

Naked ambition

Elizabeth Gleeson talks to Marcos Zimmermann to uncover the reasons behind a bold new series of male nudes photographed across Latin America.



For nearly three decades, Marcos Zimmermann has been developing a comprehensive portrait of Argentina's landscapes and people through his photographs. His books have garnered numerous prizes and his images are permanent fixtures in many international art collections. From August, his new work will be on show at **Galeria Vasari** (Esmeralda 1357, www.galeriavasari.com.ar) and his upcoming book, *Desnudos Sudamericanos*, will be available in bookshops in Buenos Aires this spring. **You spent the early 1980s freelancing in Italy. What did you learn there?**

I learned a lot in Italy about how to look and how to critique – things that couldn't be learned in Argentina at the time. I learned to open my eyes.

Why did you come back to Buenos Aires?

I wasn't going to stay when I came back. I came to sort some things out but then the *las Malvinas* (Falklands) war took place and the country changed. Suddenly it became easier to express myself here, so I stayed. I had always wanted to photograph

Patagonia, so I went back and forth, taking photos, for ten years.

How did your body of work progress?

I wanted to tell the story of Argentina. It is a little-known and an important history. The whole country is based on a mistake: the explorers went up the river thinking that it was the sea and that they were circling around the bottom of the continent; the conquistadores came looking for silver. The indigenous people must have thought that those men in uniform on horseback were extraterrestrials.

You use quite a bit of text with your images – how important is that element to your work?

I spend a lot of time searching for texts to accompany my photos. I think that words and images have a lot to do with one another, and the text completes the images sometimes. Photography is just one way of communicating. I also love to write.

You've published several photography books depicting different regions of Argentina. Which is your favourite? *Desnudos Sudamericanos* is my current favourite, because it's what



I'm working on. It's been seven years in progress – a long time, but I'm not complaining. It takes a long time to find these people, get to know them, and then to get them to let me photograph them nude

Who is the desnudo sudamericano?

What kind of a responsibility do you feel towards him with these images?

He is a man that I know. He has a bad reputation in the rest of the world, maybe. I want to tell the story of the South American male, so I found these men – a bullfighter in Peru, an Argentinian gaucho, a Rapa Nui from Chile, a Nazi in Paraguay – they are stereotypes, if you want to say that, but beyond that, they are men. You will look at each man and see his nakedness, but if you look again, you will see his expression and you can learn his story. It's important for me to present the book as a collection of photographs of men, not penises. They're just regular guys who took their clothes off, and I have the responsibility of protecting them. I feel responsible for telling the truth and finding the correct information about the photos – names, locations.

What difficulties have you had while working on this project?

Well, Chile was the easiest country to shoot. Chileans get naked really easily for some reason. Brazil was the most difficult. It is a very religious country, and then there is the big issue of pornography. You approach someone with a proposition like this in Brazil and they just assume that you're asking them to star in your next porno book.

Which other artists interest you?

Antonio Berni, Pablo Suárez – the big painters. I really understand the value of painting. There aren't many photographers in Argentina who think, but lots that take photos. I'm not interested in much contemporary photography; it is so subjective. What I don't understand is when someone shoots a picture of that little mouse from Walt Disney and hangs it on the wall really huge; it's just unnecessary.

Do you have a favourite place in Argentina?

El Litoral, Corrientes, specifically. There, the people are happy; the music is happy. In the north-west, the people have the earth in their eyes. In the north-east, water.