

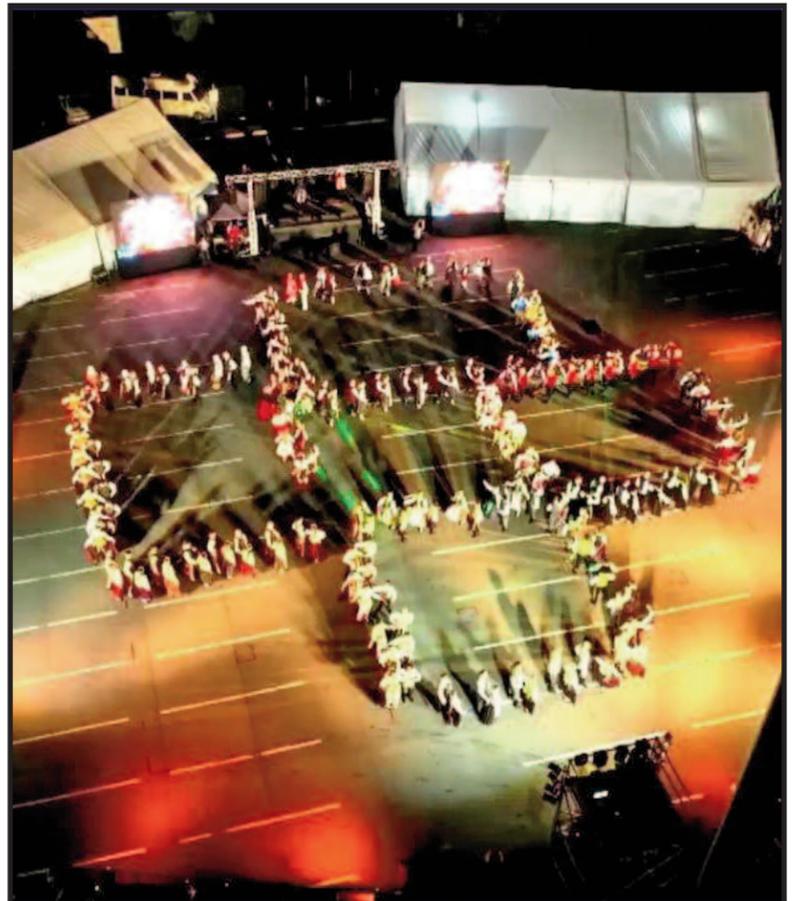
PERIODICALS

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Allí, donde fluye el río Nemunas Where the Nemunas flows

On December 17, Argentina was host to a spectacular Lithuanian Folk Dance Festival called “Where the Nemunas Flows.” The title, of course, refers to Lithuania, but it’s also a nod to Argentina’s 114-year-old Lithuanian Cultural Society “Nemunas,” whose two premier dance groups “Nemunas” and “Skaidra,” are marking 50-year anniversaries. Their artistic directors were at the helm of the festival’s impressive organizational feat.

The date of the festival coincided with an exciting time in Argentina – it was the eve of the FIFA World Cup soccer final, and the atmosphere was thick with anticipation before Argentina’s showdown with France (in which Argentina triumphed the following day). The Folk Dance Festival added its own buzz to Argentina’s port city Berisso. Here, more than 400 dancers converged from various corners of the world – Argentina, Uruguay, the US, Sweden and Lithuania – to perform Lithuanian folk dances in measured synchronicity to the delight of over 1,200 spectators.



Lithuanian Folk Dance Festival in Argentina

8



King of Them All, Immortalized in Art 12

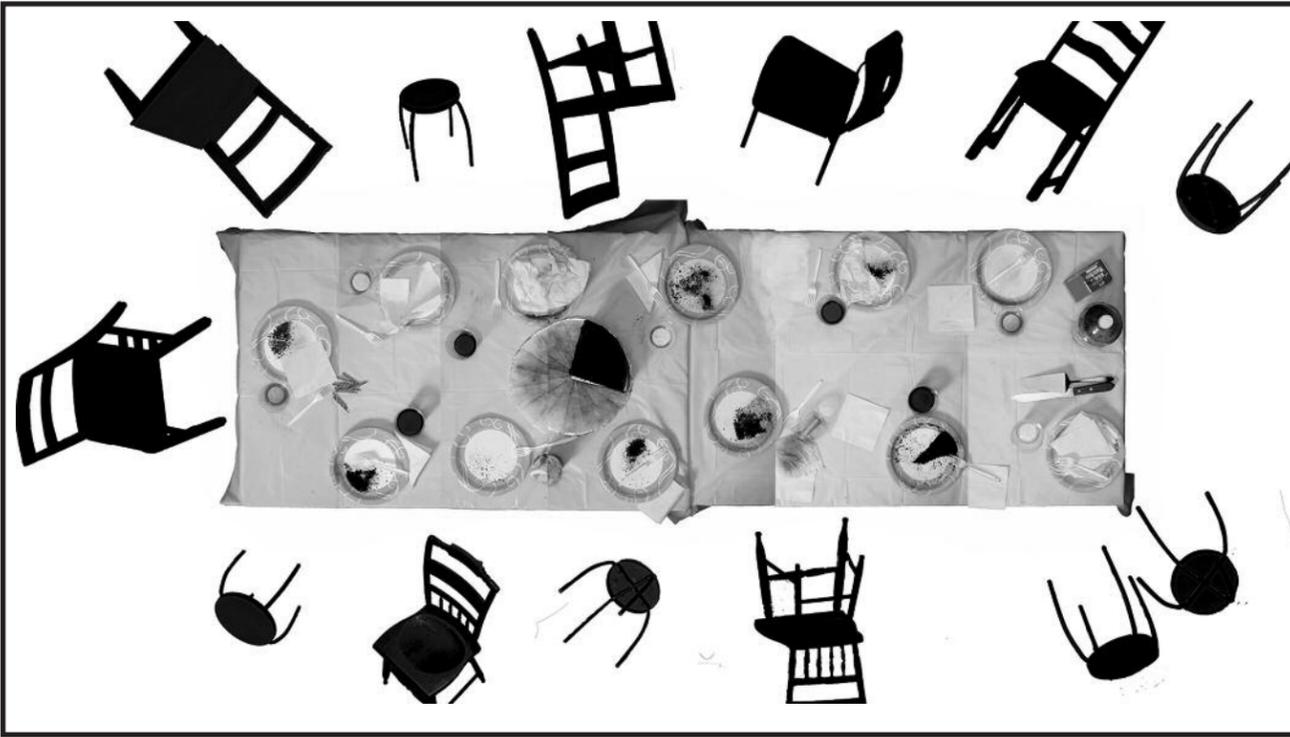
His preeminence is reflected in a wealth of art seen today in various media

After the Party They all Departed



Perhaps the most powerful image to take away from Brooklyn-based photographer Algis Norvila’s solo exhibition, “Algis Norvila: Recent Photographs,” shown in December 2022, at SLA Gallery, the Lithuanian American Alliance, New York City, is the symbolism of the table set in anticipation of the people who will sit down around it to share a meal. Quite noticeably, the human figure is absent. Therein lies the artistic intrigue.

6



After the Party They All Went Away (Birthday Party)

Photos by Algis Norvila

After the Party They all Departed:

Photographs About Community by Algis Norvila

LAIMA VINCĖ

Perhaps the most powerful image to take away from Brooklyn-based photographer Algis Norvila's solo exhibition, "Algis Norvila: Recent Photographs," shown in December 2022, at SLA Gallery, the Lithuanian American Alliance, New York City, is the symbolism of the table set in anticipation of the people who will sit down around it to share a meal. Quite noticeably, the human figure is absent. Therein lies the artistic intrigue.

The table set in anticipation of a communal meal is the beating heart of Lithuanian family, social, and cultural life. This sense of community becomes even stronger in the Lithuanian American diaspora, where Lithuanians strive to keep the culture of gathering around the table alive while faced with the challenges of mainstream American life. Norvila captures this powerful archetype and incumbent emotion in his series of

photographs. Each grouping of pictures combines subtle form with texture and color, depicting a different emotional aspect of gathering (or not gathering) at the communal table.

The show consists of 18 prints of varying dimensions that fit together thematically into a cohesive whole while at the same time, each image retains its own individuality. As I view the photographs, taking time with each image and then contemplating each group of combined images together, a powerful Lithuanian archetype comes to mind, and I think of the Lithuanian word "užstalė." A literal translation would be "sitting behind the table." But that translation does not quite capture the essence of the word. For Lithuanians, gathering around a large welcoming table laden with familiar traditional foods—whether for family meals, during important calendar holidays, or to greet those who have been away—is a vital bonding tradition passed down the generations. It is a tradition that Lithuanian émigrés brought with them to America and passed down to their descendants.

"For me, the table represents com-

munity, family gatherings, coming together," says Algis Norvila.

"But where are the people?" I ask.

"The people are not in the photograph because once you add the human figure you open up the work to an entirely different layer emotionally. My work in this particular show has more to do with graphic design, color, and the technical aspects of assembling large photographs constructed from many individual shots," Norvila explains.

In his artist statement, Norvila writes: These photographs were begun some time ago and completed only recently. The large pieces are composites, that is, stitched together of smaller photographs using software. Some started as a series of individual photos placed alongside or overlapping each other to make the appearance of a continuous whole. Any discontinuities in lining up separate photographs, or their color, are entirely intentional.

Algis Norvila was born in 1953 in Brooklyn, New York, where he grew up, married, raised his family, and lived and worked his entire life. Norvila's parents were displaced persons

who fled the Soviet occupation of Lithuania in 1944, finding refuge in the D.P. camps of the Allied territories of Germany until 1949, when they emigrated to the United States.

Norvila studied Chemistry at the New School, Parsons, but then switched his major and graduated with a B.A. in Philosophy. His interest in photography consumed him, and in the seventies, eighties, and nineties, he was a street photographer, recording the everyday rhythms of life in New York City on black and white print film, which he developed himself. He freelanced as a photographer and photographer's assistant for Life magazine and other venues in New York. Eventually, his interest shifted to constructing and photographing scenes in his studio. These themes were developed into three solo exhibits and three group shows.

Algis and his wife Dana have raised their three children as active members of the New York Lithuanian American community. Norvila's dedication to family and respect for family are evident in the negative space around the images—the empty white voids that invite the viewer to imagine the people outside of the frame of the photograph causing chairs to fly, roses to bloom, and tantalizing pancakes to be eaten. In Norvila's photos, what is left out is as vital as what is included. The white space around the images is precisely the space where the viewer is invited inside each photograph.

The largest piece, titled "Mennonite Picnic" (11 1/2" x 91"), occupies one gallery wall. This scene, shot in 18 sections, repeats the basic visual language of a simple white plastic tablecloth with place settings of paper plates and cups. Norvila built the table on which the installation was photographed and painstakingly assembled the long table as the center of the photograph's image through individual connected pieces. The idea for the image came to him years ago while driving cross country with his wife and children on a trip to Yellowstone National Park.

"One morning in South Dakota, poking my head out of the tent," Norvila remembers, "I was struck by the image of a group of young men and women in traditional dress setting up a large picnic on a long plastic tablecloth on the grass. The simplicity of their actions and their dress struck me, and the image remained with me for years as a recurring memory."

Across the gallery, on the opposite wall, another large piece, titled "After the Party They all Departed" (48" x 96") echoes the themes of the "Mennonite



Shrove Tuesday



Last Supper

Photo by Algis Norvila

Picnic”; however, where the forms of the Mennonite picnic are orderly, the rhythm of the place settings impeccable, in this photograph chaos reigns. A half-eaten chocolate cake dominates the center of the table, crumbs, spilled drinks, soiled crumpled napkins, half-melted birthday candles, and bits of cake remaining in the guest’s plates set the “after the party” mood of the long table while folding chairs and stools fly off into white space as though propelled backward by bodies hastily pushing them away and departing.

“When our daughters or son had a birthday,” Norvila remembers, “my wife Dana would bake an exquisite cake out of love. Then the children would gather, and in their excitement, they’d eat hardly a few bites, push away their chairs, and run from the table to play.”

Seven individual images of the chairs extend outwards from the right of the photograph, each with its own color background, each chair flying haphazardly through space, as though inviting the viewer to think about how our children, who we seat at the table year in and year out, one day depart, leaving their empty chairs behind them.

Another large photograph, “Shrove Tuesday” (24” x 36”), depicts a row of tin and plastic containers holding different varieties of pancakes—rolled up, small and circular, large and round. The plastic tablecloth, the foil, and the plastic create their own visual landscape through reflections and forms, rendering the literal images of the pancakes abstract.

“When our children were growing up,” Norvila narrates, “at Saturday School we would celebrate Shrove

Tuesday. All the parents would bring in dishes of pancakes from home. The array of haphazard dishes and their contents always triggered my visual imagination.”

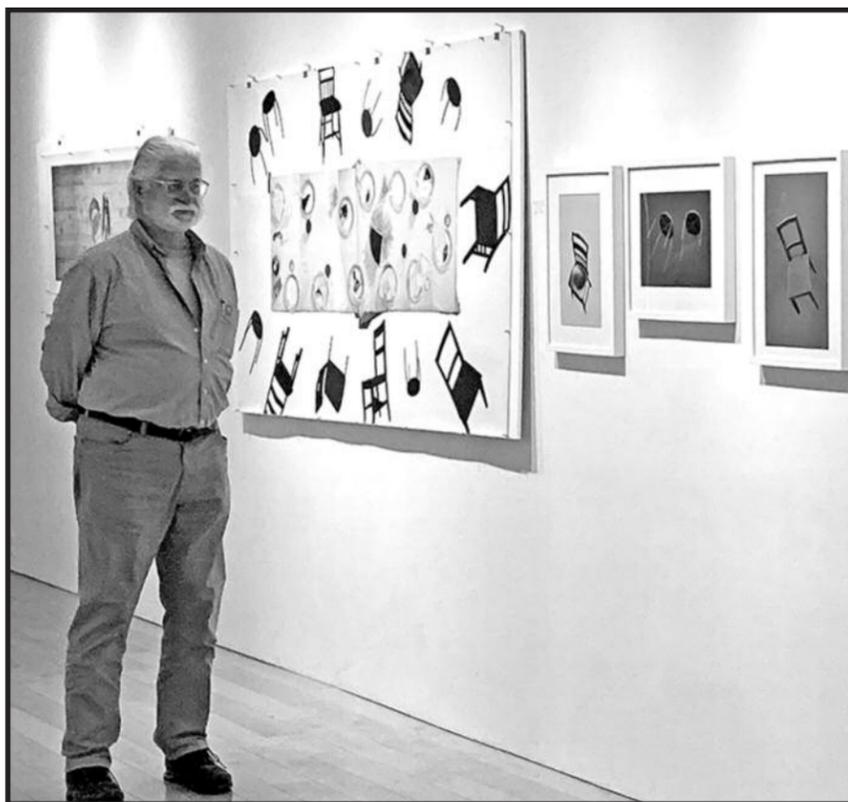
In contrast to the happy chaos of “Shrove Tuesday” and “After the Party, They all Departed,” a quieter photograph, “The Last Supper” (59” x 22”), depicts a basic meal of a separated loaf of bread and a few fish placed on a wooden plank table.

“When I first thought about this image, I did some research on the Last Supper. Leonardo Da Vinci painted all the figures on one side of the table. It was completely representational. There were no women to be seen although historically we know women were there. I realized that all depictions of the Last Supper are representational, and that artists made distinct visual choices. I made the choice to pair the meal down to its most basic elements.”

The photograph “Pandemic Dinner” (57” x 33”) depicts a table set in anticipation of a dinner party with two bouquets of roses—one red and one white.

“The pandemic pulled the rug out from under everyone. I would dream of giving a dinner party,” Norvila confides, “but of course, nobody could come.”

This show warrants quiet contemplation. Each table setting conjures up a different social construct while remaining tantalizingly empty. Each series of photographs has so much to say but does so through a subtle visual language that evokes memories for all of us who have lived our lives in community with others.



Photographer Algis Norvila at his exhibit



Lithuania is a model of courage, resilience and democratic values, US Vice President Kamala Harris (r.) said as she met with Prime Minister Ingrida Šimonytė.

Photo: L. Penek/ Government of the Republic of Lithuania

Lithuania’s Prime Minister visits Washington

Continued from page 3.

Not Only Ukraine

In response to the question of what Lithuanians in the United States can do to support Ukraine, the Prime Minister urged Lithuanians to encourage their fellow Americans not to grow tired of helping Ukraine. She said some US politicians have stated that Ukraine should no longer receive financial support without restrictions, i.e., no more “blank checks.” But politicians respond to their constituents, she noted. Lithuanians in the United States, through their elected representatives, should continue to strive for Ukraine’s victory because this war is not only about Ukraine.

Asked if she thinks the US would defend Lithuania if Putin threatened it with nuclear weapons, the Prime Minister responded that she does not believe this will happen. Still, she cannot guarantee it 100% because it is impossible to ensure anything these days without reservations. Šimonytė said that Putin and his followers are always “barking,” attempting to intimidate. In this context, she observed, her use of the term “bark,” is an insult to dogs.

Addressing Economic Issues

Asked to list a few priorities that her government considers the most important in the country’s domestic policy, Šimonytė said she does not choose a handful but rather focuses on the future. She mentioned the attempt by the Belarusian dictator Alexander Lukashenko to force Lithuania to accept a flow of illegal immigrants out of revenge for Lithuania’s support of the democratic forces of Belarus. This created difficulties for Lithuania. Another challenge is in the field of energy. Terminating links to energy sources in the East has become a security issue for Lithuania. In the past couple of years, Lithuania has strengthened its energy system. Overall, the past year has been a successful one for Lithuania’s economy. Progress is noticeable in the country’s infrastructure, not only in Vilnius, Kaunas and Klaipėda but elsewhere as well.

A Special Case

One questioner wanted to know where Lithuania concentrates its limited foreign affairs funds. Are

more resources allocated to relations with the Baltic and Scandinavian countries or with Central European ones? The Prime Minister said that cooperation between the Northern European countries and the Baltic States began with the restoration of the latter’s independence. The relations were and still are very strong, and there are many joint projects. Other alliances are more complex. For example, she said that not everything the Polish government does is acceptable. Nevertheless, Poland and Lithuania are like-minded regarding the security of the Suwalki triangle and support for Ukraine. As for Hungary, there is a lack of a common vision. It is unfortunate that 26 countries of the European Union need to convince the outlier, Hungary, to adopt a shared policy. Šimonytė said that her government is trying to do outreach to countries that are not “the usual suspects.” In other words, Lithuania is attempting to influence countries that are not Russia’s immediate neighbors and do not necessarily perceive the Kremlin as a threat the way Lithuania does. Spain and Greece were mentioned in this regard.

Lithuania’s efforts to make an impact are not limited to European countries. Relations with Japan have intensified, and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) network has expanded significantly in the Indo-Pacific region. The MFA budget is the largest one ever. Returning to her previously mentioned relations with the US, Šimonytė said Lithuania and the US are bound by special ties. For emphasis, she used the term “a special case” in English to describe the relationship.

No Comment

The final question received the shortest answer. Asked to confirm whether she is a candidate to assume the post of NATO Secretary General, Šimonytė replied with a straightforward “No comment.”

After the Q and A, Ambassador Plepytė invited everyone to the second floor of the Embassy for refreshments and continued conversation. Judging by the enthusiastic applause at the conclusion of the Prime Minister’s talk and the lively conversations that ensued, her meeting with local Lithuanians was quite a success.