

> snapshots from the center of the universe Metropolis



In a photograph by Bia Gayotto, residents of Pasadena's Towers Apartments answer "yes" to the question "Do you vote?" by turning their lights on.

Tower of Power

Throwing Some Light on Urban Living

Angelenos have perfected the art of keeping to themselves. They traverse the city in insulated automobiles and rarely talk to strangers. But there's poetry in all of those windows that glow along the streets when the sun goes down, and photo-artist Bia Gayotto found a way to illuminate the subject with help from the city of Pasadena's Cultural Affairs Division.

Early this year, Gayotto asked south-facing residents of Pasadena's historic Towers Apartments to use their apartment lights to answer a question for Gayotto's camera each night for a week (on for yes, off for no). Topics included such queries as, "Do you vote?", "Do you know your neighbors?" and "Do you consider yourself happy?" The result is "The Towers Apartments I-VII," seven 18-by-40-inch digital prints each representing a single theme. The images, on view at the Armory Center for the Arts through Feb. 8, document the ability of Gayotto, a Brazil native, to get one group of hardened urbanites to open up about life behind the window panes.

Gayotto, who sees the project as "a feminine approach to architectural photography," began searching Los Angeles for the right building about two years ago. At first she planned to shoot the seniors apartment building on Olive Street behind the Museum of Contemporary Art, but after receiving an individual artist grant from Pasadena's Cultural Affairs Division, she chose the 1929 Towers Apartments.

Concerned about the potential for distortion in single wide-angle photographs, Gayotto decided to make each tableau a digital composite of two large-format camera shots.

Getting the residents on board wasn't as easy as she had hoped. The surveys she slipped under their doors with a letter of explanation went mostly unanswered. One came back with the following note: "I don't see what the requested information has to do with a photo of apartment house at night. This is not art."

But a couple of residents got excited and rallied others. Gayotto camped out in the building lobby several weekend mornings to assuage concerns. Soon she had completed surveys from almost all of the 16 she had queried. She distributed directions to each resident instructing them to turn their lights on or off each night during the approximately 15-minute shoots. She also invited them to stand in their windows or place objects of significance on the sill.

Gayotto recalls that when she arrived for the first shoot, on the question "Do you consider yourself happy?", "almost all the lights were on. It was so emotional." Gayotto says the building itself is somewhat ordinary: "It's a building not many people notice. But it's amazing how it has changed for me. Now I know most of the people who live there, and the building, it's like part of me."

Many of the residents now see the Towers in a new light as well. "At first it was an invasion of privacy," says artist Christine L'hotsky. "Then it turned into absolute trust. It's definitely an artifact."

"I really see its personality," adds Dora Guerra, a legal secretary who has lived at the Towers for about two years. "She almost anthropomorphized the building." —LESLEE KOMAIKO