

Hernease Davis ([00:10](#)):

Hello and welcome back to the Project Space, a podcast featuring some of the remarkable artists who have participated in the project space residency here at the Visual Studies Workshop in Rochester, New York. I am Hernease Davis. I'm a photo-based artist and an assistant curator here at VSW. The Project Space Residency has served regional, national and international artists for many years, providing a studio space and access to VSW facilities. In this episode, I spoke with Eduardo Rivera. Eduardo came to the residency as a Rochester-based photo artist and was nearing the end of a two year appointment as visiting faculty at the Rochester Institute of Technology. Eduardo grew up in Phoenix, Arizona, and his photographs often feature his loved ones. We spoke about how the residency and particular aspects of Rochester's weather gave him much needed space and perspective to parse through nuances within his own images. During our conversation, we referenced a number of photographs, which you can find on Eduardo's website. That link is in the show notes. Now, without further ado...

Eduardo Rivera ([01:24](#)):

Hi, I'm Eduardo Rivera. I'm from Phoenix, Arizona, and I was a Project Space resident in March of 2023. And my work is essentially this, I guess I can call it a love letter to home. I've been photographing my family and community for about a decade close to the US Mexico border. I've been thinking about the personal and political histories that ripple through my childhood home. And my practice - my photographs at least - tend to depict fragments of the quotidian and use visual traditions like portraiture, still life and landscape to negotiate these poetics held in the everyday. And through this frequent return, throughout the last 10 years, I've thought about ideas of time, belonging, and the significance of light as threads woven throughout the fabric of my work.

Hernease Davis ([02:28](#)):

Can you say that last part again? "The significance of ..."

Eduardo Rivera ([02:31](#)):

The significance of time, belonging, - ideas of time, belonging, and the significance of light as threads woven throughout the fabric of my work.

Hernease Davis ([02:41](#)):

Okay. All right. I'm just going to write that down because I kind of jogs my memory about a conversation that we had in your Project space, So that's great. Okay, so before we get into that, can you talk about how did you come to even apply for your Project Space residency?

Eduardo Rivera ([02:58](#)):

Yeah. So first moved to Rochester a couple years ago to teach at RIT, but the idea of Rochester has sort of lived with me for as long as, I mean, I guess the last 10 to 12 years. My undergrad professor, Mark Klett, he instructed us, as well as a professor, William Jenkins, talked fondly about Rochester. William Jenkins was a curator of The New Topographics, and I believe worked at the Eastman, but Mark Klett specifically went for his MFA here at VSW. So all of this was just planted in my brain and when I first moved here, I'm like, wow, I'm in Rochester because I heard about it so much as an undergrad and being from Phoenix, I'm like, I don't know what Rochester is. It was just so removed. It's on the completely opposite side of the country and in all aspects. So when I first moved here, just wanted to be connected

to a community and yeah, did the sort of typical survey of where I can find my space and heard a lot about VSW through grads and undergrads and faculty at RIT and knew about it of course already.

[\(04:13\)](#):

But when I saw that the Project Space residency was, the application was coming up, I'm like, I'd love to apply. I didn't have a studio here in town, so I was using an additional room space to make my work and print and sequence and edit and all those good things. But my work typically lives at a large size. I'm photographing with large format cameras and I want to make large prints because there's that sort of relationship you have when you approach a photograph that's human size or just a large size for you to look at and observe and walk through the image. I love that experience, and so that's why shooting with large format is important to me, but more so printing those images and having those live in a space was equally as important. So when I was selected, I'm like, let's do it. I was pumped. I was pumped because all of those, I think it was about six, well, this happened this year, so it had been a solid year, year and a half where I didn't have a studio. And so throughout that time I had made a bunch of photographs back in Arizona and I was just scanning them and printing them and just keeping them in my apartment.

Hernease Davis [\(05:29\)](#):

So when you finally get to a space where you can actually spread out, what happened there? Where you're able to get into the project space, the ceilings are very high, there's quite a bit of wall space as well. And since you hadn't been able to print or even see these images at a large scale, what did it mean for you and the work to be able to look at a four by six, choose it and then see it at that size?

Eduardo Rivera [\(05:59\)](#):

At that size? Yeah, I think it was just a part of that processing and trying to just understand the works some more. I come from this school of thought of trying not to impose too much on the photographs before I make them. I mean, I tend to have a concept or an idea, and maybe it's like a parameter of I'm going to make photographs, I dunno, on my block or a family or these sort of overarching themes. Those parameters help. But when I'm making the photographs, I try not to let that filter in too much. I try to be guided by, I dunno, intuition since I'm working with a larger camera, there's a lot of that, that preplanning that you think would go into it. But I often would use it in sort of similar to a medium format. I mean not physically, but just trying to work with intuition and just sort of this quick interaction with the space and guided by light and sort of texture.

[\(06:59\)](#):

And with portraits, I'm often working with family, but then also when I'm out photographing in the community, I am sort guided by interaction, this sort of air of the space. So that was sort of the process of making the photographs and when I would see them, that's when I would go through this whole process of trying to figure out what they meant or at least what they were doing, looking at the form of the photograph. And I think form is also a big part of that because at a smaller size, I think they do something, whether if it's in an installation, for instance, because I did have a variation of large images, but then there were smaller ones and then even pictures on the table all spread out over the table, those four by sixes. So you had the back and forth relationship between getting closer to the photograph, trying to look closer of if it's a family album photograph that's been scanned and you see sort of all the withered texture of it, or having to stand back from this 40 by 50 photograph of, like, my mom.

[\(08:02\)](#):

Yeah, I think the space just gave me the moments to explore that relationship of getting closer physically and conceptually or backing up, in both ways. So yeah, that hasn't always been a part of the way that I typically worked because I mentioned I haven't had a studio ever, and although I just would use spaces that I would live in and put things on the floor, I think that's why you saw so many prints on the floor. I was just used to throwing things on the floor. But yeah, there's something about when an image is on the floor, what does that do to the picture? What does that sort of speak to? And versus if something's high in the ceiling. So I'm curious about how folks sort of come into a space and interact. And even for myself, because I think it then sort of plants a seed of how I can use my practice in these metaphorical ways. I try to find a balance between photographing in this very politically dense space near the US Mexico border.

[\(09:10\)](#):

There's so much connotations attached to it, so much history in the land itself and physically embedded in the dirt. So that sort of idea has been something that's been really interesting to me. But then those sort of politically driven ideas, very heavy, sometimes didactic. And there's this whole tradition of documentary photography that I really appreciate. We talked about Latoya Ruby Frazier earlier, and she was a huge inspiration. Having not seen the work when I was making it when I was in my early twenties, maybe 19, 20, but at the time across the country, she was working on something very similar. So I don't know, it was just those moments of affirmation where I'm like, oh, people make work about family in this sort of documentary tradition, but then there's all this other room for metaphor, for possibility, for poetry that can happen in that too. And I think that sort of mirrored in how I attempted to install the photographs in the studio.

Hernease Davis [\(10:12\)](#):

Yeah, I think that's an interesting thing to think about because in thinking about borders, and I also think about this in terms of how people think about culture or even society that I think your work does a lot of that enmeshment. In my head is the word liminal, but I don't think that is an appropriate word to use for the work because I think liminal is still too either/or. And in talking about metaphor and poetry, I think the way that you title your works call attention to a lot of form, but also feeling and relationships and the images, especially when there are no human beings. And even thinking about the tradition of still life and documentary and even vernacular photography, that there are these wonderful details that you're able to call attention to that is about this, just observing how you just be and how you just are. And so I think even specifically coming from the border, it's an important thing to talk about in the US in terms of this idea of that there are even borders and what does a border even mean? So all that being said, I think about how you work with the relationship between your photographs. So whenever I came into your studio, you would call attention to, oh, I think I'm going to move this image of my uncle over here because it just feels more appropriate over here.

[\(11:55\)](#):

Or the image of my mom, I don't know if I'm going to keep this here, blah, blah, blah. I guess that's my question. How do you determine sequencing on the wall and even placement. So when you put something high up on the ceiling or leave something on the floor. I think that is important to think about in terms of what you're trying to accomplish with these photographs, what you're showing in terms of the nuances of relationships to a place.

Eduardo Rivera [\(12:21\)](#):

To go back to this idea of liminal and sort of the in-between that idea has been on my mind for a couple of years now. I went to this residency in Maine, the Skowhegan School of Painting and Sculpture, and such a formative moment for many reasons. But it was then where I used image and video and sound to kind of do something together, creating a small installation in my studio that allowed me to think about these spaces of in-between. And I think that that notion of in-between kind of functions on it can be this larger connotation of how folks live in space, but then going back to this metaphorical poetic understanding of what can the in-between sort of mean and without any answers, I'm just curious about that. And I think books are a big part of how I think about that in-between space. You can look at a spread and it can be a cluster of images, like a collage, and then you flip the page, and it could be a single photograph, a small image, but it's in those moments of transition, maybe that liminal moment where I feel there's some sort of magic that's carrying me over.

[\(13:41\)](#):

And when you're looking at an installation, I think sometimes we take it all in, especially if it's a bunch of large photographs, you'd step back and you're like, wow, this is a big piece. But when I'm thinking about sequencing on the wall, I mean, that's always a tough way to find myself because it's to find a rooting of that because it's creating a puzzle. You're like, I don't know what, it's trying to create a puzzle without understanding what the image is. And so there's a lot of moments where things feel like they fit and you give it a day or an hour or even a second and you're like, no, that has to move. And so that goes for books as well. So I didn't get to make as many books as I wanted in the residency, but I actually did. I made a small mockup, I don't know if you got to see it, but the mockup was just folded 11 by 17 sheets of paper.

Hernease Davis [\(14:34\)](#):

Yes. Yeah, I remember.

Eduardo Rivera [\(14:35\)](#):

And just clustered together. And those were family photographs that I had scanned and wanted to put it together and just sort of see how they functioned in this form, because I was so used to looking at pictures of family. We all do family albums or whatever. A lot of the pictures that I found from my family were sometimes kept in trunks of cars or I found some in the dirt, the backyard. I'm like, what is this doing out here? And so the weather interacted with that surface. The heat and the summers in Arizona get crazy.

[\(15:17\)](#):

There's this thing called a haboob, which is weird, but that's what it's actually called. And it's this sort of wall of dust that just takes over the entire city and there's rain attached to it, thunderstorms all these things, and that affects everything. Cars, houses, everything. And so something at that grand of a scale is there. But then there's also just the act of pictures buried in dirt, which has, I don't know, it does something really special. Not special, I don't know, because there's this whole archiving system that I think sometimes my family at least didn't follow. They're like, that's a picture. Great. And sometimes it would show up in the back of a car. But all of that said, that book were photographs that were re-scanned from family pictures that I'd found. Some were in good condition and others were sort of withered and weathered, and they had this whole new feeling to them.

[\(16:14\)](#):

I had this picture of my uncle, it was him in sort of this formal attire. I think it was right after my mom's quinceanera, the 15th birthday celebration. And he was dressed up, and it was this really beautiful

photograph that was made of him, I think, by someone who came in to take pictures of the event. And he's looking off to the side, it's sort of yellowed, I think, just over time. And his hairs slicked back, just a very beautiful portrait. And that one was found outside somehow, and the weather had completely altered his eyes and his head. And so it looked like it was just, I dunno, it just created this whole new understanding of what the picture can be based off of the weather. So I took all these pictures and put 'em together in this small book that again, was just loose papers.

[\(17:12\)](#):

But that gave me a moment to think about flipping through and having seen all these pictures in a cluster at one point, and now slowly looking through them and then incorporating my own photographs that I've made, there was this whole flattening of time and space that has been interesting to me, but I hadn't seen in this way. And so I went on after the residency to try that, making those photographs as large as I would 40 by 50 of my mom that I made with a four by five or something. And I don't know, it just created this whole new interaction between images that I didn't make and images that I did make, but there are about the same person. I dunno. There was a whole lot of flattening and just created a new potential for what the work can be. And that's always an ongoing question. It's like, what is this work?

Hernease Davis [\(18:04\)](#):

It calls to mind. There's a Deana Lawson photograph. It's a photograph of a photograph, and I dunno if you're familiar with this image, but it's a woman who's lying down in a bed. She's pregnant and her belly's showing. But in exhibition, there's a hologram that's embedded into the photograph, but when it's blown up, you can also see that there's been some scribbling. Some kid got to it or something and scratched through. And so Deana Lawson also uses a large format camera, and this is a large format image of what we can assume is a store-bought, produced at a drugstore image. So you talking about the wear and tear and the wearing away of the image of your uncle, and what that does to an image, it brought to mind that photograph because there's something very, and I'm going to use the word vernacular.

Eduardo Rivera [\(19:11\)](#):

Sure, yeah.

Hernease Davis [\(19:11\)](#):

And when I say the word vernacular, just for our listeners, just broadly, meaning an everyday photograph, but in your example, and also in Deana Lawson's example, particularly a photograph that's meant for family, that's meant for intimate connections, perhaps for an album. I think there's something that happens when you photograph that with a four by five camera or a larger format camera in a way that not necessarily elevates it at all, but in thinking about the types of images that we tend to see that are made with those cameras, but also I think the intimacy of the process of making that photograph, and on top of that, relating that to landscape and time. And also the wear is really, really beautiful in how it has essentially marred and scarred the image. But I see that as just a trace of use, a trace of place. I'm not saying that your example is exactly the example of that Deana Lawson image, but for instance, thinking of the scribble, it makes me think about images that I've found as a kid not knowing how precious photographs are, taking a pen and just writing on it, or even thinking about perhaps a photograph that I've lost or a photograph that somehow ends up in your backyard or ends up outside. But just thinking about the environment working on it and what it means to take that into your medium of photography, to deal with that.

Eduardo Rivera ([20:50](#)):

Yeah, I mean, those are all really great points because my relationship to that picture that I made or that I didn't make, but that I found of my uncle did speak directly to, I guess surface, is a way to, for me to access it because surface of the photograph and surface of even just the surrounding environment and using these cameras that really give me this moment to interact with surface and space and people and this hyper, very intentional, slow way is, I don't know. It felt like a way to reconnect it to things that I may not have ever considered or thought about or yeah, I think that way of reconnecting to a place through these happenstance moments where this photograph was altered in this specific way or in another way, I think there's moments of, I don't know, possibility in that. And it's that attention to that detail that, I dunno, I just find really exciting and that I sort of strive for when I'm looking just to make a photograph when I'm walking around or if I have a moment where someone in my family wants to be photographed and there's this connection to them where I'm just observing and I'm just looking at them and looking at the texture of their blouse or their shirt or their pants or their eyes or something.

([22:22](#)):

For me as a maker, it allows me to remember in a lot of ways that are connected to photography and the way that we use images and think back and think about memory, but just sort of this one-to-one relationship. I don't know.

Hernease Davis ([22:36](#)):

So then, okay, this is just an aside. I'm just curious. So you have family who actually want you to photograph them.

Eduardo Rivera ([22:42](#)):

Yeah.

Hernease Davis ([22:42](#)):

That's great.

Eduardo Rivera ([22:44](#)):

Yep. There was runs of times where it was sort of like I would show up and we're like, oh, we're making pictures. Because I always lived out east, or not always, but 2014 is when I went to grad school in Boston. And then every winter and summer I would just go back to Arizona and that's when I would make a bulk of the photographs. I stopped for a duration of time, but when I would come back, then they're like, oh, they call me Eddie back home. So oh, Eddie's here going to take pictures or whatever. Sometimes of course, some people don't want to be photographed, and so I don't photograph them, but I don't know, it's this sort of dance sometimes of re-acknowledging someone in my family or someone who I've seen growing up over and over and just never really thought about, just never thought about photographing them.

([23:31](#)):

And then, so returning was really important. So I would sometimes just make pictures for the community. I wanted to reintegrate and remember this area that's adjacent to where my grandmother's home is where a lot of my pictures sort of take place. And I took these flyers and I put them up around that area and said, I want to make pictures of the community that I'm really connected to that I grew up around, but that I was sort of removed from because of going back and forth and I was just making photographs for them for their own archive in whatever style they wanted. And it was great because it

was just like, I have this photograph of me and my child or my partner, and then I would just make some pictures. I would take those digitally. It was easier to send them. And so yeah, people would be into it, which I was always thankful for and excited about because I know you see a camera and you're like, what are you doing? But it took time. It took time for sure, because my first interests in photographing my mom, for instance, she wasn't skeptical, but it's like I mentioned earlier, it's this dance. You're getting to know someone through this object. And she just had some reservations about it. And then I would show her the images and we would just go back and forth. And I think that just grows. And that's the same for my extended family and other folks that I photograph.

Hernease Davis ([24:57](#)):

Yeah, and I'll say when I ask that question, of course, you're not going to photograph anyone who doesn't want their photograph to be taken, but I kind of assumed that for you, it's more on your end asking to take a photograph. But I really love that there is this expectation that you're going to take

Eduardo Rivera ([25:15](#)):

It's picture time,

Hernease Davis ([25:15](#)):

Like, oh, you're in town. All right, let's bring out the four by fives.

Eduardo Rivera ([25:18](#)):

Yeah, send them prints.

Hernease Davis ([25:21](#)):

Yeah. Okay. So going back to walking around, there was a piece that you were working on that was a series of photographs that you had actually taken on a prolonged walk down, a main road in Arizona that was under heavy construction. And so can you describe that piece and talk about it a little bit?

Eduardo Rivera ([25:42](#)):

Yeah. So I moved back to Phoenix during the pandemic. I was living in Boston and I moved back to Phoenix summer of 2020. And I acknowledged that this part of the city was shifting drastically, and my family spoke fondly about this strip of road because back in the seventies and eighties, they were probably in their mid twenties, early twenties. It was a joyous strip of land. A lot of car shows were a part of it, just people driving up and down, listening to music, just enjoying the space. And then I think around the eighties and nineties is when it shifted. There was a lot of violence that started to be connected to the space. And I think people were also growing up and they were so connected to all of the other folks in the community that everyone just had families. And so it just was a changing environment, but that always stuck with me.

([26:37](#)):

The fact that they had this formative moment based off of this strip of road or just going down, it's called Central Avenue. And that strip of road just functioned in a lot of ways. It brought you from metropolitan downtown Phoenix into South Phoenix, which is, I grew up in sort of south central Phoenix area, but South Phoenix, you can go even further. And predominantly black, brown, indigenous community sort of made space here. And that's been the case forever. As long as I can remember growing up in the late eighties, nineties. When I started photographing exclusively in this area, it's

maybe about a five minute walk from my grandmother's home where I made a lot of photographs. That strip of road just was changing quickly. And the city in many ways created this transit system that just sort of expanded in many different directions, north Phoenix, west to east, but they hadn't gone fully south, at least they haven't gone in this direction.

[\(27:36\)](#):

And I think this construction project started probably, I don't know, I could think back maybe 10 years, maybe like 2015 for sure. But more so in 2020 is when I saw like, whoa, this is really happening. And I just had this sense of urgency to want to photograph these buildings that I remember seeing growing up or just the idea of the space before it completely transformed. And I think a lot of artists and a lot of people in general had the same relationship to Central. So what I did was there's this sort of dividing line that sections out downtown Phoenix to what I sort of see as this shift into South Phoenix. And you can tell by the way that the city's kind of cared for. There are certain areas that were just kind of falling apart, but also had this history attached to it.

[\(28:25\)](#):

You're like, wow, that building's been there forever. And so I started at this point, which I remember going under this bridge as a child from in either direction because Central Avenue runs north to south, and in either direction, this bridge, it went underground, but it sort of dipped down. And then you would come out on the other side and it was always really dark in that tunnel, but it had these really yellowish lights and sometimes things on the wall or you can see people sort of walking by, but it was very quiet. So it felt like I was entering into this other part of the town physically. And so I started at that point, I remember it being this transformative moment. So I started there and I walked from that section all the way down to what's called baseline. And baseline is not necessarily the end of that south Phoenix area, but its name meant like, oh, this is the baseline.

[\(29:16\)](#):

This is sort of the end. And I think that's where the end of the transit system is going. So I walked from that tunnel and this was sort of a prolonged time of two weeks. So I would go out for about an hour to hour and a half and photograph at high noon because that was important to me to sort of feel, I wanted to feel the heat. And I would start at a point and I would look east and I would make images along the way. So I walked maybe a total of five miles from that tunnel to the baseline, and it turned around and I did the same looking west. And so I did that all the way back to the tunnel. So just to get both sides of that view, it took about two weeks and thousands of pictures and functioned as a document of these buildings.

[\(29:58\)](#):

But also for me, it was important to see what it was because I mean, there's so many stories of gentrification that happen often everywhere, unfortunately. And I know that's what's going to happen. This train system's going to go through the city and it's going to alter and hopefully for the best, but I know in many cases it's not always the situation. But to go back to your question about the piece, I just wanted to lay that groundwork because the piece, I wanted to find a way to work that into this experimental short, I dunno, I don't even know how to describe it, a sequence of images. It wasn't even a film, but it was sort of a stop motion of all of the images that I made. And they were on this small TV that I checked out here from the cage. I checked out two of them, and those showed each side of the walk.

[\(30:47\)](#):

And I think this piece in particular was about two minutes long. And on both sides you have just the television sort of facing each other, but had sound attached to it. So it felt like you were walking, you could hear the sound of the environment. And yeah, it was an experiment. I mean, I think a lot of what photography does is really amazing. We talked about the liminal space and the moments between the magics that sort of happen when you look at a photograph at different distances or flipping through a page of a book. But sometimes I miss what sound and moving image can do. And when I was here, I'm like, I'll play around with this because I initially thought of it as a book or something, or just something completely different. Never a moving piece

Hernease Davis ([31:31](#)):

I'm actually interested in how you came to think of it more along the lines of something that was moving rather than a book.

Eduardo Rivera ([31:41](#)):

Yeah, I mean, I mentioned this photographing at high noon and feeling the heat. There's a lot of things that are attached to that for me that are important because I think back in my lineage, I know my grandfather for one had to work out in the sun. He worked with brick and worked in construction and did a lot of labor work. And in many instances, folks don't have the privilege to not do that. I've tried to find my position within it because I recognize that working in education and being an artist is a privilege already. And not having to work out in the sun is a privilege from just seeing what my grandfather and grandmother, my family had to sort of endure. But there was something about being out and enduring that, that I felt was important. It was physical, it was sort of almost spiritual as well, because when you're out in the heat, people might call it heat stroke, but it feels like you're hallucinating.

([32:48](#)):

And I don't know, it just takes over your body in a different way and it makes you very much aware of your body. You're like, I'm running low on fluids, or I'm sweating a lot, or I'm physically exhausted. So I wanted to think about that in my work. And so for me, without diving into the whole concepts of the political, of me being outside working labor, I was just like, I want to connect to that. I want to feel that. Which isn't distant from how I normally would photograph, but this was very intentional. It was like a system: go out at noon, it was maybe 105 to 110. It's like it's hot, photograph, and then call it, but then go back, how can I translate that into the work itself? And was an experiment, which VSW embraces this ethos of the experimental to a degree. And I'm like, this is the place to try it,

Hernease Davis ([33:46](#)):

Because we've talked about that process before. And I just kind of recall the plethora of possibilities that could come from just that experience and being very aware of the feeling and the embodiment of doing something like that. And I've told you this before, it feels very much like a performance piece. And some of my colleagues listening to this podcast will know that I'm not the book person at VSW. And so I'm always great on not making something a book. There's so many books that come out of VSW and they're wonderful and great, amazing, excellent. But I also would be interested in how would you translate an experience like this into a book, that is something that's very possible, but also going to the beginning of our conversation where you talked about your work, also talking to time, belonging, and the significance of light. I think even on top of the wanting to feel the heat, it is a very, I think from a photographic perspective, a pointed choice to photograph when the sun is the highest in the sky when you're not just out there intending to feel, but also to photograph.

[\(35:00\)](#):

And I also am talking from my perspective as someone who grew up in Los Angeles where there's not a lot of weather out there as well, it's not as hot as Arizona, but in thinking about the monotony of the sun. It's something that seeps into the background and hearing you talk about light, specifically, in Arizona, not necessarily weather, but that all is wrapped up in and of itself. I think all the time about how in LA you don't really, well growing up it's different now, but growing up, you didn't really talk about the weather because it was the same every day. But it wasn't until I moved out of California that I realized just how much the light affected everything and how it affected how you see one another, how you move through the world, how you think about your day. I'm noting it that you're using it as something that's very deliberate in your work.

Eduardo Rivera [\(36:03\)](#):

And that was the same growing up in Arizona. It was just always hot, and then it just wasn't for a little bit, and then it was hot again. So that, yeah, moving out east, that changed my whole relationship to how people navigated the space. And that happened in Arizona as well. And this might've been the case in LA, but in the summers you didn't really see people walking around. Maybe not in general.

Hernease Davis [\(36:27\)](#):

No one walks, really.

Eduardo Rivera [\(36:28\)](#):

Phoenix is not a walking city, and LA isn't? Yeah, right. So if you see somebody walking around, you're like, what's going on?

Hernease Davis [\(36:33\)](#):

You stop the car and you roll down your window, you're like, are you okay? Do you need something?

Eduardo Rivera [\(36:40\)](#):

Yeah, you're looking for a car. You're like, how can I help?

Hernease Davis [\(36:44\)](#):

And it's less so now. Transit systems are happening, and just as it's happening in Arizona, it sounds like in Phoenix, it's happening in LA too, and it does affect the city, it affects the landscape. It is this kind of give and take, and I can only think about what it takes away and the memories, and especially if you've been in a place for so long, what that does to how you relate to it, and especially since your work is so much about place. This is my next question. You've been in Rochester for two years. I just have been wondering what that has done to even your perspective on your work. So considering how your work is very focused on your home, your family, your connection with that and your historical, I would call it personal landscape in Arizona, how has being in Rochester affected your approach to your work?

Eduardo Rivera [\(37:41\)](#):

Sure, sure. Well, I mean that's such a great segue because we have been talking about light and we have been talking about heat, and those notions are very, very distant here because I mean...

Hernease Davis [\(37:53\)](#):

Can you say why? Just in case we want to know. I mean,

Eduardo Rivera ([37:56](#)):

Just move here from December to March and especially January, try to look for the sun. You will not find it. I've heard the snow has been kind of light in the past couple of years?

Hernease Davis ([38:11](#)):

I heard that too. And I don't know what that's like, cause, I'm from LA, it all seems bad, it's all a lot of snow.

Eduardo Rivera ([38:17](#)):

And it's like there are days where I'm like, fine, it's snowy, but it really affects you. And to go back to that idea, I thought about how I can frame my work, and that's such a vast thing to do. And I think sometimes there's ways of doing it for the maker, but also an audience to kind of understand. But other times where if the work is about looking and trying to find these sort of poetic, nuanced, metaphorical understandings of your mother's drawer or something, how does that sort of fit into this larger context of art and photography and whatever that means? So when I was in Rochester and even in living in Massachusetts for about six years, I knew that that was a component. But I did realize that there was this guiding factor of light that I was using both in the pictures themselves, but also going back to sequencing and editing.

([39:16](#)):

I was like, what would it feel like if I was moved by light through a sequence? And I guess Rochester, the fact that there wasn't much light during these moments, in those months, specifically November through March, or just all throughout, but especially when it was darker here, I'm like, I was finding that in my work, and I started to embrace that even more so because again, this structure of how to understand the work and sometimes go into areas that are equally as important, very urgent, but that aren't always politically driven. Light itself, I feel sometimes gets passed up on because it is very much photographic. You're looking at light, you're capturing light, but that concept, there's so much potential in that. I think that's what Rochester did along with teaching and working with some amazing students and thinking, always just thinking about the dedication to trying to figure out something larger than yourself through photography. And then looking at my work and seeing all of these ways that I saw light in that place, that means so much. And that has done so much to the environment, to our bodies. With all that said, I started to embrace that and say how can that show up in the work?

Hernease Davis ([40:28](#)):

That's interesting to hear because I actually had a question that I didn't ask, but I'll ask it now because you talking about Rochester and how it's affected how you view these, or even opening up to being led by light, I remember distinctly looking at those collection of images that you took on Central and feeling out of place, because I know that you're from Phoenix, but it looked like LA to me. And looking at those, I was like, oh. And it also was very different in terms of how your other photographs are lit as well. They're black and white, but that's not the only distinction. It was this very familiar childhood memory that came up that also put me out of place. I was like, this looks like Western Ave, or this looks like Century. But to think about how it was that high noonness of it that set it apart. So to see that in your studio alongside these other images that are a bit softer and

Eduardo Rivera ([41:34](#)):

In color,

Hernease Davis ([41:35](#)):

In color, and there are softer shadows, was stark in that way where it made it less. Not that it made it less personal to you, it was personal, but this kind of regional look at this area, that was such a strange sensation, but also warm in how it looked like home in a way.

Eduardo Rivera ([41:53](#)):

Yeah, I've had that come up a lot when I've showed pictures of family from folks all throughout the country saying, wow, I feel so connected to this. It reminds me of my grandmother's home or my home or something. And so I think there's that common denominator between, well, just the landscape and how we've lived amongst it. But I feel like every pocket of the country has its own underlying history to it. But then again, this common denominator is maybe the architecture or just the way that people live, the photographs of buildings that I made at least feel they do have character to them, but they also feel like they were kind of constructed from a mold, and the mold was like: building, sign, next, building, sign, next. And then I think there was a lot of artists that kind of explored that going back to the New Topographics.

([42:48](#)):

So that was that whole concept and understanding of that changing environment. I feel it continues. And I think that was sort of an interest of mine as well. My influences into photography was being introduced to that and to how people were looking at their space. And so yeah, this walking piece was an attempt to, again, just reconnect to a place, to collect and to, I dunno if collect is the best word, but it's more so just to reconnect and to reimagine. I don't know what it looks like now. I haven't been back in about... since January, and which... I made photographs there that weren't so systematic, but still showed a certain degree of the area. So it's changing, but I'm glad just as sort of an act, I'm glad that I was able to do it because it did bring up a lot of why this place was important to me. And along with all these other connotations that I spoke about regarding family and labor, all these things are important. So...

Hernease Davis ([44:06](#)):

Yeah. So you just recently returned from a residency in Philly at TILT Institute for the Contemporary Image in Philadelphia. And so I think this is very interesting because it's so recent and not that you've done these back-to-back residencies, but it's another city that you've never been to before, is that correct?

Eduardo Rivera ([44:32](#)):

Yeah. First time. Yeah.

Hernease Davis ([44:33](#)):

Can you talk a little bit about that experience and anything that was particularly distinct? And again, thinking about place, was there anything about Philly?

Eduardo Rivera ([44:41](#)):

Yeah, the TILT Institute for the Contemporary Image, really great residency. They supported me in many ways and they had a space that I can work in. But in thinking about the comparison, I guess not to compare, but more so just thinking about how I was treating the works between the two spaces. As I mentioned, VSW was very much intense, like, looking, re-looking, and I was just driven in different ways as I was making the pictures and then allowing the pictures to guide me after the fact. So having a studio space to do that here was really amazing. And then when I was at TILT, it felt like the way that it was structured when I was there felt very much production, the production side of things. And I'm currently working on an exhibition, and so my time there was very much production. I was spending hours and hours at a computer just editing, because all this work is shot on film.

[\(45:40\)](#):

And since I am constantly remaking and processing later on, there was pictures that I hadn't seen. I went through my archive back in just a span of 10 to 12 years, and there was photographs that I forgot I had. And so I used time before TILT to scan and just get those ready. But when I was there, I was really thinking about this upcoming exhibition and just again, sitting at a computer and processing them. It's not the fun part of this whole journey, at least it can be, but it was sucked right out as soon as I was there for five hours or more. But this became, for the duration of about a month, I was editing and spotting, unfortunately. So if you work with film, you know this whole process, and it's important to me because it could be used in a way, and I'm sure these sort of conceptual manners of just the image as is or whatever, however you can interpret that, or even those photographs that were altered by the landscape, those I didn't want to correct and I didn't want to fix, but I do appreciate a beautifully scanned and printed photograph and looking at it and just sort of being lost in it.

[\(46:53\)](#):

So a lot of my time there was just working on that. But yeah, the city itself, since it was new, I don't know if I got a chance to explore it as much as I wanted. It was a month, the month flew by.

Hernease Davis [\(47:06\)](#):

That's good to hear, because that is another very useful way of using a residency because doing that kind of work, spotting and dusting,

Eduardo Rivera [\(47:16\)](#):

And all color correcting and processing...

Hernease Davis [\(47:18\)](#):

Yeah, getting ready, something ready for production, it is a lot of work. And especially for you, you're teaching during other parts of the year, so it's really nice that you get some dedicated weeks to doing something that is very time consuming and very important.

Eduardo Rivera [\(47:35\)](#):

Nonstop.

Hernease Davis [\(47:38\)](#):

Alright, and then, so my last question is what's next?

Eduardo Rivera [\(47:43\)](#):

So yeah, it's sort of been, I guess under wraps for a while, but I'm really excited to share that I'll be showing this work, an iteration of this work at Light Work in Syracuse and Light Work, amazing organization of course. And that's what a lot of that production was going towards. And there's an accompanying contact sheet with that. So contact sheet is essentially a catalog of the exhibitions, but I was working with Dan Boardman, who's a director at Light Work...

Hernease Davis ([48:15](#)):

And also a crossover residency. Dan Boardman also on the podcast. Yeah.

Eduardo Rivera ([48:19](#)):

Yeah. So Dan, but Dan and I were working on the publication side as well as the exhibition. I was also working with Whitney Hubbs. We were thinking about what the work can be, which was always the case for me, working from these poetic metaphorical veins, but also being inspired by Murakami or short story of the every day. But there's something surreal and weird happening in the underbelly of a town, just a very plain town, wherever Murakami was one that came up. But there's also some other writers that I really respect. There's this book called Pedro Paramo. Juan Rulfo wrote this book back in the fifties, and Pedro Paramo is essentially, without getting into it too much, it's a book that has a foreword by Susan Sontag who wrote On Photography, which initially I was like, wow, this feels very photographic before getting into it. But it just sort of embraced the sort of surreal and sort of the spiritual of a place, while also thinking about it starts off with a mother on her deathbed, telling her son to go search out his father who he had never met or he got to know.

([49:38](#)):

And that resonates, that idea that just resonated so much. And there's moments where he goes into these sort of ghostly and spiritual realms. And so I brought that up with Dan as we were working on the contact sheet. And I don't know, I'm excited about what it came to because it was like, how can we use the pictures in this way? And while also looking at the land and paying attention to all these very important things of the land and of the people. So yeah, I'm excited. That's kind of what's next on the agenda. I dunno. That's what's next.

Hernease Davis ([50:14](#)):

Yeah. Well, yeah, that sounds really fascinating. Not necessarily a horror aspect, but it makes me think about the photograph of your mom holding onto the light post.

Eduardo Rivera ([50:25](#)):

Oh, yeah.

Hernease Davis ([50:25](#)):

Before I met you, I didn't know that was your mother. And knowing that was your mom, thinking about how strange that image is. And I also love the title of it, which is Earth.

Eduardo Rivera ([50:39](#)):

Earth, yeah.

Hernease Davis ([50:42](#)):

There's something very off about that photograph, but also very intimate and warm. Because, of course, it's not something that you'll see every day, like driving down the street, some person hugging a light post, or... it's a light post, right?

Eduardo Rivera ([50:59](#)):

Yeah. Light post or telephone pole.

Hernease Davis ([51:01](#)):

Yeah, telephone pole, those kinds of gestures with the land in a way that I think are off in this wonderful, fantastic kind of way. So I think it's really interesting because I think if you kind of take away a lot of the context from the work, then there is a lot of rich narrative that you can put into those images. There's one of, I don't know who this person is, but they're dragging something, and there's cats right underneath.

Eduardo Rivera ([51:30](#)):

Oh yeah. They're looking at you.

Hernease Davis ([51:31](#)):

Yeah. They're just these very narrative filled potential there going on. So that's interesting,

Eduardo Rivera ([51:37](#)):

And I love that. I love that part of photographs, films, just moments where kind of, not necessarily the spectacle, but it just kind of takes you outside of yourself for a moment. It just can be so heavy sometimes. Yeah. That picture in particular with the pole, it sort of started off as this playful moment. My mom and I just walking around photographing or just walking, we tend to just walk around together, and she interacts with the space sometimes, and so in this moment, she was kind of not twirling around the pole, but just moving around it and holding it. And at that moment, the sun was setting in the west, and so my shadow was projected onto the pole, and in that moment, photographed her as she looked back and the wind was blowing and it's no longer there. There's something built over it now. Maybe going back to that liminal understanding of what things can be and where we can sort of find meaning in sort of these in-between spaces, whatever, however iteration it is. I think that's just what's been driving me. It's just how do I contribute to this sort of ongoing dialogue of the American Southwest now that has this rich history and so much connected to it, but also can be about a son and his mom or his siblings and his family enjoying the everyday, but then moments of possibility and mystery and love and care all sort of wrapped up into a photograph, with light being its central driving force. Yeah.

([53:07](#)):

Yeah. That sounds cool.

Hernease Davis ([53:11](#)):

All right, Eduardo, thank you so much.

Eduardo Rivera ([53:14](#)):

It's been awesome.

This transcript was exported on Nov 27, 2023 - view latest version [here](#).

Hernease Davis ([53:15](#)):

And it was so wonderful having you here as a resident.

Eduardo Rivera ([53:17](#)):

Thank you.

Hernease Davis ([53:18](#)):

So, a lot of fun.

Eduardo Rivera ([53:18](#)):

Really amazing place. VSW, as I mentioned, has a very special part of my photographic history, but now just being here and interacting with everybody has been really special. So I feel super honored.

Hernease Davis ([53:35](#)):

And there you have it. Eduardo's exhibition at Light Work in Syracuse, New York is on view until December 15th, 2023. His work is also featured at the Silver Eye Center's Biennial Exhibition Radial Survey. That exhibition is on view until February 2024. For more information about both, please click on those links in our show notes. To learn more about the Visual Studies Workshop, please visit us at vsw.org where we have information about the Project Space residency and our current artists in residence. Keep following us on Twitch and Instagram at the Visual Studies Workshop, and feel free to send me an email at HerneaseDavis@vsw.org. This podcast is funded in part by the New York State Council on the Arts, with the support of New York State Legislature and the Leonian Foundation. Thank you so much for listening to this conversation with the artist Eduardo Rivera. In the meantime, take care. Bye.