

# WAYS OF LIGHT

PHOTOGRAPHY: STELLA JOHNSON

Where others are spellbound by light, photographer Stella Johnson remembers to keep a close eye on the darks. She adds her distinct, poetic touch drawing on the interplay between the two.

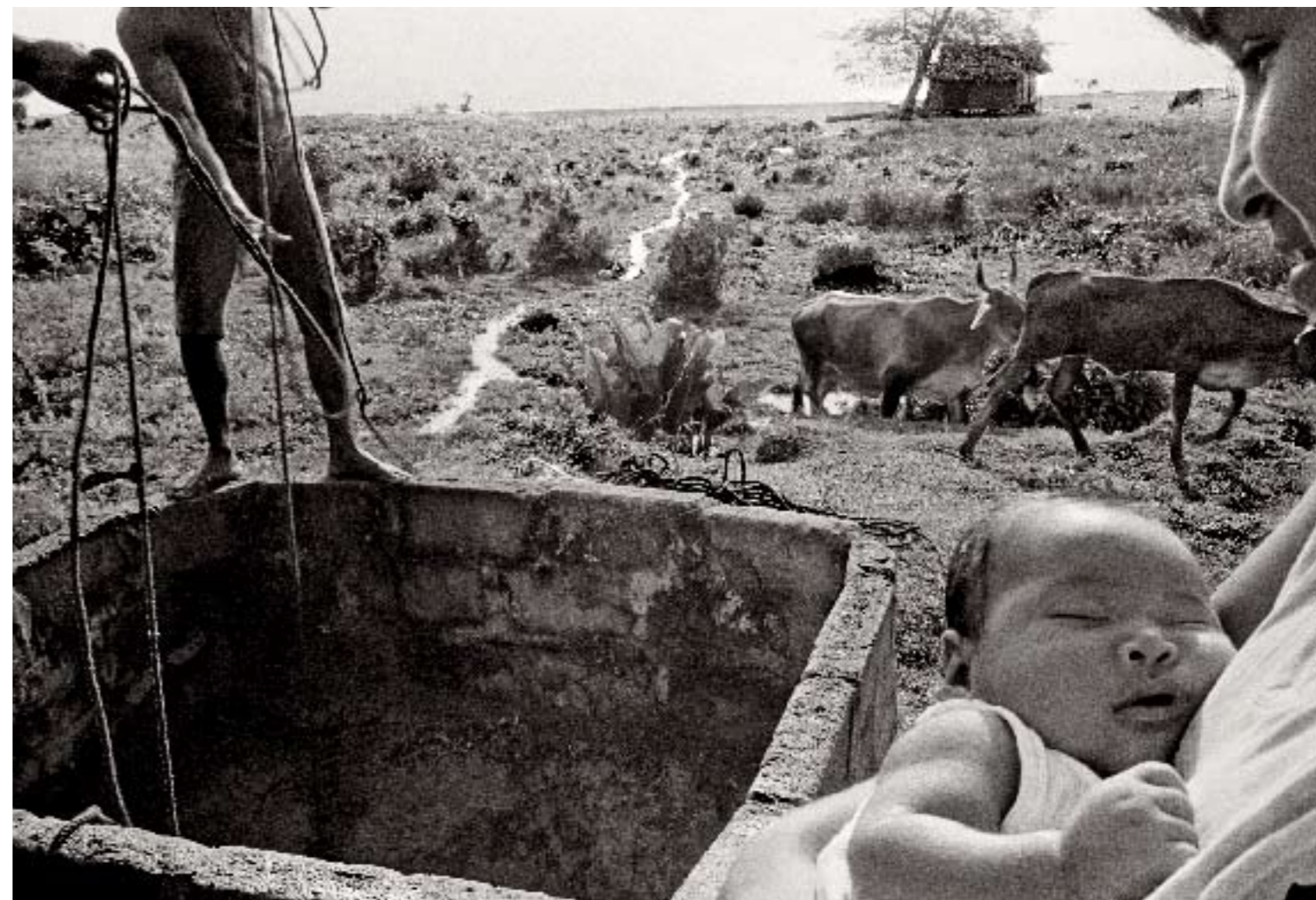
Highlight of the crab season – at three in the morning Stella Johnson drove out to sea with the fishermen to spend six hours on the boat. She too made a catch. Kakabila, Nicaragua, 2003





Natural beauty – when Stella Johnson showed the girl her picture she could hardly believe it was her. Orinoco, Nicaragua, 2003 (left); fishing is part of the children's duties. Orinoco, Nicaragua, 2003 (right)

## NICARAGUA



Rest and work – Johnson experiences everyday life with the people. Occasionally the heat is so unbearable she can only go to work in the mornings. Moments in Kakabila, Nicaragua, 2003



# CAMEROON

The charm of ordinariness – in Johnson's picture, Alim radiates with the magic of a medicine man. Cameroon 2001 (right); moments in a Koran school. Bawaka koi, Cameroon, 2001 (left)



The working life of children – adolescents on the thatched roof of a corn storage (left); Koulsome shaves a boy's head with a single razor blade (top right). Moments from *Bawaka koi*, Cameroon, 2001



# MEXICO

Spirituality and everyday life – San Bartolo coyotepec, Oaxaca, 2002 (big pictures); Jolalpan, Puebla, 2003 (above left); Amilcingo, Morelos, 2004 (right); Rancho Peralta, Guanajuato, 1998 (right, above right); San Bartolo Coyotepec, Oaxaca, 2003

Hector – now 19 years old and a handsome young man, Rancho Peralta, Guanajuato, Mexico 1995



Photographer Stella Johnson, born 1953 in Boston, goes about her work with patience and speed. She gives herself plenty of time to wait for the right moment and press the exposure button: "For me, light, moment, gesture and composition are all key to the success of a photo. The anticipation of these things can be difficult. One waits and vacillates between boredom and tension," Johnson explains on her approach.

Her monograph, 'Al Sol', published in 2007, presents an impressive collection of works. "I thought the title should reflect the fact that most of my images are about light. I would travel to places where I would find wonderful light. I chose Spanish since it is the language of two of the three countries in my monograph and because I speak Spanish. It is a lyrical, wonderful language," Johnson says about her book.

Over a period of 15 Years Stella documented the lives of two rural families living near Guanajuato and Oaxaca, Mexico, the Garifuna and Miskito cultures on the Caribbean coast of Nicaragua and the Gbaya and Fulbe cultures in Cameroon. Each visit to these exotic countries lasted a number of weeks at least. For 2003-2004 and 2006 she received a Fulbright grant for Mexico. Johnson is fascinated by the simple lives of country people: "I've spent most of my career photographing in similar villages, learning how to bathe with one bucket of water. I have come to realize that villagers depend on family and community, and that is the experience my photographs document. My Greek grandmothers were raised in villages like the ones I photograph. These are my roots. They drive my work."

Stella Johnson uses two Leica M6 bodies mounted with Summicron-M 35 mm lenses. Her photographs are rich in atmosphere and highly poetic. She masterfully conjoins the extremes of light and dark and manages to weave several story lines into a single picture. The effect is something of a compositional cross-fade between scenes, implemented with technical perfection. "I like to find the background first and anticipate the action. I wait for a tableau to be created, I wait for people to come into the frame. I like to surprise my viewer and myself, so I try to make images that will capture the beauty and complexity I see in ordinary experiences," she says. Johnson documents her unexpected encounters in black & white. "Colour can obscure content. It changes the feeling of an image and, if not done well, can clutter the composition." Stella Johnson knows how to avoid this. She experiments with grey tones and hard contrasts to the extent that her pictures seem more colourful than real life itself. CARLA SUSANNE ERDMANN

Exhibition: Stella Johnson, "Al Sol"; Feb 27 until May 5, 2010; Southeast Museum of Photography; Daytona College, Daytona Beach, Florida, USA, [www.stellajohnson.com](http://www.stellajohnson.com); [www.lfi-online.com/books](http://www.lfi-online.com/books)