First place: Cameron Bell, Class of 2016
Gian Paolo Minelli, “Chicas (Girls)"
Alternative title: “The Chicas of the Concrete”

Gian Paolo Minelli, born 1968, Geneva; lives and works in Buenos Aires
Chicas (Girls), from Zona Sur—Barrio Piedra Buena, 2003
Chromogenic prints (diptych)

The concrete fills the frame. The walls intersect, covering the edges of each building. Their eyes, we call them windows, see everything. They see the trash in what was once, perhaps, a garden—now abandoned. They see the dark sky and the changes that accompany life in this neighborhood. They have seen everything, the prosperous years and the lean years, when the skyscraper in the background was the center of business, and when the businesses left. These wise eyes watched the transformation of the city from a place of opportunity to one of fear and violence. These sad eyes watched the evolution of the people from optimists to realists. And these old eyes will continue to see everything. They form part of the solid building, a solid barrio, something that was built to last; something that continues to survive.

Concrete created man in his own image. He forms and raises people of his own material—strength, fortitude, and resistance. Those who grow from concrete never leave. Nothing and no one can move them. They prosper without much care and attention; they aren’t weak. Just like the lawn in the foreground, they prosper without the light of the sun and without the water of charity. They prosper on their own; they support themselves and the world. As the concrete holds up the sky, the children of the concrete hold up the cities.

The girls, chicas, are of the concrete. They are formidable. Their postures scream
tough confidence. Their eyes penetrate the scene with wisdom beyond their years. They have seen everything. These young chicas witnessed the development of the barrio through the stories of their grandmothers who came to work in the skyscraper. These innocent chicas witnessed, from the street legends, the evolution of the city from a place flowing with milk and honey, and jobs, to a desert of misfortune. These expert chicas witnessed the transformation of people when their fathers stopped joking and started drinking while their mothers stopped singing and started sleeping. These girls have lived the implications of poverty—schools without education, the daily threat of violence, and the fight to escape. But, given everything they have witnessed, the one thing these chicas haven’t seen is the deterioration of hope. Like the lawn in which they stand, they have grown between the cracks in the concrete and used it as a source of strength.

What makes this portrait unique is the participation of the subjects. They chose the scene, their postures, and the moment the photo was taken.¹ The chicas selected this scene for their portrait, perhaps because it symbolizes something integral in their lives and communicates who they are. Circumstances form people. And places—like barrios—form circumstances. Everything is a cycle. Therefore, the “Chicas” stand with pride, affirming their identities as part of the neighborhood and the urban life that infiltrates their souls. They created a portrait of their inherent traits. The concrete fills the frame.

Caption for the photo on the left: From the earth to the heaven by way of concrete.
Caption for the photo on the right: The lawn that grew in the concrete.

Second place: Cindy Johnson, Class of 2015
Marcelo Brodsky, “La camiseta”
Alternative title: “Fantasma”

In this image, the photographer’s activist brother acts like a phantom in that he gives off an illusion of tangibility but is essentially intangible. He arrests the viewer with a somber expression full of weary as the dark circles beneath his eyes are magnified by the unknown source of light; the same source that causes a shadowy distortion of his face. In this listless gaze the man and I are at once connected. I am further connected to this being through two fingers as the photograph is taken from a first person point of view, i.e. it is as if I am personally holding the image and the camera acts as an extension of my own sight. As Brodsky’s two fingers desperately hold onto the paper, I too do not want to let go of his gaze and thus his presence.

However, I am reminded by our distance and my inability to reach him through the yellowed, brittle paper upon which the photograph is placed. The cracks in the paper inch toward him, threatening to disintegrate and destroy the entire image. It is as if at any moment a slight breeze could blow and the image would instantaneously crumble. The thumb essentially acts as a constant (unconscious) reminder that I am only staring at a small photograph and not the person himself, through its scale. The numbering has the same effect; the man is dehumanized through his number, 4, and I am reminded
that this is simply an old image that is quickly decaying and this person that so
effortlessly holds my gaze no longer exists.

The medium itself helps to create this barrier that gives off the illusion of
permeability. Again his gaze and the grip of the two fingers create a feeling of
connection between Brodsky’s brother and I. However, this is a photograph of a man
and not the man himself and thus he will never be tangible. In fact, the photographer
challenges the viewer’s visual perception in that he could have simply shown the
photograph up close and disregarded the brittle yellow background, instead he chose to
show us the full reality: this is a photograph of a photograph of a man far removed from
us and long gone, he was reduced to a number upon many, a tired face among others.
As Gombrich once stated, “aided by light and a darkroom, a photographer can achieve
those relationships in brightness that will make us dutifully admire the tints in a photo.
As soon as we look at a print of these photographs by day, the light seems to go out of
them”. Brodsky at once lures us into a metaphoric darkroom which creates a semblance
of reality while also exposing the print to light breaking this illusion, making us fully
aware of our own position as viewer in a different space and time. It also echoes
Brodsky’s position as a brother impossibly trying to grasp onto his brother’s presence,
but no one can touch “un fantasma.”
Third place: Yessica Martinez, Class of 2015
Pablo Ortiz Monasterio, “D.F”
Alternative title: “Rastros”

This photograph, like all photographs, is an image suspended in time. Though what we witness is a place that has been torn at its foundation, the image is at once a zone in ruin and one in construction. It is impossible to know whether this scene of destruction represents a fatalistic end, or rather the necessary groundwork for the erection of a new place. Indeed, on the far right side of the frame, we see a house that has either survived demolition, or is near the end of making. And yet, the figure of the male subject within the frame has the effect of continuously remitting us to the site of ruins. With arms crossed, and a fixed gaze toward the camera, the figure is firmly rooted in place. In a scene where everything has been torn from the ground to the point of collapse, this figure remains grounded. This distinction is greater because he stands at the bottom of the ruins, such that his immediate backdrop is the site of wreckage.
Anytime, we turn to him, we are thus forced to consider what he stands against. Indeed, this is the reason why we read his stance as a deliberate act of resistance against his surroundings. This is important if we consider the nature of photography as an act that suspends the passage of time. Though this might very well be a site in the process of making, rather than one in perpetual ruin, it is important that the photograph grounds us in the latter moment. We get the sense that the subject is immovable, and that he will continue to stand in the same place even in the face of a new backdrop. This means that regardless of the passage of time, he will continue to bear the traces of the past. The same is true of the cinder block wall next to him, for though the electrical wiring speaks of lines of flight, its support structure is made of tree trunks firmly planted on the ground. This reference to nature in the context of this striking attempt at modernity speaks to us of a past in tension with a future that signifies its erasure. Indeed, the electrical wiring in the photograph shoots out like twigs growing out of a tree’s branches. This tension between past and present, between ruins and creation, between rootedness and flight is the tension present in the making of a modern Mexico City. What Monasterio’s photograph does while not denying the possibility of creation is to ground, in an act of resistance, the ghostly traces of its costs.