS AND MURDERS OF MEXICO CITY FOR NEARLY FIFTY YEARS. THE PICTURES OF THIS MEXICAN TRAGEDY PHOTOGRAPHER TELL LESS ABOUT THE DEAD THAN ABOUT THOSE WATCHING FROM THE SIDELINES

If you believe everything you read, Enrique Metinides shot his first dead body when he was 12 years old. This is not exactly true. “I would like to clarify that I took my first photo at the age of 11,” Metinides, now in his 70s, stated recently in an interview from his home in Mexico City. He added, for the record: “I started with a box camera, and took pictures of accidents and collected them. My father had a restaurant where the policemen usually went to have lunch. They invited me to the police station where there were people who had been arrested and also a corpse. The murderers had put the dead body on the train tracks so the train would sever the neck. This scene took the fear out of me, so I could continue to look at these kinds of images for the next fifty years.”

For many of those fifty years, Metinides was the most renowned *nota roja* (red, or “bloody” press) photographer in Mexico City, with daily newspapers like *La Prensa* publishing some forty of his pictures each week, many in the coveted spots on the front and back pages. In the United States, Britney Spears fumbling her newborn child may be our idea of a train wreck waiting to happen, but the Mexican tabloid press feeds off the more anonymous tragedies that punctuate our daily existence—its audience is insatiable and not terribly picky as to the nature of the catastrophe. In a book of Metinides’s collected photographs spanning from the ’50s through the

early '90s, there are scores of overturned buses and derailed trains. Small planes land where they are not supposed to, like on the top of a house or on a busy highway, or nose-down in a field. There are photos of people who have been hit by cars or stabbed or shot in the head or electrocuted, and one of a man who is attempting to jump from the top of Torero Stadium 40 meters to the ground below because, he said, "he wanted to see what death felt like."

In Metinides's world, death feels as arbitrary as life. Disaster is around every corner, but it always seems to be happening to somebody else while we stand around and watch. And we are not alone. In many of the photographs, large crowds of people have gathered around the scene of the accident. They are climbing onto the wreckage of a train, peering through the fractured window of a smashed car. But they are not looking at the woman and her lifeless child, or the man with the knife in his gut. They are staring into the photographer's lens. They are staring at us. And in that sense, Metinides's pictures are less about death than they are about our own fascination with it.

Metinides often approached an accident or crime scene as if he were making a movie in still pictures, starting with the façade then methodically working his way, frame-by-frame, to the victim. Get him going on the subject of cinematography and you find he was raised on old-fashioned cops-and-robbers movies. There is an Al Capone film from the '30s that he particularly likes to talk about, especially the part where the gangster drops off a bomb on the doorstep of a liquor store after the owner refuses to pay protection money. "The next scene is the building burning, the firemen have arrived, ambulances," Metinides says. "The scene I like the most, even if it is in black and white, is where we see all the onlookers and the reflection of the flames that illuminate people's faces. With this scene, I realized that the onlooker is very important, that it has the main role in any situation."

Metinides himself was rarely just a spectator, and he was not immune to the conflict of interest inherent in his chosen line of work. He was trained in first aid, and rode to the scenes of the accidents with ambulance drivers and Red Cross rescue workers. (Occasionally, he said, the car he was riding in crashed en route.) Once, at the scene of a burning building, Metinides turned his back to signal to firemen for help as a person jumped from the thirteenth floor. The jumper died, and to add insult to injury, Metinides missed the shot. He regrets this, of course (as did his editor at the paper), but he says he has never thought twice when it came to helping someone. "Once, I was in a Red Cross ambulance with a person who had been stabbed," he recalled. "I realized that he was suffocating. I took him and helped him to sit and put my back against his. He spat up and all my clothes were covered with blood, but this gesture saved his life, and he thanked me." Pretty much the only photo that smacks of heroism in the book is one of Metinides carrying an injured child away from an accident. It's the only photo in the book Metinides didn't take.

Metinides stopped shooting professionally in 1993, after he was told that the paper could no longer afford his salary. He now mostly stays at home, cataloguing recorded video footage of live accidents from television for a personal archive that no one will ever see. Still, in the past few years the audience for his photos has only grown. His work has been exhibited in London and Rotterdam, and he had his first solo gallery show in the U.S. last spring, at Blum and Poe in Los Angeles. Metinides, it seems, has been offered a small piece of the immortality that eludes the rest of us. He knows not to make too much of this, though. He has had far too many opportunities to contemplate his own death. His pictures, he insists, have nothing to teach us about fate. "One thing I am sure of," he says, "is that I will never die in a plane crash, because I never take planes." Alix Browne

Above: Untitled (Intento fallido de suicida, desde el piso 27 de la Torre Latinoamericana), 1993 (Red Crossworker Manuel Hernandez Martinez prevents Guadalupe N. Guzman from leaping off the 27th floor of the Torre Latinoamericana. Mexico City, December 2, 1993)

Courtesy the artist; Blum & Poe, Los Angeles; and kurimanzutto, Mexico City

Photography Enrique Metinides