

MAIDU BEAR DANCE, Susanville, California

The Bear Dance is important to the people. It's a time of confirmation of family ties and friendship. It establishes our ongoing actions with the universe and puts us in touch with the land and animals in our immediate surroundings.

We do the dance four times to start it and let everyone know what's going on. Then another four times to do the ceremony. We use wormwood for blessing, to talk to the bear, by brushing the bear with it. At the end we go down to the river to make our blessings.

The Bear Dance is a time to pay respect to rattlesnake and bear, who are important to the land and people, according to the Maidu people. The Bear Dance ceremony is an expression of thankfulness for the new year. Many people, friends and relatives, are involved in helping to make the dance work, providing the food and necessities. One comes away with fond memories and ready for the Maidu New Year.

Frank LaPena, Nomtipom Wintu artist and professor emeritus,
California State University, Sacramento

TAKING PHOTOGRAPHS OF THE BEAR DANCE

Interview with Dugan Aguilar by Theresa Harlan

Theresa Harlan: What were you thinking about when you took these photos?

Dugan Aguilar: I just wanted to document the Bear Dance. The photo with the flag over the bear skin is one of my favorite images, and we have that framed up in the house. Over the last three or four years I've taken pictures if it. At this particular dance there were lots of strong images. I think the spirit was there, kind of backing me, I guess.

TH: You've gone to so many Bear Dances that you probably know what you want to photograph.

DA: Yeah. That's the thing, too. Like this one here [gesturing to the photo of the elder on the wheelchair being blessed by the bear] just says a lot about the loss of the elders. There's another one of my favorite ones, where the dancer under the skin is coming straight at you, and he's backlit and kicking up dust. And you can barely see the flag hanging. Once upon a time I went over to Yosemite for their dances in the roundhouse, which isn't very big. So, I was just kind of standing outside by the door while the bears were getting ready in the little side house. I wish I would have had my camera, but I didn't really know the people that well. I was just watching the shadows grow inside the pit and oh man, the spirits really started up. It's hit me a few times, but that particular time, you just really had more respect for the bear. Even as they were just getting dressed.

There was another time in Sacramento for the national Congress of the American Indians conference. And they had a Bear Dance at night, so there's about twenty bears from all over the state—white ones, cinnamon ones, short ones, big ones—and they all came out and danced. And I tried to take pictures of that, but the batteries in my camera were low, so all I got was shadows. And I thought, well, it's just meant to be. [laughs]

TH: [laughs] You've said that there are things in the photographs that people might not see. What are some of the things that people might miss?

DA: Well, what I've learned over the years is that the images have a spirit of their own. I've learned from the basket makers, who say that everything has to be right and you have to say thank you to the earth when you gather your materials. So I do the same thing. I just love all these people I consider my family, the people of Northern California especially. I call them my extended family. When I first moved to Sacramento, I wouldn't see another Native for a week or maybe even two. Finally I had the chance with my photography to go to various events and learn about the different families. Usually the families that you run into are the ones who are still practicing their traditional values. Natives are beautiful people. When you look back over history, we really got a raw deal and there's a long way to go still. There are people that you can hammer on all day long and they still won't change their viewpoints about minorities or the prejudices that still exist.

I just feel that my photos work when they have a spirit and a story. I'm so thankful. I sacrificed taking pictures of my immediate family to take Native American photos in Northern California primarily. And now I consider myself part of this larger family. And really it's been such a great experience to meet people and go into their homes. And sometimes I'll see a photo I've taken—I've given away a lot of them for gifts. I've never been into it for the money part. I actually don't like to talk about money. Photographers are supposed to have some amount of self-promotion, but my dad always told me don't brag about yourself. I always just wanted to do a little above average, not be the best at anything. I think when you're the best, when you're the fastest gunslinger, someone else is always going to come along with more talent. There's a lot of talent in this world. I'm just grateful to have gotten to have this as my artistic release.