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ARTIST AND EDUCATOR
SOL ARAMENDI, IN HER FORTIES,
TALKS WITH HER STUDENT
CYNTHIA GOMAR, 31.

Sol Aramendi: I moved to New York twelve years ago from Buenos Aires. It was January—the weather is difficult, no? I didn't have any of the proper clothing. And I went from having family and a lot of friends to a place where I knew very few people. It took me three years to adjust.

A friend had invited me to start a business, but the business didn't work out, so I had to do something to survive. One morning I went to see the sunrise, and I took a picture of it. That first light gave me a lot of hope, I think, and that's when I started going around taking pictures.

First, I felt this compulsion to photograph grass. In New York! It wasn't easy to find. And then I had a dream one night of when I was a kid and my grandmother used to take me to

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the countryside and she would stop in the wheat fields and I would walk in this wheat field like I was swimming. For me, it was the best part. And all these New York pictures of blurry grass—they looked, also, like a sea of grass or like swimming in the grass. It reminded myself of where I was coming from. I needed that connection.

Photography helped me arrive in New York: *I am living here, this is my life now, these are the places I go.* It helped me realize that I don't live anymore in Argentina. After that, things changed completely. I made new friends; I felt more comfortable.

I said, *Okay, since photography's helping me feel at home in the city, I'm going to teach photography—in Spanish—to people who are immigrants.* Most of the time, immigrants are kind of second-class citizens. We are not welcome in many spaces, or we feel like we are not. So I'm reclaiming spaces that we think are not for us.

Why did you come to my class?

Cynthia Gomar: I wasn't happy. I was working Monday through Friday at a factory. I was making, I think, five dollars an hour, and I sent money to my mother. And then on Saturday and Sunday I was visiting family—and that was it. I had arrived from Mexico when I was sixteen, but I couldn't believe that I was really living in New York. You see in the movies that New York's a big city, a great place, but we didn't go to the places that are in the movies. And it was hard for me to

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learn the language, so when we would go out, I felt scared. That was my life for years.

Then, when I got pregnant with my daughter, I stopped working—so I was a full-time mom all the time, until I found out about your class. My friend told me, “I found a flyer about a photography class, and it’s in Spanish. If you want to go, let’s go together.”

Sol: So what were your first impressions of me?

Cynthia: I found you kind of intimidating at first. You said, “Don’t think about your past. Think about what you’re doing now and what you want to do. See the city that you live in. Find out about it. Explore it. *Live* in the place where you live. You can do it!”

But taking pictures changed everything. I feel good when I take pictures; I feel free. I discovered that I can take good pictures, and I can see the city.

Before, I was always afraid of talking in public with people looking at me. But when I take pictures, and everyone’s like, “Oh, show me!” it’s not hard anymore. For me, taking the class, it was freedom. I’m proud of myself. With photography, we can tell stories. We can express how we see the world.

Sol: So how has your idea of New York City changed?

Cynthia: Well, now I don’t visit my family so often. [Laughs.] When they call and say, “Oh, come and visit us,” I say, “You know what? I’m busy. I am taking my kids to the museum.” Now I do believe that I’m a New Yorker. This is my home.

Sol: That makes me feel really good—and also emotional. I really hope that art can help my students be the best that they can, and that they discover their own power. Something that I have learned throughout the years is that the only person that can change you is yourself. And I feel like it’s my duty to create spaces where these changes can happen.

Cynthia: Before I started your class, I was in a room with a closed door, and you opened the door for me. So I want to thank you—I thank you very much.



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Cynthia Gomar (left) and Sol Aramendi.