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FotoFest exhibits frame the world

By **PATRICIA C. JOHNSON**
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From Venezuela to the Sonora Desert to the Niger River, Houston FotoFest exhibitions continue to open proverbial windows to distant worlds and ways of life.

EXTRA

• FotoFest 2004

For the past five years, Madrid native Alvaro Leiva has focused on the banks and the people of the Ganges, Niger, Amazon and Mississippi rivers. The similarities can be astonishing; so, too, the differences.

The majority of the people we encounter in his work eke out a living from fishing and crops. The river is a place for music and prayer, for playing and working.

Images like these are familiar from newspapers and magazines, but Leiva's carefully composed photographs seem especially rich in clues about life outside the viewfinder.

The image at the entrance to Leiva's exhibit, *The River People*, at Rice Media Center portrays a swami dressed only in a loincloth, sitting yoga-fashion amid snowdrifts at the pilgrimage site of Gangotri in the Himalayas. An icy river flows past, but his serene austerity matches the quietude of the landscape at the moment. Implied are the storms and frozen atmosphere, as well as the trek the man will make later to warm himself by a sacred fire.



Campsite from *Sed: The Trail of Thirst*, by Delilah Montoya and Orlando Lara.

There is poetry in the movement of the women in Bagangata, Barkire, along the Niger. Leiva positioned himself on the ground amid a circle of women, looking up, capturing the choreographed

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labor of the women as they toss grain into the air with calabashes and beat it with sticks where it lands.

The 4,000-mile-long Amazon, described as the river of extremes, traverses South America from Iquitos in the Andes of Peru to Brazil's Belem on the Atlantic Ocean. Leiva's photographs, incisive and crisp, suggest the complex vastness of landscapes and cultures along the river's banks. In one almost abstract composition, he shows the back of a Huitoto Indian (Brazil) that is partly covered by a fanned assortment of feathers from the (invisible) headdress. In another, he captures a group of Colombian soldiers in battle gear as they wade through a stream and dense vegetation seeking drug labs hidden in the jungle. (Through April 10. Entrance 8 off University; 713-348-4882. Call for hours.)

At the Station, Venezuelan photographer Edgar Moreno's *Memorias del agua* (*Memories of Water*) offers a look at the landscape and daily life in images that are the equivalent of literature's magic realism. The alligators are real, as are the waterfalls and the plains, the thatch houses and jungles. Yet the silver gelatin prints are toned so areas appear nearly gold or nearly blue, and the images are constructed so the "facts" may not jibe with photojournalist standards. But their psychological tenor rings true.



How Many More? from *Sed: The Trail of Thirst*, by Delilah Montoya and Orlando Lara, is exhibited at Teatro Bilingue.

In the signature photograph, a man's tattooed, bronze arm extends across the picture plane with a gun-metal gray piranha, head down, in his fist. The horizon is a darkened wedge of vegetation, separating a nearly golden river in the foreground from a transparent, blue-tinged sky above.

There's also a group of photographs featuring a massive alligator that shares the family home, like a domesticated pet. This reptile of rivers suns himself in the dirt front yard of a hut, a little girl nonchalantly perched on its back near the muscled tail. In another, all that's visible is that tail as the creature slips under the curtain that separates the kitchen from the rest of the house.

Not all is so bucolic: A third composite has the alligator walking near a road, headed toward the viewfinder, his tail nowhere in sight. (Through April 29, with live music at 4 p.m. on Saturdays. 1502 Alabama at LaBranch; 713-529-6900. Hours: 11 a.m.-6 p.m. Wednesdays-Sundays.)

Water is central to the small installation at Teatro Bilingüe shaped by Delilah Montoya, professor at the University of Houston, and Orlando Lara, one of her students, who came across the U.S.-Mexico border as an infant.

Sed: The Trail of Thirst consists of Montoya's panoramic photographs documenting the landscape and providing a backdrop. The specific trail crosses the Sonoran Desert, from northern Mexico into Arizona, a beautiful but scrubby, parched land with little water, shade or shelter.

Shelves placed in front of the photographs display things left behind by migrants in their makeshift camps and collected by Montoya and Lara: child's boots worn to a nub, an empty blister pack of pain pills, a tangle of *relicarios* -- small medals with images of holy figures worn around the neck -- a pack of *Loteria* game cards.

On the surface, these objects on the desert floor are litter. Symbolically, and more important, they are pieces of a discarded life that in their essence are no different from what other immigrants from other places and times have abandoned during their anxious search for the future.

Cumulatively, the compact presentation is a testament to a desire so large it ignores all danger. The point is sharpest in two fragments of the installation. One consists of five plastic water jugs, their labels altered to read (in Spanish) the reasons for risking one's life -- Opportunity, Family, Money, Work, Education. The other is a poster created by Lara. Its background is a list of some 200 dead found in the area. (The list was published last fall in the Arizona Republic.) The foreground is a view of white crosses in a makeshift graveyard. The superimposed text reads, "More than 2,500 (deaths, since 1996). How many more (to come?)"

It's not all hopeless. The trail runs through the O'odham tribal reservation near Ironwood National Forest. Mike Wilson, a member of the tribe, places 150 gallons of water on the trail every few weeks for the migrants. Humane Borders, a ministry-based organization, maintains water tanks in 14 locations -- approximately 400,000 gallons of water annually -- throughout the Arizona border area. A group called the Samaritans dispenses first aid and food packets to the migrants huddled in camps. And the border patrol will sometimes just turn a compassionate blind eye. (Through April 12. 333 S. Jensen; 713-743-2855. Hours by appointment.)

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