

## Graciela Iturbide's Photos of Mexico Make 'Visible What, to Many, Is Invisible'

Over the past 50 years, Ms. Iturbide has captured layers of Mexico's diverse cultures and practices, as well as the struggles and contrasts across the nation.



"Mujer Ángel, Desierto de Sonora, México (Angel Woman, Sonora Desert, Mexico)," 1979. Credit Graciela Iturbide/Courtesy of the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston

**Text by Evelyn Nieves Photographs by Graciela Iturbide**

**January 8, 2019**

Graciela Iturbide may be one of the most renowned photographers working today. Five decades into her journey with a camera, her work, most famously in indigenous communities in her native Mexico, has achieved that rare trifecta — admired by critics, revered by fellow photographers and adored by the public. She continues to travel, photograph and exhibit all over the world.

But it is becoming impossible to discuss her work without mentioning the Zapotec woman wearing live iguanas on her head.



"Torito, Ciudad de México (Little Bull, Coyoacán, Mexico City)," 1982. Credit Graciela Iturbide/Courtesy of the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston



"Nuestra Señora de las Iguanas, Juchitán, México, (Our Lady of the Iguanas, Juchitán, Mexico)," 1979. Credit Graciela Iturbide/Courtesy of the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston



“Los Pollos, Juchitán, México (Chickens, Juchitán, Mexico),” 1979. Credit Graciela Iturbide/Courtesy of the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston

Ms. Iturbide made the photo after happening upon Zobeida Díaz at a farmer's market while living with the Juchitán of southeastern Oaxaca in 1979. It took several tries — the iguanas kept moving around, falling off, reducing her subject to laughter — but on her contact sheet, Ms. Iturbide found her “Nuestra Señora de las Iguanas (Our Lady of the Iguanas),” an image so arresting that 40 years later, its popularity is still growing.

In Mexico, “Nuestra Señora” is on murals, posters, postcards and road signs to Juchitán, and rendered into a life-size bronze sculpture in the Juchitán town square. It covers a brick building wall in East Los Angeles. It has gone viral. Fans have taken the rich black-and-white image and recreated it into graphic art, self-portraits, YouTube videos.

No wonder Ms. Iturbide says the image “is no longer mine.”

Nor is that iconic image her only claim to fame. In a long and varied career, Ms. Iturbide, 76, has done deep dives into her beloved country. She has documented the Seri Indians of Sonora, goat-slaughter festivals among the Mixtec of Oaxaca, funeral rites, cultural practices, complex landscapes, birds, herself.





"Chalma," 1974. Credit Graciela Iturbide/Courtesy of the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston



"Cayó del Cielo, Chalma, México (Fallen From Heaven, Chalma, Mexico)," 1989. Credit Graciela Iturbide/Courtesy of the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston





"La Danza de la Cabrita, Antes de la Matanza, La Mixteca (The Little Goat's Dance, Before the Slaughter, La Mixteca)," 1992. Credit Graciela Iturbide/Courtesy, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston



"Pájaros en el Poste, Carretera a Guanajuato, México (Birds on the Pole, Highway to Guanajuato, Mexico)," 1990. Credit Graciela Iturbide/Courtesy of the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston

Selections from these projects, "Graciela Iturbide's Mexico," drawn primarily from her own collection, will be on view at the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston, from Jan. 19 to May 12. Some of her most recent work, on Frida Kahlo's bathroom (opened 50 years after Diego Rivera locked it upon her death), goes on display on Feb. 27 through June 16) as part of the museum's exhibit "Frida Kahlo and Arte Popular."

"Graciela Iturbide's Mexico" unpacks Ms. Iturbide's artistic journey as she captures layers of Mexico's exquisitely diverse cultures and practices, struggles and contrasts.

Of course, it includes "Our Lady of the Iguanas," on loan from the permanent collection of the Brooklyn Museum. It also includes "Angel Woman (Mujer Angel)," arguably Ms. Iturbide's second-most famous image, an ethereal image taken from behind of a Seri woman with hair down her back and traditional dress who seems to float through the desert carrying the cultural prop of urban life at the time: a boombox.

In image after image, there is more going on than meets the eye.

Kristen Gresh, the Estrellita and Yousuf Karsh curator of photographs at the Museum of Fine Arts, who worked closely with Ms. Iturbide in organizing the exhibit, said what made her unique among the pantheon of photographers working today was her empathetic approach.

"For her, the camera is an instrument of sharing, making visible what, to many, is invisible," Ms. Gresh said. Ms. Iturbide's photos, she added, provide "a poetic vision of contemporary culture informed by a sense of life's surprises and mysteries."



"Jardín Botánico, Oaxaca, México (Botanical Garden, Oaxaca, Mexico)," 1998-99. Credit Graciela Iturbide/  
Courtesy of the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston





"El Baño de Frida, Coyoacán, Ciudad de México (Frida's Bathroom, Coyoacán, Mexico City)," 2006. Credit Graciela Iturbide/Courtesy of the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston

To Ms. Iturbide, based in Mexico City, her approach is simple. Using natural light, sans tripod, flashes and telephoto lenses, she follows her curiosity and takes photos — always black-and-white — when she sees what she likes. She allows for the magic of surprise when she examines her contact sheets. She eschews labels (don't ask her if she's a surrealist or a magical realist) and calls herself "complicit" with her subjects.

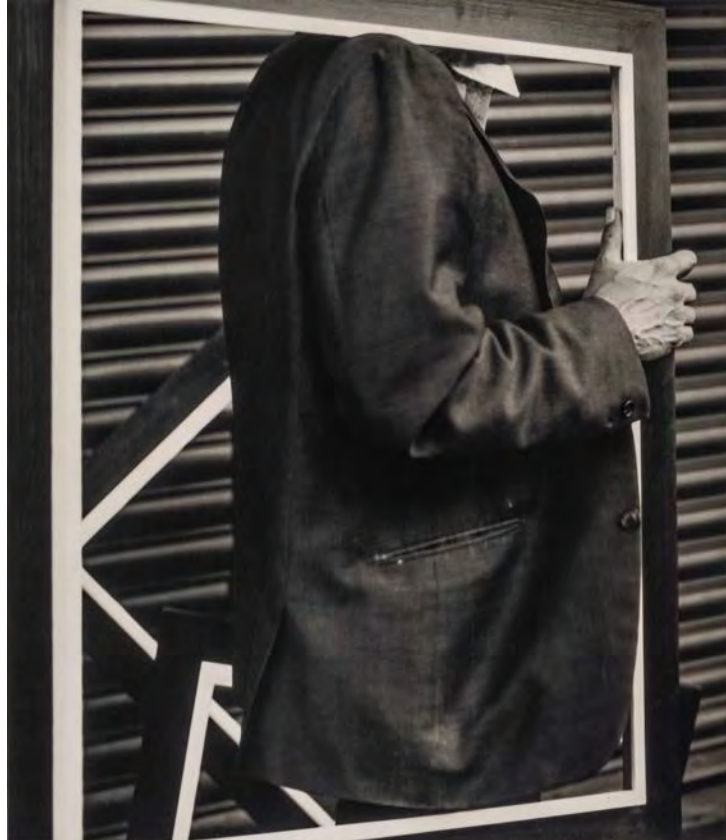
Ms. Iturbide followed her passion when she chucked the comfortable confines of a wealthy Catholic upbringing, got divorced and began studying film at age 27. She switched to still photography upon meeting her mentor, Manuel Álvarez Bravo, considered the father of modern Mexican photography. (She never fails to mention his influence.)

She also credits Francisco Toledo, the acclaimed artist, for her breakthrough project for inviting her to photograph Juchitán, his hometown. More recently, in 1998, Mr. Toledo invited her to photograph the newly opened Ethnobotanical Garden of Oaxaca, designed to tell the story of the cultural and ecological relationship of Oaxacans with their native plants. As images from the Museum of Fine Arts exhibit show, Ms. Iturbide was most fascinated with plants — cactuses — ailing and bandaged — that revealed the interconnectedness explicitly and symbolically.

Asked what inspires her, she said, "I find my artistic inspiration in life — in what I see, and in what I do."

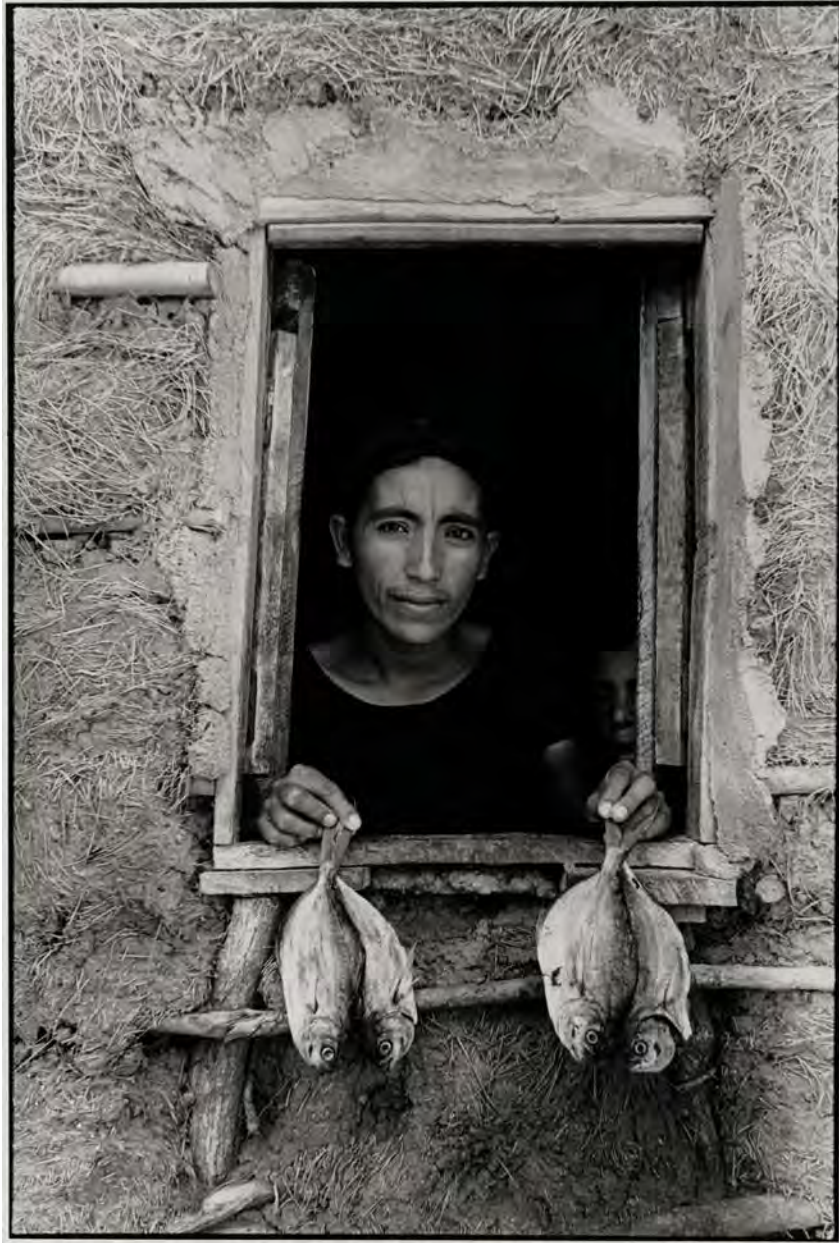


"Serafina, Juchitán, México (Serafina, Juchitán, Mexico)," 1984. Credit Graciela Iturbide/Courtesy, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston



"Señor Enmarcado, Ciudad de México, (Framed Man, Mexico City)," 1970. Credit Graciela Iturbide/Courtesy of the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston





"Señor Enmarcado, Ciudad de México, (Framed Man, Mexico City)," 1970. Credit Graciela Iturbide/  
Courtesy of the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston

## Discovering contemporary Mexico beyond the daily headlines: The images of Graciela Iturbide

By Kevin Sieff  
March 8, 2019



Mujer Ángel, Desierto de Sonora (Angel Woman, Sonora Desert), México (Graciela Iturbide/Courtesy Museum of Fine Arts,



El Baño de Frida (Frida's bathroom), Coyoacan, Ciudad de México (prosthetic leg against wall) (Graciela Iturbide/Courtesy Museum of Fine Arts, Boston)



MEXICO CITY— What are the images that define contemporary Mexico? In the foreign eye, they are pictures of migrant caravans, escaped drug traffickers, beaches conjured by the American imagination.

Joan Didion once wrote of the Mexican state of Durango, “The very name hallucinates.” And so it seems with the country as a whole, a nation distorted in the public imagination for decades, reduced to a convenient caricature. It’s hard not to see the ellipses between that iconography and an American president whose politics hinge on the idea of a lawless Mexico, unpierced by nuance.

Which is why 2019 is the appropriate year for the world to discover Graciela Iturbide, who now has extensive exhibitions in Boston and Mexico City. For a half-century, Iturbide has traveled across her own country with a camera loaded with black-and-white film. She has taken pictures that are often described as dreamlike, surreal or painterly, but those words fall short.

They are the visual opposite of the Mexico we have come to expect, simple and violent, a projection of our own fears. Iturbide’s work is instead an exploration of a nation’s subconscious, not strange or beautiful for the sake of aesthetics, but because of what the work reveals.

A flock of birds, like a dark cloud, soars over a powerline in rural Guanajuato. A woman in a white dress walks on a mountain bluff, seeming to hover above the earth like a ghost. There are portraits of men in carnival masks, a pile of dead iguanas, a pickup truck plastered with angel wings.

What do we see when we look at those images, which are not quintessentially Mexican in any sense? Even the pictures themselves are incomplete: torsos without heads, masks without faces, birds blurred and truncated by the frame. We see pieces of a whole, fragments that take on more meaning with each picture, a nation reimagined image by image.

Iturbide’s new exhibition at Boston’s Museum of Fine Arts is called “Graciela Iturbide’s Mexico,” suggesting that what we ought to see in her pictures is a coherent way of interpreting a misunderstood nation. But Iturbide never set out to document her own country.

“I only photograph that which surprises me,” she said in an interview in her home last month. “And from there, I develop my obsessions.”

On her wall was one of her few color prints: a picture of Frida Kahlo’s prosthetic leg, bent at the knee, in Kahlo’s bathtub. Iturbide had been invited to photograph Kahlo’s house in 2005. What she documented was an antidote to the brand Kahlo has become in death, another Mexican fiction. Kahlo’s prosthetics are now displayed as fashion accessories at museums in New York and London.

Instead, we see the leg splayed, the tub dirty, a tiny window into a life lived, raw and complicated and irreducible.



Volantín (merry-go-round), San Martin Tilcajete, Oaxaca, Mexico (Graciela Iturbide/Courtesy Museum of Fine Arts, Boston)



Volantín (merry-go-round), San Martin Tilcajete, Oaxaca, Mexico (Graciela Iturbide/Courtesy Museum of Fine Arts, Boston)



Pajaros en el poste (birds on the post), carretera a Guanajuato, Mexico (Graciela Iturbide/Courtesy Museum of Fine Arts,





Mexico, Quiero Conocerle!, Chiapas, Mexico (Graciela Iturbide/Courtesy Museum of Fine Arts, Boston)



Chalma (Graciela Iturbide/Courtesy Museum of Fine Arts, Boston)



Iguanas, Juchitan, Mexico (Graciela Iturbide/Courtesy Museum of Fine Arts, Boston)



Jardin Botanico, Oaxaca, Mexico (Graciela Iturbide/Courtesy Museum of Fine Arts, Boston)



## 'Graciela Iturbide's Mexico' Review: Life and Death South of the Border

When her 6-year-old daughter died in 1970, photographer Graciela Iturbide dove into art, pursuing images steeped in ritual, dignity, and the mysteries of being.



Graciela Iturbide's 'Angel Woman, Sonoran Desert' (1979) PHOTO: GRACIELA ITURBIDE/MUSEUM OF FINE ARTS, BOSTON

By William Meyers  
January 29, 2019

In the section headed "Death" at the "Graciela Iturbide's Mexico" exhibition at the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, is a somewhat surreal photograph of two cardboard skeletons taped to a plate-glass window and shot from a point of view that makes it seem they are riding the tricycle parked on the sidewalk in front, "Day of the Dead, Mexico City" (1974). Death is an important part of the culture in Ms. Iturbide's Mexico, as it has been in the life of the photographer. She was born in 1942, married in 1962, and her 6-year-old daughter Claudia died in 1970; it was this traumatic event that precipitated her career in art.

There are nine prints in the "Death" section and incidental mementos mori elsewhere among the nearly 140 prints in the exhibition. All the prints are black-and-white silver gelatin, of modest format, and exquisitely executed. In "House of Death, Mexico City" (1975) a man sits on a makeshift ramp in front of large painted figures of a skeleton in bridal gown and veil and of a horned male devil; the man is looking to his left, where two blurred women seem to be walking into the frame. Of the crowd in "Procession, Chalma, State of Mexico" (1984), those in front are wearing masks and costumes, with the central figure dressed as a skeleton; way in back someone holds up a baby, the alternative to death.

A vitrine holds two contact sheets, each with a dozen 2-by-2-inch frames taken in 1978 in a cemetery in Dolores Hidalgo, Guanajuato. (Following the progression of images on a contact sheet is like examining a CT scan of a photographer's thinking process.) It was a fateful day for Ms. Iturbide.



Graciela Iturbide's 'Our Lady of the Iguanas, Juchitán, Mexico' (1979) PHOTO: GRACIELA ITURBIDE/MUSEUM OF FINE ARTS, BOSTON



After the death of her daughter, she had been compulsively shooting angelitos, the corpses of children fitted with wings before burial. Sixteen of the frames on the contact sheets are of a man and woman bringing a child's coffin to the cemetery and burying it, and eight frames are of a deteriorating male corpse sprawled on the ground. At the moment the burial of the child was done, an enormous flock of birds rose up and flapped away; Ms. Iturbide interpreted this as an omen freeing her of her obsession.

And it got her interested in photographing birds: a huge flock against a troubled sky, "Birds, Dolores Hidalgo, Guanajuato" (1978); an individual bird, "X-ray of a Bird with Francisco Toledo, Oaxaca" (1999); and two slaughtered "Roosters, Juchitán" (1987) dripping blood. The birds seem portents, although it is hard to tell of what. Kristen Gresh, the museum curator responsible for the exhibition, comments in the wall texts on the ambiguity that is a feature of so many of Ms. Iturbide's images.



Graciela Iturbide's 'Birds on the Post, Highway' PHOTO: GRACIELA ITURBIDE/MUSEUM OF FINE ARTS, BOSTON

Ms. Iturbide has a special talent for making part of an object do for the whole, a sort of visual synecdoche. The two women in "Ascension, Chalma, State of Mexico" (1984) stand in their bare feet on the rough textured bark of a sloping tree limb; we see only their feet and the bottom of their skirts, but that and the connotations of the title testify to their pilgrimage. The woman in "Fallen from Heaven, Chalma" (1989) is seen in profile from the shoulder down; still her carriage and the way she holds up the excess material of her long white dress make the picture serve as a headless portrait.



Graciela Iturbide's 'Fallen from Heaven, Chalma' (1989) PHOTO: GRACIELA ITURBIDE/MUSEUM OF FINE ARTS, BOSTON

"The Seri" and "Juchitán" are sections devoted to Ms. Iturbide's extended stays with indigenous peoples in remote areas. The first has two prints of one of her best-known images, "Angel Woman, Sonoran Desert" (1979); she is seen from the back, long black hair hanging down, wearing an incongruously voluminous skirt, poised as if to fly across the empty plain, and in her right hand holding—of all things—a boom box. "Juchitán" has an equally well-known image, "Our Lady of the Iguanas, Juchitán, Mexico" (1979); shot from below, the sturdy woman stands serenely indifferent to the flock of live iguanas perched on her head. "Juchiteca with Beer, Juchitán" (1984) is also in this section, a round-bellied woman with glorious plump cheeks about to enjoy her cerveza.





Graciela Iturbide's 'House of Death, Mexico City' (1975) PHOTO: GRACIELA ITURBIDE/MUSEUM OF FINE ARTS, BOSTON

The revelers in "Fiestas" include "The Gardener, Oaxaca" (1974), a man in a fancy dress wearing white gloves and a tinsel crown and leaning against a doorjamb; "Tlaxcala Carnival" (1974), another man in a dress and white gloves, this one wearing a mask and sombrero with feathers, standing alone, arm akimbo, in a barren landscape; and "Holy Thursday, Juchitán" (1970s), a somber, white-haired man separated by lattice from the figure of a white-gowned man who is blindfolded.

The people who inhabit "Graciela Iturbide's Mexico" are invariably presented with dignity, however extraordinary their rituals and animating tics; they persevere in a land of intense sunlight, dark shadows and whirring birds.

—Mr. Meyers writes on photography for the Journal. See his photographs at [www.williammeyersphotography.com](http://www.williammeyersphotography.com).

Correction: An earlier version of this story misspelled the curator's last name.

Appeared in the January 30, 2019, print edition as 'Graciela Iturbide: Life and Death South of the Border.'

# 'Graciela Iturbide, Visionary Ethnographer

Christopher Alessandrini  
30 MARCH 2019



Consider the chickens, roosting at a vendor's feet as he reads the daily news; or a semi-circle of women clutching freshly plucked carcasses—wings outspread, headless, then bundled and hung. In the photography of Graciela Iturbide, animals appear in various stages of preparation: walleyed fish dangle in pairs; severed goats' legs herringbone across a spread of drying mats. Iguanas wreathed around a woman's stoic face—like tentacles, or the rays of an aureole—are destined for soup. The woman in this final, famous image, *Our Lady of the Iguanas* (1979), is Zobeida Díaz, a vendor in the Oaxacan town of Juchitán, vaulted from the market's everyday bustle into the realm of myth.

In "Graciela Iturbide's Mexico"—a magnificent exhibition of approximately 125 gelatin silver prints at the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston—five decades of an extraordinary visual intelligence are on display. Winner of the Hasselblad Award (2008) and Cornell Capa Lifetime Achievement Award (2015), Iturbide has exhibited internationally for most of her career, but this is her first solo museum show on the East Coast since a modest traveling retrospective opened at the Philadelphia Museum of Art in 1998. Curated by Kristen Gresh in close collaboration with Iturbide, the show celebrates the museum's recent acquisition



of thirty-seven photographs, including two gifts from the artist. It is an overdue reintroduction to one of the world's great photographers.

Born in 1942, the eldest of thirteen children in a prosperous Catholic family, Iturbide originally wanted to be a poet. She was already twenty-seven, a mother of three and a recent divorcée, when she enrolled at the National Autonomous University of Mexico, determined to study cinematography. But her vocation shifted again after the death of her young daughter, in 1970, when she began to obsessively photograph dead infants, or angelitos, laid out in tiny white coffins. One day, documenting a funeral, she found an adult cadaver sprawled across the cemetery path, skull and torso picked clean. "There were many birds in the sky," she recounted. "The ones that had been pecking on the man." It was the moment she decided to stop photographing angelitos. "I felt that Death was saying to me, 'Enough!'"

Ever since, flocks of birds have served as a major source of inspiration—reminders of death, certainly, but also of life's strange continuities, flesh transubstantiated into flight. Her "Birds" series is monumental: massive swarms conducted through the sky like magnetic filings, obeying an inscrutable, suprahuman logic—seemingly algorithmic, ultimately impossible to decode. The photographs hum with remembered motion, scores of stark, glyph-like wings thronged around trees, a cruciform telephone pole.



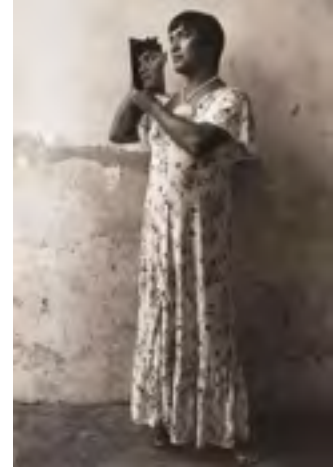
Following the death of her daughter, Iturbide worked as an assistant to her professor, the legendary modernist photographer Manuel Álvarez Bravo. From 1970 to 1971, she traveled with him across Mexico, observing his process. While they did not collaborate or discuss each other's work, he encouraged Iturbide's interest in documenting Native Mexicans and offered advice that transformed her outlook: "Don't rush yourself for anything," she recalls him saying, in a captivating fifteen-minute documentary produced for the exhibition. "There's always time." Dedicating herself to the virtue of patience would prove invaluable in a long career marked by intimate involvement with her subjects.



The dark ballast of Iturbide's photography is a deep knowledge of predation: how humans prey on animals; how multinational corporations subsume developing economies; how modern industry exploits a largely indigenous underclass; how artists wrangle life from their subjects in the name of creation. In one haunting early photograph, a young Cuna woman walks through an open field in Panama, Pepsi-Cola's logo embroidered on her shirt. The pernicious creep of capitalism, yes, but also its corollary: a vivid reminder that indigenous people, often relegated to an imagined antiquity, are full participants in contemporary life.

Supported by a grant from the Ethnographic Archive of the National Indigenous Institute of Mexico, Iturbide set out with the anthropologist Luis Barjau to live among the formerly nomadic Seri people of the Sonoran Desert in 1979, establishing a practice of

total immersion in traditional communities that she would maintain for years. Ever wary of playing the artiste interloper, Iturbide committed herself to sensitive, and often humorous, portrayals of cultural syncretism: Manuel (1979) features a Jheri-curl'd Seri man clad in aviators and a frilly tuxedo shirt, drawing sartorial inspiration from the cumbia singer Rigo Tovar; Sonoran Desert (1979) depicts a couple before a towering saguaro, the man in a snowflake-patterned crew-neck sweater, the woman in traditional garb. And in the iconic Angel Woman (1979), a Seri woman scales a hillside path, boombox in tow, the desert unfolding deliriously ahead. Now one of her most famous works—it was the album cover of Rage Against the Machine's 1997 single "Vietnow"—Iturbide has no memory of taking it. She says, "I feel that the desert gave it to me."



Photographing Mexican street scenes, Paul Strand often fitted his Graflex with a decoy lens, to capture his subjects unaware. Walker Evans snapped most of his series of subway portraits from between the buttons of his topcoat. But for Iturbide, mutual understanding is fundamental. The word she uses, again and again, is "complicity"—an insistence on the affinity between artist and subject: natural lighting, no telephoto lens, full disclosure. Her sitters must comprehend her role as photographer and its implications; in turn, they are given the opportunity to refuse her camera's eye or look back. Gresh compares Iturbide to Robert Frank and Diane Arbus, similarly omnivorous social taxonomists compelled to record "within and outside the mainstream."

Iturbide calls her approach to photography "intuitive." Even the posed shots, such as the winsomely deadpan *The Alligator's Godparents* (1986)—staged as a family photo, babe swapped for stuffed gator—have the curious air of found art, like postcards stumbled upon at a yard sale, a mood of oddness. At the Ethnobotanical Garden in Oaxaca, she framed the region's native flora as sculptural forms, paying particular attention to the garden's unexpected reciprocity. Often harvested for medicinal purposes, the plants were now recipients of human care: trees pumped intravenously with pearly fluid; stands of ailing organ pipe cacti interleaved with crumpled newspapers, cradled in plank and twine.

In 1979, the painter Francisco Toledo invited Iturbide to visit his native Juchitán, in southeastern Oaxaca, a town known for its fierce independence and long-standing leftist sympathies. She returned frequently over the next decade, chronicling the public and private life of its largely Zapotec population. As a perpetual guest, Iturbide became a master of the threshold, of doorways and frames, storefront windows and cemeteries, masks and carnival, of the moments preceding and following transformation.

In Juchitán, the marketplace is traditionally the province of women and muxe, an identity comparable to trans and sometimes described as a Zapotec third gender. With their economic independence and social power, Juchitán's women and muxe modeled a femininity that confounded bourgeois notions of womanhood; Iturbide called them "big, strong, politicized, emancipated, wonderful." (Many Juchitán women have rejected the "matriarchal" label often applied to them, including by Elena Poniatowska in her essay for Iturbide's 1989 monograph *Juchitán de las Mujeres*, and by a controversial 1994 *Elle* article that described them as "red-hot mamas.") Some of her most affecting photographs date to this period, including *Dance* (1986), a beguiling scene of four women in regal dress, held in each other's orbit, and





two portraits of Magnolia, a muxe who approached Iturbide for a shoot. In one picture, her face is doubled in a handheld mirror; in another, she curtsseys in a sombrero, grinning.

Contact sheets enclosed in glass vitrines accompany select images, often annotated with grease pencil. According to Iturbide, there are—pace Cartier-Bresson—two “decisive moments” in photography: “One, when you take the photo; and two, when you discover it in the contact sheet, because you often think you took one photo, and another comes out.” In the sheet for Magnolia with Mirror (1986), a livewire thread of intimacy is palpable in the sense of giddy experimentation between artist and subject. In the proofs for Our Lady of the Iguanas, Zobeida Díaz shakes the hand of a passerby, adjusts her crown of iguanas, suppresses laughter. The sheets underscore the contingency and providence of any image’s origins, how a slightly upturned lip or shifted frame catapults one into the pantheon while another slips into obscurity.

Perhaps there is a third decisive moment in Iturbide’s photography, the moment a relationship begins. When Iturbide first spotted Díaz at the Juchitán market, in her halo of iguanas, she asked to take her picture. Soon, the image became known colloquially as “The Juchitán Medusa,” and Díaz’s likeness was replicated in murals and magazines, graffiti, posters, highway signs, postcards, even in Hollywood films; as if to reverse and literalize the Medusa metaphor, a bronze statue was erected in Juchitán. Díaz died in 2004. Years later, when Iturbide learned of her unremarkable tomb, she commissioned an architect to design a new one, and Francisco Toledo to appoint it with iguanas. It will become, Iturbide expects, something of a shrine.

## Photographer Graciela Iturbide: 'I notice the Pain as well as the Beauty'

Interview with Jo Tuckman  
23 FEBRUARY 2019



**Iturbide's images of her native Mexico, exploring religion, ritual and unexpected surprises, are showcased in a new book and exhibition.**

Graciela Iturbide was out with her camera in a provincial Mexican town one day in 1978, when she came across a family preparing to bury a baby.

Back in those early years of her career, Iturbide was often drawn to shooting folk rituals around the death of children. It was obvious why: her own daughter had died suddenly at the age of six. But this time was different.

First, the cortege with its near-weightless casket came across a dead man lying in its path, exposed flesh picked away by vultures. Then, in the cemetery, the sky filled with the birds that had been feasting on the corpse.

"I felt as if death had appeared and said, 'That's enough! Don't keep living your suffering in this way. Stop it!'" says Iturbide, on the phone from her home in Mexico City.

The contact sheets from that day provide a frame-by-frame account of how a chance encounter transformed Iturbide's early compulsion to photograph infant mortality into a longer-lasting fascination with birds. They also illustrate how her work constantly throws up new ways of seeing key themes such as pain, dignity and mystery, and how those themes never go away.

"The camera for me is a pretext for exploring life and culture around the world, and what usually guides me is what surprises me as I look at things," she says. "If I am not surprised, I cannot take photographs, because it is missing that emotional dimension."



Graciela Iturbide's Mexico, a new book that accompanies an exhibition of the same name currently at the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston, explores those surprises in her native country and includes her best-known work from the extended periods she spent in indigenous communities 40-odd years ago.

There is the celebrated image of a regal Zapotec woman with iguanas on her head taken in the southern city of Juchitán, where women famously wield unusual amounts of power, as well as many other photographs featuring faces and bodies that show the strain of hard lives on the margins.

And yet Iturbide, who describes herself as "very politicised" and "of the left", insists poverty and injustice are never her point. "Whether in my country or in other places, I notice the pain as well as the beauty, but I never shoot poverty," she insists. "I am interested in taking pictures of people with dignity."



Iturbide is similarly keen to protect her more recent pictures of Frida Kahlo's corset, prosthetic leg and other intimate possessions set against the stark background of her bathroom from being sucked up in the mythification of the artist as a feminist icon. "I am not a Fridamaniac," she says. "What I photographed was Frida's pain."

Iturbide draws a quiet satisfaction from the contrast of her images on display in Boston with the anti-Mexican rhetoric coming out of the Trump White House, just as she celebrates the success in Hollywood of the film Roma, directed by her friend Alfonso Cuarón. But she insists there is no political takeaway from her photographs.

"My work is egocentric. It is about what Graciela Iturbide saw when she was taking photographs around the world, nothing more," she says. "I am showing how I interpret things through all the influences in my life."

These include her unshakable fascination with what she calls the "paraphernalia of religion" and ritual, which she maintains despite being an atheist. She says its roots in her childhood as the eldest of 13 children in a strict, religious and well-to-do Mexico City family are just too deep, though long since transformed by her creative independence.

The foundations for that freedom lay in her break for liberty at 19 when she married a "relatively liberal man". Then, after having three children in quick succession, she went to film school and took a class with renowned photographer Manuel Álvarez Bravo.

"Álvarez Bravo taught me another way to live," she says, downplaying what her mentor taught her about photographic technique.

Now, at the age of 76, Iturbide, who has been described as "one of the most important and influential Latin American photographers of the past four decades, who continues to inspire a younger generation of photographers", is spending time revisiting old projects, particularly outside Mexico.



These include returning to photograph a group of deaf people within an east LA street gang she first captured on film in her contribution to a 1987 book called A Day in the Life of America. She is currently planning a trip to take pictures of them visiting the grave of a recently deceased female leader.

"I like to maintain a relationship with people I have worked with," she says. "The experience with them has been very lovely."

The ever-present importance of time and ritual in Iturbide's work is also there in her unflinching loyalty to shooting with film. For one thing, she knows that the mysterious surprises she seeks in the field can also lurk on a contact sheet.

That's what happened with the famed image of a Seri indigenous woman heading down a mountain with the Sonoran desert in northern Mexico stretching out below her.

"It's my favourite photograph, because I don't remember taking it," she says with a laugh. "Maybe it was some kind of spirit out there that took it."