

LISETTE MORALES

While sitting in a canoe in the Florida Everglades, photographer Lisette Morales feels like she can touch the sky. The water, dotted with American lotus flowers, mirrors the stars above. In the stillness and silence, she says, is a symphony of life.

The wetlands are a source of peace and healing for the Naples-based artist, activist and storyteller. Best known for her work's humanistic approach, Lisette captures not only the Everglades' natural beauty but also the people who have stewarded the land for ages. Her photography immortalizes community gardens in Immokalee, Aztec dancers honoring Mother Earth, and the Miccosukee and Seminole Tribal leaders fighting for the Everglades' future. "[My photos] document the work of

Indigenous communities in their efforts to protect the land, protect tradition and avoid cultural erasure," Lisette says.

The photographer's work is currently on display at Artis—Naples, The Baker Museum's *Entangled in the Mangroves* exhibit, the most recent in a long line of convention-challenging shows to highlight her oeuvre. Her lens offers a firsthand account of the threatened ecosystems and cultures of the region, compelling viewers to consider the beauty of what might be lost—what we all stand to lose.

Lisette, who traces her roots to Nicaragua, has called Florida home since 2000. A multicultural woman of Nahua-Nicarao ancestry, she grew up with an Indigenous grandmother who taught her how to milk cows, forage for edible plants and grow corn. "She took only what she needed and made sure that there were seeds for the future," Lisette says. Sustainability, she learned, is about being connected to our food, fostering future resources and caring for your neighbors.

Even in her early 20s, using a camera her friends gifted her, Lisette's lens was drawn to the human condition. She wasn't surrounded by strong examples of Latina artists until she met Naples-based community organizer and Frida Kahlo researcher Margarita Claro. Inspired by Claro's Mexican pride, Lisette pursued her first big project in 2014: a series of black-and-white portraits of Claro in traditional garb. The collection became a sensation. It was the first time Claro, somewhat of a local legend, had been photographed, presenting a powerful portrayal of a local woman for marginalized communities.

"That's when I realized the local impact of photography," she says.

After an unexpected hospitalization in 2016, Lisette was desperate for nature and joined an Everglades prayer walk led by Miccosukee environmental activist Betty Osceola. "I realized the connection that she has with the land is the connection that I had lost with my homelands," Lisette says. Her journey of personal and environmental healing began: walking intentionally, slowing down with the water's flow, and surrendering to the fear and awe that make her feel alive. For her, it's a meditation. "Once you conquer the fear, you walk a little more," she says.

The Everglades is a landscape in constant flux, always giving Lisette new things to photograph. Today, when the 54-year-old encounters spiders in Fakahatchee Strand Preserve State Park—a sign of a healthy ecosystem, since declining insect and arachnid populations often signal environmental degradation—she plays with how sunlight glimmers on the webs. She hopes her photos inspire people to connect with the Everglades in their own way. All it takes, she says, is some natural curiosity. "How do we help the Everglades if you don't know it?" she reflects.

—Marlowe Starling

