

A photograph of a small, fluffy chick with blue and white feathers perched on a person's hand. The background is a textured, blue-grey surface. The chick is facing right, and its feet are visible on the hand. The overall mood is calm and gentle.

By Danielle Stewart

Christian Rodriguez

An Unlikely (Mormon) Photojournalist



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*A couple in love
talks near the lake
in Hanoi, Vietnam*
2011

Front cover:
The Blue Chicken
August 2015

Back cover:
*A female motorbike rider
photographed at a traffic
light during rush hour in
Hanoi, Vietnam*
From the *MotoBaik*
project, October 2011

By Danielle Stewart

Christian Rodriguez: **An Unlikely (Mormon)** **Photojournalist**



The Blue Chicken
August 2015

In one of Uruguayan photojournalist Christian Rodriguez's most memorable photographs, a scruffy chick balances on a child's crooked wrist; the chick's unnatural blue hue and the mottled stucco background echo one another uneasily. *The Blue Chicken* is the titular image in Rodriguez's series about the everyday surrealism of life in rural Mexico. Sadly, the story behind the blue bird is more tragic than mystical: it is a cautionary tale about rural poverty navigating the tides of global commercialism. The photographer's text reveals that the bird was one of many painted with synthetic dyes to resemble popular cartoon characters and then sold as "toys." The toxic painting process kills the birds within days. They are sacrificed to the rapacious appetite of consumerism, which reaches even into the mountain villages of southern Mexico.

The blue chick and its tragic story communicate Rodriguez's embrace of Latin American magical realism, a genre that intertwines realistic narratives with inexplicable and fantastic elements. Magical realists confront the incomprehensibility of living with systemic violence—from colonization to contemporary political corruption—by embracing the bizarre in everyday life. *The Blue Chicken*, alongside other photographs in Rodriguez's oeuvre, demarcate his place within a tradition of Latin American surrealist photography that includes [Lola Alvarez Bravo](#), [Grete Stern](#), and [Graciela Iturbide](#).

Alongside Rodriguez's fantastical photographs are deeply empathetic and starkly realistic portrayals of the human experience. Another predominantly blue image of a young couple seated at the edge of a body of water, the male tenderly pointing to the female's outstretched palm, echoes the cool tones and delicate gestures of *The Blue Chicken*, but is grounded in the mundanity of modern life, the vulnerability of young love, and the universal need for human connection. Taken in Vietnam while Rodriguez was working on what would become his international breakthrough story—a photo essay on a Hanoi circus troupe published in *National Geographic's* September 2016 issue—the photograph demonstrates Rodriguez's photojournalistic breadth.

Scanning Rodriguez's broad portfolio, one can easily make sense of the distinctive yet intuitive place his work occupies within the canon of Latin American art. He fits less naturally into the category of art associated with The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, where, as a Latin American photojournalist, he is practically anomalous, even as LDS art becomes increasingly diverse.



Mormon Camerawork

Mormons love photographs. Across the “Mormon corridor,” Utah, Idaho, Wyoming, and Colorado all rank within the top ten states in the US for the number of photographers per capita! Current figures register over 5,000 photographic businesses in Utah, with a 6% increase from 2021 to 2026. Quantitative and anecdotal evidence suggest that Mormons, at least those living in the Rocky Mountain states, love viewing, creating, and preserving photographs—from the continuous parade of wedding shoots in front of Wasatch Front temples to the social media feeds of Mormon “MomTok” influencers?²

This embrace of image-making is not a new phenomenon; LDS businesses and hobbyists helped to drive the scrapbooking craze of the late 1990s and early 2000’s³. As a medium, photography is deeply connected to the “Elijan” spirit of LDS doctrine and culture. However, because of the deeply personal and familial nature of photographs in LDS culture, Mormonism has not produced an outstanding cadre of artistic photographers or photojournalists. Despite Mormonism’s photo-enthusiasm, when it comes to art history, Mormons have more often been in front of the camera than behind it.

As BYU-based photohistorian James Swensen notes in his essay, “Defining the Mormon Landscape: Photography and the Representation and Evolution of a Distinctive American Space,” Mormons were early adopters of photographic technologies. Early in Utah’s history, [Charles R. Savage](#) and [George E. Anderson](#) contributed to documenting and disseminating information about the LDS Church’s settlement of Utah. These men created a vision of the “Mormon Landscape” linked to community cooperation and land cultivation⁴

In the twentieth century, the list of Mormon photographers to receive broad artistic or academic recognition dwindled. In the 1940’s, non-LDS photographers [Dorothea Lange](#), [Arthur Rothstein](#), and [Russell Lee](#) photographed Utah’s agricultural communities under the auspices of the Farm Security Administration as part of a broader goal to support rural rehabilitation nationwide. Later in the century, photographs of Mormon communities circulated broadly via projects like Lange’s photo essay “Three Mormon Towns,” published in the September 6, 1954 issue of [LIFE magazine](#), and *The Mission: Inside The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints* (1995), a large-format photobook. Both were outsider views of Mormonism. Photographs



produced by LDS photographers often had more limited, regional circulation, primarily near Utah's large universities in Provo, Salt Lake City, and Logan.

So, why have there been no great Mormon photographers?⁵ Since the shuttering of the federally funded FSA program in 1944 and the decline of illustrated magazines in the 1960s, documentary photography and photojournalism have become increasingly precarious fields. More to the point of this essay, they are largely incongruous with a traditional LDS lifestyle, requiring constant relocation and offering little economic stability. Rodriguez's photographic pursuits necessitated a semi-transient lifestyle, taking him to Spain, Vietnam, across Latin America, and to his current residence in Sweden. These moves were necessitated by photographic training (he completed his Master's degree in documentary photography in Spain), professional opportunities (he spent several months in Vietnam photographing circus performers there), and personal necessity. Furthermore, photojournalists are often expected to create their reportages "on spec," shouldering the cost of the story's production in the hopes that it will eventually be purchased by one or more media outlets.

This occupational insecurity makes it easy to understand why there would be few LDS photojournalists, and why those who have risen to relative prominence, like American Fork-born Steven B. Smith, have largely chosen subjects directly tied to the American West and the "Mormon landscape."

Previous page:
Still from *Women of Resistance*
2006

Top:
Yuka Iseda, principal dancer at Carmen Roche Ballet, during a class in Madrid, Spain
October 2010

First International Forays

For Rodriguez, who grew up more than 6,000 miles from Utah in the relatively small but stable country of Uruguay, documenting the “Mormon landscape” was not an option. He benefited from an artistic upbringing—his grandmother enrolled him in art classes as a teenager, and he studied drawing and painting for eight years—and discovered photography as a young undergraduate. From there, his interest in the medium escalated quickly: he worked in a photolab before serving an LDS mission and then studied communications at university. He briefly worked as a cameraman on a TV news team before becoming a photojournalist for a local newspaper.

Looking to expand his journalistic horizons, Rodriguez traveled to Lebanon in 2006 to cover the aftermath of that year’s Israel-

Hezbollah conflict, producing images for stock photo agencies. His time in the Middle East culminated in the project *Women of Resistance*, a short film highlighting female members of Hezbollah. A conservative political force that encourages female modesty through veiling, Hezbollah also advocates for female political resistance.⁶ Rodriguez’s five-minute film expeditiously exposes the paradox of women finding strength—and even rebellion—in a system that requires their physical obscurity. In doing so, he highlights the tension between faith and politics, belief and the lived practice of religion. The film also introduces an important throughline in Rodriguez’s work: women’s narratives.

Rodriguez’s work in Lebanon won him a scholarship into the MFA program at the

International Center of Film and Photography (EFTI) in Madrid. While there, he completed another woman-centered project on female migrants in Madrid. Rodriguez felt drawn to the topic because of his own experience as an outsider in Spain, but his interest in women’s stories emanates from his personal history as the son of a single mother raised largely by his maternal grandmother. His frequent foregrounding of women’s voices defies broader cultural currents within the Western art world, Latin America, and the LDS Church. Fortunately, offering primacy to women’s stories proved an effective strategy for Rodriguez, not only funding his MFA but also elevating him to the top of his graduating class and winning him the prestigious FNAC New Talents prize in 2013.⁷





Previous page:
Guadalupe, left, and Gloria wear huipils, traditional clothes from Oaxaca, Mexico. They live with their mother, along with three other siblings and Gloria's son, in a small town near Mathias Romero, Oaxaca
From the *Teen Mom* Project, 2013

Top:
A young boy herds livestock in the mountains near Sa Pa, northern Vietnam
2011

Following pages:
A young man from the Hmong ethnic group walks back home through the mountains of northern Vietnam
September 2011

A Hmong mother and her child work in rice plantations in the mountains of northern Vietnam
September 2011

Missives from Vietnam

Rodriguez began traveling to Vietnam during his MFA. There, he shot his breakout story on performers from the Vietnam Circus Federation, Hanoi's oldest circus troupe. *National Geographic's* photo essay featuring these images was translated into fifty languages, but Rodriguez's time in Vietnam also produced a photo book called *Motobaik* about female motorcyclists. Showcasing the vibrantly printed clothing that female motobikers wear to protect their skin from the sun and pollution, the book recalls themes from Rodriguez's previous projects while also interrogating beauty standards, socio-economic status, and modern commercialism.

Women also feature prominently in photographs Rodriguez made while traveling through the rural, rice-growing regions of northern Vietnam near the Chinese border. The series *Làng Tôi*, or "my village," foregrounds the Hmong people, the largest ethnic minority in Vietnam. A portrait of both the region and the Hmong ethnic group, the work demonstrates Rodriguez's technical growth through his expert color modulation and atmospheric storytelling.

In *Làng Tôi*, the rich, brown mud of the mountain region contrasts sharply with the verdant green rice paddies and saturated tones of the laborers' colorful clothing. Much of the traditional clothing is made from indigo-dyed hemp cloth, casting the photographs in a cool blue that anticipates the shade of *The Blue Chicken*, a photograph that would be made several years later. Blues hover like a mist over the series from the silhouettes of distant ridgelines to the backpack straps of a young agricultural worker to the headscarf of a mother harvesting with a child tied to her back (an image that also presages things to come).

Blue tones are a hallmark of Rodriguez's work, reappearing in projects made across Latin America after his return from Europe. Rodriguez's ability to find tonal patterns across various geographies testifies to his skill as a colorist, a relatively unique ability within the canon of Latin American photographers, which has been historically dominated by artists working in black and white. For example, Brazilian documentarian [Sebastião Salgado](#), arguably the best-known living Latin American photographer and one of Rodriguez's inspirations, photographs almost exclusively in black and white. While the differences between Salgado and Rodriguez's approaches can be explained in part by their different vehicles for dissemination—primarily books for Salgado, and media outlets for Rodriguez—it can also be attributed to their individual sensibilities. Rodriguez's lyrical use of color crescendos in the *Teen Mom* series.







Birth and Complications

Teen Mom is Rodriguez's most geographically wide-ranging project, incorporating film and photography from nine Latin American countries. It is also his most ethically complex. Inspired by his background as the child of a single mother—Rodriguez met his father for the first time at the age of 35—and his entry into fatherhood, *Teen Mom*'s capitialar structure invites a multifaceted exploration of teen pregnancy. As a region, Latin America and the Caribbean is second only to sub-Saharan Africa in teen birthrate. Approximately 1.6 million Latin American girls under the age of twenty give birth each year, one every twenty seconds. *Teen Mom* explores topics from the educational and health impacts of teen pregnancy to its sociological causes and medical recourses. In a 2017 TED talk, Rodriguez framed *Teen Mom* as a project about gender violence that is “physical, symbolic, psychological, and economic.”⁸

The project began in Rodriguez's home country of Uruguay, which has one of the highest rates of teen pregnancy in the world. Working for several months at the Dra. Paulina Luisi Women's Hospital in Montevideo, where teen moms accounted for 26% of all births, Rodriguez attended at least two dozen vaginal deliveries and nearly the same number of cesarians, some lasting as long as

fourteen hours. The resulting photographs are raw and primal. Bathed in the eerie blue hue cast by the turquoise hospital walls, the images capture the terrifying viscerality of labor and birth. The young mothers' faces are contorted in pain while they cling to family members and hospital attendants. In one video, a newly-delivered mother shudders silently and uncontrollably before starting to weep, more from pain than from happiness, at the birth of her child. Such intimate imagery makes *Teen Mom* one of the few artistic projects that unflinchingly represents the sublimity of childbirth, alongside [Rineke Dijkstra](#)'s celebrated *New Mothers* series from the 1990s. Even the latter feels staid and staged in comparison with the immediacy of Rodriguez's delivery-room camerawork.⁹

As with Rodriguez's previous series, the color blue plays an important aesthetic and symbolic role in *Teen Mom*. Uruguay is a country with a strong Catholic heritage, but also the highest rate of irreligion in Latin America. In this context, the teenage mothers-to-be on their blue-draped beds invite associations with the Virgin Mary. Unlike the generally pacific depictions of Mary's labor and delivery, the teen moms are visibly bare and vulnerable, stripped of both clothing and pretenses in their struggle against human biology. The comparison



Previous page:
Ángela and her sister Patricia during labor. Patricia comforts Ángela through painful contractions. The father of her baby and her boyfriend was murdered 20 days before she gave birth
From the *Teen Mom* Project, October 2012



Top:
Daiana, 17, moments before being taken to the delivery room to give birth to her third child. She became a mother for the first time at 14 to Ezequiel, then at 15 to Felipe, and at 17 to Santiago, who was born on October 27, 2012
From the *Teen Mom* Project, October 2012

Bottom:
Olga Noel Maciel, 15, gives birth to her daughter, Wendy Berenice
From the *Teen Mom* Project, October 2012

is important, since the Bible alludes that, were it not for angelic intervention, Mary might have been seen as the single mother of an illegitimate son. Rodriguez does not speak about the project in religious terms, but his position as an evangelist of social reform invites the comparison..

Uruguay is only one chapter of the *Teen Mom* project. Other chapters shot across Latin America reveal distinct, but overlapping aspects of teenage motherhood, from the lack of access to contraceptives in Venezuela to struggles with malnutrition in Nicaragua. In Mexico, Rodriguez tells the particularly tragic story of a teenage incest victim, Gloria, who gave birth to her father's son at twelve years old. According to Rodriguez, the baby went nameless for almost a year due to the lingering resentment the mother felt towards her child because of the trauma of her abuse.

To underscore the shocking circumstances of Gloria's pregnancy and highlight her indigenous Mixe heritage, Rodriguez approached her chapter metaphorically. It is the only installment to receive this magical realist treatment, and the only one to focus on an individual story. Rodriguez learned about Gloria through a local NGO and traveled

hours into the jungles of southern Mexico to meet her. Photographing Gloria and her son, Juan Diego, was a slow process, as Rodriguez first had to gain the trust of a family full of wary women (Gloria, her two sisters, and her mother).¹⁰ The resulting photographs are reminiscent of Mexico's artistic heritage, specifically the surrealist self-portraits of Frida Kahlo, who famously struggled with her inability to carry a child, and colonial images of the Virgin Mary and Christ. A photograph of Juan Diego wrapped in a deep blue cloth and sleeping in a hammock visually recalls both Nativity scenes and Rodriguez's blue-toned photographs from Vietnam. Likewise, a portrait of Gloria with a glittery butterfly clipped in her hair and thorns around her neck associates her with suffering, atonement, rebirth, and resurrection; Rodriguez has turned her into a martyr.





Teen Mom, Mormon Mom

Explaining the urgency of *Teen Mom*, Rodriguez observed, “Girls who become pregnant before they are 18 rarely obtain an adequate standard of living. The pattern of poverty and limited access to education and healthcare is a common thread among teen pregnancies.”¹¹ For these same reasons, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints has long cautioned against teenage sexual activity and for the active participation of both parents in child-rearing. At the same time, the Church has created cultural pressure around motherhood through declarations like, “Mothers are primarily responsible for the nurture of their children.”¹² Ironically, by making motherhood a requirement and a badge of honor, the Church cultivates an allure around the role similar to that felt by Latin American teen moms. As Rodriguez explains, “motherhood imparts status and respect [...] in her community. Her child becomes her life project.”¹³ How familiar that sounds to many LDS women.

One way to combat this cultural pressure, Rodriguez suggests, is to amplify messaging around fatherhood. As part of *Teen Mom*,

Rodriguez photographed teen fathers in the Dominican Republic; he also photographed teenage boys and girls caring for “baby robots” together as part of a school assignment in Colombia. “I wanted to highlight the [...] need to educate boys differently, without turning them into macho men,” Rodriguez suggested.¹⁴ This thinking also emanates from the LDS community in calls to transmute the long-held model of motherhood as a parallel to the priesthood into an equivalence between motherhood and fatherhood.¹⁵ Recent (and controversial) Church social media posts have also showcased women in higher education, complementing Rodriguez’s assertions that education is a primary vehicle for interrupting girls’ over-identification with the role of mothers.¹⁶

Many things make Rodriguez an impressive photographer: his gift for observing and recording color, his deeply empathetic approach to people from across the globe, his intuition for finding subjects that are both aesthetically engaging and socially significant, and his ability to infuse documentary

images with a sense of the fantastic. Perhaps most importantly, he connects deeply with individuals navigating periods of complexity, emphasizing their resiliency and humanity. One manifestation of this is his attention to women’s voices, from the female motobikers of northern Vietnam to Latin American teen moms. To emerge from the patriarchal spheres of both the contemporary art world and the LDS Church with the ability to listen to, document, and circulate women’s stories is a remarkable achievement..

Previous page:
Gloria and Juan Diego
From the *Teen Mom*
Project, 2013

Top:
***Juan Diego, Gloria’s
son, takes a nap in his
hammock. Gloria gave
him his name when he
was 10 months old; until
then, he had simply been
called “the baby” at home***
From the *Teen Mom*
Project, 2013



Livestock market in Lao Cai, northwestern Vietnam. The market is an important trading hub for ethnic minority communities in the region
2012

Gloria, 13, photographed with butterfly figures in her hair and a necklace of thorns
From the *Teen Mom* Project, 2013

Endnotes

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About the Author

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