



READ NEXT: AYOUNG KIM WINS 2025 LG GUGGENHEIM AWARD

SUBSCRIBE

NEWSLETTERS

ARTFORUM

SUBSCRIBE



NEWS DIARY VIDEO CRITICS' PICKS REVIEWS COLUMNS FEATURES CURRENT ISSUE ARCHIVE

artguide 艺术论坛



PHOTOGRAPHY

EYES TO FLY WITH

Mónica de la Torre on Graciela Iturbide

By Mónica de la Torre



Graciela Iturbide, *Nuestra Señora de las Iguanas* (Our Lady of the Iguanas), 1979, gelatin silver print, 10 × 8".

GRACIELA ITURBIDE'S formidable photographic oeuvre testifies to how inextricable Mexican identity is from the experiences of colonization and religious syncretism. Her images are repeatedly described as poetic, and they certainly operate metonymically, making parts stand for a whole. Her exquisite four-decade retrospective at the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston functioned similarly: “Graciela Iturbide’s Mexico” homed in on series the artist made in specific regions of her native country, capturing, among other subjects, Zapotec women and *muxes* (who identify as transgender women, or as a third gender) in Juchitán, Oaxaca; slaughtering rituals in la Mixteca, also in Oaxaca; and the Seri Indians in the Sonoran desert.

It is bitterly ironic that the Mexico Iturbide’s camera finds most compelling is represented by indigenous peoples, who—since a brief utopian postrevolutionary moment in the early twentieth century—have been systematically excluded from national development projects. The Mexicos of Henri Cartier-Bresson, Tina Modotti, Edward Weston, Paul Strand, and many others are like Iturbide’s in this regard. Carlos Fuentes, introducing Cartier-Bresson’s *Mexican Notebooks 1934–1964* (published in 1996), writes that the French photographer never returned to Mexico after his second visit in 1964, fearful that it would have changed. Assessing the work across this three-decade divide, Fuentes’s response to Cartier-Bresson’s concern is categorical: “These photographs haven’t changed because the artist didn’t photograph Mexico in 1934 and then in 1964. He photographed Mexican eternity and he photographed it in an instant.” It’s as if the relentless marginalization of Mexico’s indigenous populations has allowed them to stand in for the nation’s timeless essence. How different is Iturbide’s position before her subjects, whom she portrays with as much gravitas as grace. Traces of her proximity and familiarity populate the frame. If she didn’t live with them for extended periods, as she did with the Seris, she returned repeatedly to their communities, as with the Zapotecs of Juchitán.

Iturbide's lineage is palpable in her formal choices and allegiance to black-and-white photography. She took a class with Manuel Álvarez Bravo in 1969, at Centro Universitario de Estudios Cinematográficos in Mexico City, and he served as her mentor thereafter. In a video produced for the exhibition, she references an aphorism by Octavio Paz: "Reality is more real in black and white." Black-and-white photography's reduction of reality to hard-edge geometries might account for its veneer of authenticity. (Iturbide claims that color photography feels "like Disneyland.") Her ongoing dialogue with the images of her forebears is also evident in her take on certain themes. The portraits she shot in Juchitán, for instance, extend photographers' historical fascination with the women of the Isthmus of Tehuantepec, whose feistiness and independence have earned them mythic status. The first Tehuana photograph, by ethnographer Charles-Étienne Brasseur de Bourbourg, dates from the mid-nineteenth century, when the isthmus's potential for interoceanic communication was being explored by a French company. At the turn of the nineteenth century, documentary-style pictures by American photographers Charles B. Waite and Winfield had such an impact on the popular imagination that one, depicting a woman in ten-peso note. Later, Tehuanas would appear in photos by Modotti and Weston and in Diego Rivera's murals for the ministry of public education. They would inspire Frida Kahlo's wardrobe of long, ruffled skirts and embroidered huipiles. The most celebrated image in Iturbide's Juchitán series, *Nuestra Señora de las Iguanas* (Our Lady of the Iguanas), 1979, depicts a poised market vendor crowned, Medusa-like, by iguanas, which seem to be posing for the camera. It's a far cry from the earlier Tehuana portraits, in which ornate lace headdresses or baskets rest on the sitters' heads, but it has achieved comparable iconicity.

**Iturbide's pictures, like metaphors,
transcend linear interpretation and
the realm of the visible.**

The references are more overt in works such as *Cuatro pescaditos* (Four Little Fishes), 1985, which frames a fisherwoman peering from a window, dangling her catch from each hand. The composition recalls Cartier-Bresson's pictures of prostitutes showcasing their bosoms through the openings of wooden doors. And as Álvarez Bravo did with his *Maniqués riendo* (Laughing Mannequins), 1934, are *Parábola óptica* (Optical Parable), 1931, Iturbide can uncannily resignify advertisements by shifting her lens to their surroundings. A poignant example is a 1975 photo in which a window reflects the silhouette of a passing peasant; behind the glass is a display containing a helmeted skull and the tourist poster after which the work is titled: ¡MÉXICO . . . QUIERO CONOCERTE! (Mexico . . . I want to get to know you!).