

# Haunting photos from 'Cracolandia' in Sao Paulo, Brazil

Perspective by [Kenneth Dickerman](#) and Gui Christ

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As a young boy, Brazilian photographer Gui Christ heard about a place in Sao Paulo filled with people with broken dreams and broken families. The people wandered dirty streets, having lost their jobs and abandoned their families, destitute and turned delinquent because they had become addicted to a heinous new drug called crack.

At first, Christ avoided the area. But after he began working as a photographer, much to his surprise, he became acquainted with the place. One day, there was a big police operation that took control over what was once a dangerous and out-of-control environment. Afterward, because of his work as a photographer working for newspapers and magazines, Christ eventually made his way into the neighborhood. For the next 2½ years, he would document the area known as “Cracolandia,” or the Crackland.

Today, that documentation has resulted in his [self-published book](#), “Fissura,” a decidedly raw look at a neighborhood he only heard about as a child. And when he did, as he says in the introduction to the book, he found out that what he had been told wasn't entirely true. He says:

“Over more than two and a half years, almost weekly, I printed portraits for more than 2,000 people, and was able to get to know men and women who were practically invisible to society. I also had the chance to give them back their own image, often forgotten over the years they lived on the streets. Unlike what I was told as a child, I heard stories of men who started using drugs to forget the anguish of unemployment, of women who took drugs to endure the shame of prostituting themselves to support their children, and of children who smoked crack to forget the violence, the cold and the hunger of living on the streets.

“To better understand why there were countless degraded mansions around me, I started to study the region and discovered that it had once been the richest neighborhood in the city. The whole area was a project built to welcome the influential coffee barons who came to the city, bringing their productions along the railway tracks, which still crisscross the neighborhood today. For many years, the Campos Eliseios neighborhood was a reference of refinement and power, until many of the families who lived there were affected by the great economic crisis of the New York Stock Exchange in 1929, stagnating Brazilian coffee exports and causing them to leave.”

As we all know, life isn't always necessarily what it seems. When I look at the photos in Christ's book, the first thing that pops into my head is that these are real people. Fallen people, yes, but real. People who have dreams, people who are just trying to survive, just trying to get to the next day. Dreams, work, relationships, disappointment, addiction, sadness all evaporated in their pipes. Pipes that themselves are personalized and transmit secrets from the person who owns them.

I'm reminded of when I was a photo intern at the St. Louis Post-Dispatch many years ago and I had an assignment to go to an orphanage and make photos of the residents there. I hung out with them while they were studying and playing and watching TV. At one point, one of the children wanted to show me his room and the Three 6 Mafia poster taped to the bare wall above his bed in a room he shared with other orphans. My heart sank.

Later that day, I went home and told my family about the assignment. It turns out, my father lived at that orphanage as a baby, before he was adopted by my grandparents. I couldn't help but connect the dots in my head. He, too, was one of those boys at one point. He, too, was just trying to figure out how to navigate this life — as I am trying and you are trying. We're all trying. It's hard and tragic and sad, punctuated with thrills, happiness and, if we're lucky, the feeling of being loved.

Life is too hard to let people slip away unnoticed. As I write this, people are getting married, having great personal successes and, yes, there are people smoking crack, clutching a pipe smoking with their evaporated hopes and dreams. And as much as I would love to, I really don't want to drift away into comfortable numbness. Do you?

You can buy Christ's book [here](#). And you can see more of his work [here](#).

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