



Helping to curate an exhibition on the Cuban Revolution gave young photographer **EDUARDO LEAL** a thirst for Latin America that had to be quenched. So he packed his camera and flew to Venezuela for the 200th anniversary of the country's independence. Keith Wilson hears what happened next

WHEN EDUARDO MET HUGO

When Eduardo Leal arrived in Caracas, the chaotic and crumbling capital of Venezuela, at the beginning of July 2011, he wasn't sure what to expect or how he would cope. Friends and colleagues had already regaled him with tales of a city where muggings and other street crime were rampant and tourists adorned with cameras and other conspicuous labels of wealth were easy targets. Unsurprisingly, the young Portuguese photographer felt ill at ease when he stepped on to the streets ahead of the country's celebrations of 200 years of independence from Spain. Caracas, he had been reliably informed, had a higher murder rate than Baghdad.

"Caracas has a reputation as a very violent city and this is true," Eduardo recalled as we sat in the more sedate surroundings of the National Portrait Gallery in London. "But it is like any large Latin American city, in that it is crowded and there's always something going on in the streets. My friends told me to be careful. I was a white guy with a camera. The first day I could not hold my camera, I was so nervous."

The excitement in the air was palpable: it was the first weekend in July and the following Monday – 4 July – had been declared a public holiday to celebrate the bicentennial of independence. This was also Saints Peter and Paul's Day, so religious devotion and national ►





pride would surely combine to create an unmatched atmosphere of excitement and emotion. “They are so passionate,” said Eduardo when describing the residents of Caracas. “They think life is for today. They don’t worry about the future, not even the next day.”

But something was worrying large sectors of the crowd who were mobbing the streets – where was *el comandante*, the commander, the president? Only a month earlier Venezuela’s controversial and charismatic leader, Hugo Chavez, had made an unscheduled flight to Cuba. Chavez is rarely out of the public gaze or away from Twitter, so his prolonged absence and the lack of subsequent information fuelled a wave of conspiracy theories and hearsay. Eduardo recalled: “Because Chavez had disappeared, the public weren’t talking about the 200th anniversary, they were talking about Chavez, saying: ‘Where is he? Why is he not here?’”

By this stage Eduardo had overcome his nerves and mingled among the crowds that gathered regularly outside the Miraflores Palace, the presidential home, hoping for a crumb of news regarding the fate of *el comandante*. Fluent in Spanish, Eduardo was able to blend with the crowds, but his accent made some listeners think he was from Cuba. It was a mistake he accepted as a compliment because of his keen interest in Latin American politics and in legendary Cuban photographer Alberto Korda. A few months earlier an exhibition commemorating the 50th anniversary of the Cuban Revolution had opened at the Garage Centre for Contemporary Culture in Moscow. Eduardo catalogued the images for the exhibition. Now, he found himself in the midst of a 21st-century revolution as increasing numbers gathered outside the presidential palace, waving banners, chanting and singing.

“As we were getting closer and closer to 5 July (Independence Day), the people were getting more excited and worried. On 2 July it was very crowded at the palace but Chavez wasn’t there.”

Within the densely-packed throngs, Eduardo was often pinned with the camera close to his chest and struggled to bring the viewfinder up to his eye. Sometimes he fired almost randomly, the



{ WORKING PRO }

“I had spent so much time checking the background of these photographs, I felt inspired to do my own street photography, and here was this revolution happening in Venezuela.” Eduardo Leal

camera held high above his head. He used wide-angle zooms on his Canon EOS 5D Mark II – either a Sigma 17-35mm f/2.8-4 EX DG or a Canon EF 24-70mm f/2.8L USM. “I took a longer lens but I never used it,” he said. “I tried to get as close as possible and the people were interested in what I was doing. Some were saying, ‘Why are you photographing? What are you going to say about this? Are you going to say something good?’ They are really vocal and passionate.”

Then, on 3 July, Chavez made a sudden appearance on national TV, announcing that he had cancer and would return home the next day. The president had flown to Cuba for surgery on 10 June and had been diagnosed with cancer. Demonstrations by his most loyal supporters (Chavistas) were held outside the presidential palace and in Plaza de Bolivar, the main square. Eduardo said: “When he said he had cancer people said ‘No! We want him, we need him here!’ I was in Plaza de Bolivar watching the Chavistas. The women were crying and that’s when I knew these people really loved him.”

The crowds didn’t disperse during the night and by the morning of 4 July the excitement heightened as more people pushed closer to the palace for a glimpse of the balcony where they expected *el comandante* to appear. Eduardo was so hemmed in that he struggled to see his images on the camera monitor: “I really didn’t know what I had shot until I got back to my room and could look at them.” It seemed as though most of the population of Caracas were on the streets.

Then around 5pm, the president appeared on the balcony and spoke. “When he was talking, people were shouting ‘Go to bed! Rest! You don’t have to talk!’ But he spoke for an hour. He was very passionate and energetic,” recalled Eduardo. “Afterwards a lot of people stayed in the gardens singing and dancing and holding flags. Out in the avenue it was like a big party.”

The next morning – Independence Day – was a more formal occasion, with a military parade of soldiers and tanks, and dignitaries from China, Russia and neighbouring Latin American nations. “You didn’t feel the passion of the people,” said Eduardo. “It was more organised, a scheduled event, but lacking the spontaneity of previous days. It was interesting as a contrast though.”

Eduardo duly photographed the event, knowing that his assignment was now complete, but aware also that he was one of a handful of professional photographers to have witnessed the scenes of the past four days. The independence celebrations and the uncertainty about the whereabouts and health of Chavez had presented a potent story mix ideal

for documenting in black and white. Eduardo felt a great sense of achievement: only a few months previously he had been poring over the photographs of Alberto Korda; now he felt something of what Korda must have lived every day when making his iconic images of Che Guevara and Fidel Castro. “I had spent so much time checking the background of these photographs, I felt inspired to do my own street photography, and here was this revolution happening in Venezuela.”

So, will Hugo Chavez and Eduardo Leal meet again? Despite his health problems, Chavez says he will stand for re-election as president in October 2012 and Eduardo intends to be there. “I would liked to have represented this story through sound, so when I go back I will record sound as well.” You may argue that the cries of the Chavistas as photographed by Eduardo Leal can already be heard through the silence of his stills. But come October there will be no doubting. **PP**

www.eduardoleal.co.uk



BIOGRAPHY
Eduardo Leal was born and raised in Portugal and gained a degree in journalism from the University of Porto. He worked for a Non-Governmental Organisation in Peru from 2004 to 2005 before returning to Europe. After spending some time in Edinburgh he moved to London where he now lives. Further study at the London College of Communication was followed by an introduction to the photography of Alberto Korda through a lecture at Magnum Photos agency. Eduardo was then invited to work at the Arpad A. Busson Foundation in London researching and cataloguing images for the *Cuba in Revolution* exhibition shown in New York and Moscow.