

CHARLIE CORDERO
A GROUP OF CHILDREN JUMP INTO THE WATER FROM THE PATIO OF A HOUSE.
AS AN ARTIFICIAL ISLAND, SANTA CRUZ DEL ISLOTE DOES NOT HAVE BEACHES OR SAND.

VIEW FINDER

Colombian photographer CHARLIE CORDERO produces color-drenched images of an island like no other. By HARRIET QUICK



CHARLIE CORDERO
SANTA CRUZ DEL ISLOTE IS CONSIDERED ONE OF THE
MOST DENSELY POPULATED ISLANDS IN THE WORLD



CHARLIE CORDERO
THE LABYRINTHINE STREETS THAT LEAD FROM ONE HOUSE TO ANOTHER

Some storytellers choose trees, people, landscapes or streets to document the impact of time and social upheaval. Yet for Colombian lensman Charlie Cordero, the tiny island community of Santa Cruz del Islote, one of the most densely inhabited places on the planet, provides a vital microcosm into the global climate crisis.

"Santa Cruz del Islote is part of the San Bernardo archipelago that lies off the Caribbean coast, a three-hour ferry ride from Cartagena. It is the size of two football pitches and home to between 700 and 800 inhabitants," says the documentary photographer who has been visiting the isle for eight years. His ongoing body of work is an exceptional living portrait of a community and land under threat from rising sea levels that are expected to increase by 30-60cm by 2040 and to eventually engulf the island. "The flooding used to be seasonal — now there is regularly five to six centimeters on the streets," explains Cordero, noting that water supplies and power are frequently cut off.

The images dazzle with rich saturated colors and a sense of intimacy. A group of children hurl themselves into the sea from a concrete patio; in another a young boy with a bright yellow bucket rinses his hair as night falls; elsewhere figures appear and disappear down the labyrinthine streets. Lack of space means daily rituals — haircuts, washing, laundry — take place in the open air, blurring the private/public divisions we generally recognize.

It has taken patience, courage and intense observation to create this body of work, with Cordero winning the trust and respect of the Afro-Caribbean community over the years. "The first thing that surprised me was the color of the houses, the vibrant style of life of the people, the energy," says Cordero, who felt compelled to visit time and time again. "At first, I didn't take any pictures and I got to know the teachers, the pastors and the rebels. Being in both camps helped me bridge the community," says the 37-year-old photographer from his home in Barranquilla.

The Santa Cruz del Islote images are a portrait of an island nation adapting to the climate crisis as much as they are a testament to the fragile beauty of the region. "I want to show the reality of the Caribbean — not the idealized version," says Cordero. "Santa Cruz del Islote has become so known, tourists take boat tours here. It's kind of a zoo. There's a small entrance fee so that brings revenue but the pressure is too much, soon the mangroves will be gone," he says. One island in the archipelago has already disappeared, submerged by the rising waters.

Cordero's own route into photojournalism is spliced with serendipity. While studying industrial design he had the opportunity to join a trip to Holland to take part in a university dance tour. "My host in the Netherlands was a photographer and she loaned me one of her cameras. I became fascinated with it and began

documenting the festival," he smiles. MA studies in Madrid followed and Cordero was hired by the local Barranquilla newspaper *El Heraldo*. "I made stories about other Colombian islands including Tierra Bomba and Nueva Venecia: Places where the people live in commune with the water landscapes and my interest began there," says Cordero who grew up surfing.

With a few photographic assignments under his belt, Cordero later quit the paper to go freelance. "No money, no commissions!" he laughs. "I heard about Islote and decided to take a trip to better understand how a big group of people in a small space really live." The adventure proved life changing. "In the third or fourth year working there, I started to witness the sea levels rising every time and also the impact of a growing number of hotel construction projects in the archipelago," he notes. Islote offered up a microcosmic study of a unique island that is now in jeopardy. The first settlers were fishermen in the late 1870s who built the artificial island on a coral reef. Today, the majority of the population work for hotels in nearby resorts.

Now the award-winning photographer, known for his revelatory stories about societies and lands in flux, is commissioned and exhibits globally. He unearths the truth at ground level. "I love to listen to the stories of the people," says Cordero who covered the damage caused by Hurricane Melissa in Jamaica last year. His

image-making heroes include Magnum photographers Alex Webb and Harry Gruyaert who share his extraordinary sense of color.

Cordero does not sugarcoat and uses a 28mm lens which means getting up close to subjects to capture his tender and empathetic portrayals of humanity. Through this work and collaboration with Eco-Sabios, a regional ecological platform, his bigger mission is to raise awareness around climate emergency and to directly educate the islanders on ocean ecology — particularly the youngsters who will be fighting to protect this watery land from erosion. He regularly visits, taking over gifts that can only be bought on the mainland — recently a football trophy for a local tournament. "Now everyone knows me and the relationship is about friendship," he smiles.





CHARLIE CORDERO
A YOUNG MAN CUTS A CHILD'S HAIR ON THE ISLAND, WHERE MANY DAILY TASKS ARE CARRIED OUT OUTDOORS



CHARLIE CORDERO
LUCERO IS 29 YEARS OLD. SHE SPENDS MOST OF HER FREE TIME HELPING OTHER GIRLS ON THE ISLAND WITH THEIR HAIRCUTS AND BRAIDS



CHARLIE CORDERO
A TEENAGER TAKES A FRESHWATER SHOWER. ACCESS TO POTABLE WATER IS LIMITED, AND RESIDENTS DEPEND ON RAINWATER COLLECTION AND DELIVERIES FROM THE MAINLAND



CHARLIE CORDERO
IN SANTA CRUZ DEL ISLOTE, 65% OF THE POPULATION IS UNDERAGE;
CHILDREN PLAY IN EVERY CORNER



CHARLIE CORDERO
A TEENAGER SHOWS HIS HAIRCUT AGAINST A MAP OF THE SAN BERNARDO ARCHIPELAGO



CHARLIE CORDERO
PORTRAIT OF 17-YEAR-OLD JUAN GUILLERMO ON JANUARY 18, 2024