

# CHOOSING TO FOCUS ON COMMUNITY

VALERIAN MAZATAUD REVEALS  
A DIFFERENT SIDE OF MONTREAL NORTH

BY LAURENCE BUTET-ROCH

**To mark the five years since Fredy Villanueva's death in Montreal North, Franco-Canadian photographer Valerian Mazataud decided to create a portrait of the neighbourhood. As he worked on the project from 2012 to 2013, it grew in scope and took on a community focus.**

In 2008, the death of Fredy Villanueva—an eighteen-year-old killed by a Montreal police officer—put Montreal North in the national news headlines. The media took the opportunity to focus on the worst aspects of the neighbourhood: poverty, discrimination, violence, illegal drugs, gangs, and so on. Already isolated from the rest of the city by urban infrastructure (Highway 25 and train tracks) and geography (a river), the neighbourhood has since become considered a place to avoid.

Concerned about the continued schism, Valerian Mazataud—then a resident of the trendy Plateau Mont-Royal neighbourhood—went to Montreal North, hoping to create a more nuanced portrait of the area. During his first visit, it was snowing, just like it was everywhere on the island of Montreal, and probably elsewhere in the province. This simple observation solidified the photographer's conviction that the media had acted unjustly: Montreal

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North is so often depicted as “somewhere else” that we almost forget that it's a part of the city. “Bourassa-Sauvé, the provincial electoral district that includes Montreal North, is the poorest county in Canada [average annual income of \$26,000 per person].\* The percentage of single mothers is one of the highest in the country, as is the unemployment rate, and

the high-school graduation rate is very low. So we stick on the label of ‘ghetto,’ along with everything else that goes with that,” said the thirty-something.

The area was relatively prosperous until the end of the 90s, when the textile industry collapsed. Over the years, Montreal North has slowly become a refuge for people looking for an affordable place to live, largely because of the politics of the borough's former mayor, Yves Ryan, who had more low-rent housing built. “The neighbourhood functions, in a way, as a transitional place. Few residents own their home, and they have a tendency to move if they have the means to do so. But even if these neighbours haven't all grown up together, even if they don't have a lot of shared experiences and come from the four corners of the world, a local identity developed. And it solidified at the moment of Fredy Villanueva's death,” Mazataud said. Despite its isolation,

\*LAURENCE, JEAN-CHRISTOPHE. “ÉLECTIONS FÉDÉRALES 2015: « ILS VEULENT DES VOTES ET APRÈS, ILS DÉCALISSIONT »” SEPTEMBER 30, 2015. L'APRESSE.CA



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“The term ‘ghetto’ has a negative connotation because it suggests a place where people are forced to live because of social, economic

and/or physical reasons, whereas ‘community’ refers to a group of people who live together and share their resources to improve their environment. A place can be both things at once,” explained the Montreal photojournalist. Over time, by walking around and letting himself be guided by fortuitous encounters, Mazataud got involved in the neighbourhood. As a result, he was able to photograph everyday events as well as times of gathering, celebration and remembrance, sharing both the difficulties and triumphs of the residents. “Eventually, I ended up getting to know elected officials, activists, employees of various organizations, and residents, and, in doing so, I started to feel like I belonged in a way,” he confided. And that motivated him to invest himself even more in the community.

Despite its isolation, Montreal North stands out for its large number of community organizations, which create a unique neighbourhood life.



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With the help of the local Carrefour Jeunesse-Emploi, an organization that offers assistance to young people pursuing employment-related projects, Mazataud organized a photo workshop. During a three-month period, for about

two or three hours a week, he helped youth learn how to use a camera by giving them small challenges like “photograph all the employees of the centre” or “create low-light images.” The goal was to push them to meet and build connections with others. He continued, “I figured I had succeeded when one of the participants came to see me, surprised and happy that someone he had met on the street had agreed to be photographed. They learn that the camera can be a tool for meeting people rather than an intrusive or even aggressive object.”

This area was previously known for drugs and prostitution, but the creation of a community garden (in what had been a parking lot), a civic council, and cooperative activities have revitalized the area. “For a month and a half, the images were part of the local visual landscape and everyday life of the neighbourhood,” reflected Mazataud. It proved an effective way to reach an audience that rarely goes to art galleries, museums or cultural centres.

Now Mazataud wants to tour the exhibition to other Montreal neighbourhoods as a way to fight certain stereotypes and create connections between different communities in the city. He concluded, “We all live in the same city. But despite our proximity, there are many neighbourhoods where we never set foot.” ■

The photographer has also designed several exhibitions, one of which took place outdoors. A series of 40 x 60” images were printed on fabric and hung on residential balconies surrounding a new park called La Voisinierie.



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