

Exhibit Celebrates Women and Girls Worldwide

— By Sara Wolcott



Paola Gianturco's photograph shows Polish girls participating in magical rites at Wianki festival. Today, only a few small towns hold such festivals, which include rituals that date back to pagan times.

RIGHT BEFORE PHOTOGRAPHER AND AUTHOR PAOLA Gianturco sent all of her slides to her book publisher, she realized that the company would keep them for a year. Problem was, her photos were to be included in an upcoming museum exhibit, and the exhibit's curator would not be able to design the exhibit without the slides. Something had to be done, and fast.

Frantically, Gianturco called the curator, Anne Balsamo, a woman she'd never met. "Help!" Gianturco entreated. "You must come down here tonight and help me decide which of these thousands of pictures we shall use for the exhibit!" Balsamo jumped in her car, drove across the Bay and spent hours looking at hundreds of photos.

"I liked her from the beginning," Gianturco recalls. "Especially the fact that she was willing to drive to my house and spend hours looking at photos at the spur of the moment. There was definitely some amazing creative energy

in that room!"

That experience initiated the International Museum of Women's (IMOW) first exhibit, "Celebrating Women," running October 4 through December 17 in San Francisco.

In 2000, when photos from Gianturco's first book, *In Her Hands: Craftswomen Changing the World*, were shown in an exhibit co-sponsored by IMOW and the UN, she met the Museum's chair, Elizabeth Colton. The two women realized with excitement that they shared identical interests: how culture shapes gender roles and how women live

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around the globe. So they collaborated on Gianturco's next book project about traveling through 15 countries and five continents to photograph festivals that honor women.

Over the next four years, Gianturco took hundreds of photos of 17 festivals. She and Balsamo chose 20 photos from each for the exhibit.

Although Celebrating Women is the museum's first exhibit, IMOW does not yet have its own building. In fact, it will not open until 2008. Despite the immediate lack of a site, the museum has not held back on this remarkable exhibit which promises to be a "festival of the festivals."

A New Way of Seeing the World

Once Gianturco decided to photograph festivals, she was faced with a fundamental challenge: learning how best to photograph them. Her previous book is filled with intimate scenes with lots of natural light; festivals, however, would require long shots at night. Besides having no formal training in photography (she had been in business for 35 years before writing her last book), Gianturco has always been very near sighted. To prepare, she took several one-or-two-week intense workshops with *National Geographic* photographers.

"I just promised myself going into it that I would shoot nothing the way I would automatically shoot it. I was

trying to change the way I saw the world. I thought, if I wasn't myopic, how would I shoot this scene? And it worked! It was unbelievably exhilarating. I looked at my pictures and thought, 'Did I get my own film back?'"

Essentially, Gianturco learned how to alter the way she saw the world, an excellent preamble to photographing festivals she originally did not even know existed.

Although she worked alone, she received help from travel agents and local interpreters to interview everyone — from food vendors to princesses. She learned the art of holding a camera, a microphone and a plate of food while dancing backwards in time to a piece of music that captivated her body. Her pictures never stop asking the questions, "Why are we who we are?" and "What do we believe is possible?"

She found that each festival highlighted a different aspect of what it means to be a woman. Using the participants' own words to categorize each festival, Gianturco's book and the exhibit portray aspects of the feminine as diverse as "Virgins," "Flirts," "Healers" and "Warriors."

"We live in a world where we mostly hear about the troubles women have, and God knows that is an important story," says the 65-year-old Gianturco. "But there is this other, more positive, story that has not yet been told. I was compelled, even eager, to tell this story." Curator Balsamo was also intent on sharing the story in all its complexity and richness.

More Than Just Pictures

When Balsamo left Gianturco's home armed with photographs, Gianturco had one major request for the exhibit: "'Please,' she said, 'anything but just hanging pictures on the wall!' I would be so disappointed!"

Gianturco, who deeply believes that human beings learn best through experience, met her match in Balsamo, a feminist scholar who has spent more than a decade advocating the importance of bringing practical, lived experience into theoretical models and vice versa. The result is what Balsamo refers to as a "multi-modal" exhibit: One doesn't just see the beautiful photographs, but one uses all of one's senses to engage with the material. Every Wednesday for the duration of the exhibit, different local ethnic organizations will be cooking traditional festival foods and performing elements of that festival.

Fully engaging the visitors in the exhibit doesn't stop at the five senses. "The exhibit is open to the public discourse in downtown San Francisco, so we couldn't do things like make costumes available to touch or allow people to try on the jewelry, which we had originally hoped to do," noted Balsamo. "But we are able to do other things: The headsets will be elaborately dressed with feathers. The viewer will become one of the performing bodies in the exhibit. That is part of what is vital and exciting about this exhibit: We don't erase the bodies (of the museum's visitors)." The feather-decked headsets will also help add to the festive atmosphere.

As a feminist, it is important to Balsamo to bring a critical perspective to the exhibit. Festivals are paired together, evoking questions concerning the cultures exhibited and the assumptions the viewer carries with her, concerning women's

roles. "Sometimes the similarities are provocative: the comparison between the Miss America Competition in the U.S. and the Boa Morte festival in Brazil." Personal testimonies portray that social-change programs are vital components of both festivals.

Being Completely Herself

The creative combustion in Gianturco's office has ignited an infectious fire of excitement. Both women are overwhelmed by the support of professionals who have volunteered their time and expertise to make this exhibit set the viewers' enthusiasm and intellect afire. Despite her work with other exhibits, Balsamo hasn't seen anything like this. "It gives me goose bumps every time I think about it — the scope of generosity that made this possible!"

For Gianturco, at the heart of the fire is an amazement at the differences between aspects of womanhood each culture emphasized. "I saw such a wide range of roles and attributes that it encompasses almost the full range of our humanity," explained Gianturco. "And yet in some cultures some of these attributes are forbidden."

In trying to understand both the festivals and the cultural context in which they are embedded, Gianturco frequently asked women what was their vision of the ideal woman. When asked the same question, Gianturco paused, perhaps considering the myriad of answers she had received. "So often we put restrictions on ourselves. I don't want to define what the restrictions are. I just want her to be all that she can be." ❀

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