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MEMORIAL ART GALLERY
NEBRASKA ART ASSOCIATION

Seasonal Celebrations, Daily Life: Photographs by Graciela Iturbide

September 7 - December 9, 2007

By Sharon Kennedy, Curator, Sheldon Memorial Art Gallery

The photographs in *Seasonal Celebrations, Daily Life* highlight the work by contemporary Mexican photographer Graciela Iturbide. Early in Iturbide's artistic career she studied with Mexico's preeminent photographer Manuel Alvarez Bravo. Several of his photographs selected from the Sheldon Memorial Art Gallery's permanent collection are also on view.

The exhibition focuses on Iturbide's photographs of the people of Juchitan, a Zapotec community in Oaxaca. She created this portfolio over a six-year period beginning in 1979. Here she earned the trust of the people she photographed by living among them and participating in their daily life and festivities. Iturbide gravitated toward the women and children in this matriarchal society where women dominate as the healers, political leaders and breadwinners.

Graciela Iturbide, *Mujer Angel, Sonora Desert,* 1980, gelatin silver print, 16 X 20 inches, Throckmorton Fine Art, Inc.

Born in 1942 into an upper-middle class family, Iturbide was reared and educated in a Catholic setting in Mexico City. At a time when cameras were not readily available, she was given one in her early teenage years but did not develop her artistic style until later. After she married and gave birth to three children, she entered the National University of Mexico's Film School, *Centro de Estudios Cinematográficos.* There she met Bravo, and ended her formal education to become his assistant. From Bravo she learned about Mexico's indigenous cultures and traditions. Describing her education, she said: "He opened the door a little so that I could get to know my country and begin to understand its distinct cultures." [1] She left Bravo's tutelage after a year and a half to discover her own photographic language.

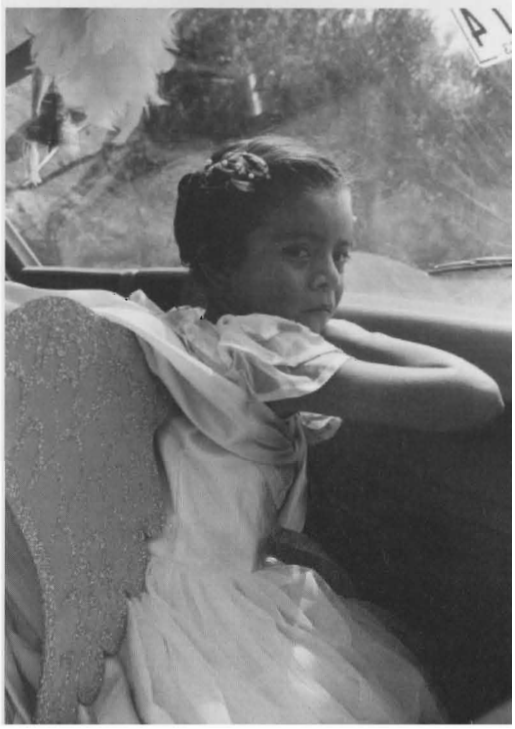
Iturbide's photographs give us a glimpse of the world of pre-colonial Mexico. Although she agrees that all photography is somewhat documentary, she says that she photographs for herself. The camera, according to Iturbide, is a pretext for discovering the world and what is inside herself. Because of the mysterious and

Graciela Iturbide, *El Señor de los pájaros, Nayarit,* 1985, gelatin silver print, 16 X 20 inches, Throckmorton Fine Art, Inc.

dream-like qualities of Iturbide's work, it has been described as surrealist in style. But, she is adamant that there is no aesthetic theory involved. She prefers to believe that she seeks imagination and poetry in her work.

One of Iturbide's most recognized images is *Mujer ángel (Angel Woman), Sonora Desert, 1979.* A Seri woman climbs a rocky terrain overlooking a vast desert vista. She is dressed in a long traditional skirt; her arms are outstretched like wings and her long black hair flows behind her. She holds in her hand what might first appear to be a lantern but is actually a large boom box. Iturbide explains that the Seris can afford such luxuries because they have special privileges to fish in the area and are economically prosperous.

Another angel appears in the front seat of a car as seen in *7674 Chalmita, State of Mexico, 1984.* The custom of dressing children as angels gained new meaning for Iturbide after the death of her young daughter, Claudia. To deal with her grief she poured herself into her photography. For five years she was obsessed with the subject of death and young children. Images depicting cemeteries, altars and death-related traditions and rituals are the result of this period in her life.



Graciela Iturbide, *7674 Chalmita,* 1984, printed 1998, gelatin silver print, 14 X 11 inches, Throckmorton Fine Art, Inc.

Ritual and tradition also are evident in *Quince anos (Fifteen) Juchitan, Oaxaca, 1986.* The image represents a teenage woman's coming-of-age celebration. Her striking long, white dress mirrors the white hair of the elderly woman, whose gaze gives the impression she is in another world. The contrasting, dark surroundings reveal this family's humble lifestyle. The girl, looking intently at the camera, may or may not be aware that two young boys are watching her through the window. One must ask: what is the fate of this young woman?

Another ritual that Iturbide believes has Spanish roots can be seen in *El rapto (The Abduction), Juchitan, Oaxaca, 1986.* Here a young woman lies in bed with a faraway look. According to tradition, the woman must prove her virginity before marrying her betrothed. In this photograph she has passed the test because flowers are strewn across her bed. To explain the purpose of such customs and of her work in general, Iturbide states: "Mexico is meaningful only when understood as an intricate combination of histories and practices."[2]

Mexico's relationship with the animal world also can be seen in Iturbide's work. About *El Sénor de los Pájaros (The Bird Man), Nayarit, Mexico, 1985,* Iturbide said that she first dreamed of birds. A recurring sentence in her dream was: "In my country, I shall plant birds."[3] She later found a man surrounded by birds on an island near the Marias Islands in Baja California, Mexico and felt compelled to photograph him. The man was the caretaker of the island. In her work, Iturbide says she wants dreams and imagination to be present. The symbolic attachment with birds in her life can be seen in Iturbide's most recent book, titled *Eyes to Fly With.*

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Nuestra Senora de las Iguanas (Our Lady of the Iguanas), Juchitan, Oaxaca, 1979 portrays a market vendor who wears her goods like a crown on her head. According to Iturbide, the iguanas' mouths are sewn shut so as not to bite. The woman's radiant face exudes confidence and strength as do many of the women that Iturbide befriended during her time in Juchitan.

According to Iturbide, "What the eyes see is the synthesis of what you are or what you've learned to do." What makes Iturbide's work original and captivating is her imaginative approach, her insatiable curiosity and her ability to be, in her words, "…alert and at the same time invisible."[4]

Celebraciones de las Estaciones, La Vida Cotidiana

Las fotografías en *Celebraciones de las Estaciones, La Vida Cotidiana* realzan el trabajo de la fotógrafa contemporánea mexicana, Graciela Iturbide. Al principio de su carrera artística, Iturbide estudió con el fotógrafo preeminente de México, Manuel Alvarez Bravo. Varias de las fotografías de Bravo fueron seleccionadas de la colección permanente de la Galería de Arte Sheldon Memorial (conocida en inglés como *Sheldon Memorial Art Gallery)* y también están en exhibición.

La exposición se enfoca en las fotografías de Iturbide representando la gente de Juchitan, una comunidad Zapoteca en Oaxaca. Ella creó esta carpeta de trabajos durante un periodo de seis años comenzando en 1979. Aquí ella se ganó la confianza de la gente a quienes ella fotografió al vivir entre ellas y al participar en su vida diaria y festividades. Iturbide se enfocó en las mujeres y los niños en esta sociedad matriarcal en donde las mujeres dominan como curanderas, líderes políticas y como el sostén de la familia.

Nacida en 1942 de una familia de clase media alta, Iturbide fue criada y educada en un entorno Católico en la Ciudad de México. En un tiempo cuando las cámaras no eran fácilmente disponibles, a ella se le dio una en sus primeros años de la adolescencia pero no desarrolló su estilo artístico hasta más adelante. Después de que se casó y dio a luz a tres hijos, ella ingresó al Centro Universitario de Estudios Cinematográficos en la Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México. Ahí conoció a Bravo, y terminó su estudio formal para llegar a ser su asistente. Ella aprendió de Bravo acerca de las culturas y tradiciones indígenas de México. Al describir su educación, ella dijo: "Él abrió la puerta un poco para que yo pudiera conocer a mi país y comenzar a comprender sus distintas culturas." [1] Ella dejó la tutela de Bravo después de un año y medio para descubrir su propio lenguaje fotográfico.

Las fotografías de Iturbide nos dan una idea del mundo de México pre-colonial. Aunque ella está de acuerdo en que toda la fotografía es de alguna manera un documental, ella dice que toma fotografías para ella misma. La cámara, según Iturbide, es un pretexto para

Graciela Iturbide, *Nuestra Señora de las Iguanas, Juchitán,* 1979, printed 1986, gelatin silver print, 16 X 20 inches, Throckmorton Fine Art, Inc.

descubrir el mundo y lo que hay dentro de ella misma. A causa de las cualidades del trabajo de Iturbide que son misteriosas y como de ensueño, se ha descrito su estilo como surrealista. Pero, ella está firme que no tiene que ver con ninguna teoría estética. Ella prefiere creer que ella busca imaginación y poesía en su trabajo.

Una de las imágenes mejor reconocidas de Iturbide es *Mujer ángel, Desierto de Sonora, 1979.* Una mujer Seri sube un terreno pedregoso con vista a un panorama de un desierto enorme. Ella lleva una larga

alas y su largo cabello negro cae como cascada detrás de ella. Ella lleva en su mano lo que a primera vista parece ser una linterna pero que realmente es una grande radio grabadora móvil. Iturbide explica que a los Seris les alcanza para comprar tales lujos porque tienen privilegios especiales para la pesca en el área y son económicamente prósperos.

Otro ángel aparece en el asiento delantero de un vehículo como se ve en *7674 Chalmita, Estado de México, 1984.* La costumbre de vestir a los niños como ángeles tuvo un sentido nuevo para Iturbide después de la muerte de su pequeña hija, Claudia. Para tratar con su dolor, ella se dedicó a su fotografía. Por cinco años ella estuvo obsesionada con el tema de la muerte y los niños pequeños. Imágenes que representan cementerios, altares, y tradiciones y ritos relacionados con la muerte son el resultado de esta etapa en su vida.

Graciela Iturbide, *Quince Años, Juchitán,* 1986, gelatin silver print, 20 X 16 inches, Throckmorton Fine Art, Inc.

Los ritos y la tradición también son obvios en *Quince años, Juchitan, Oaxaca, 1986.* La imagen representa una celebración de una muchacha adolescente al llegar al florecimiento de la edad madura. Su largo y llamativo vestido blanco refleja el cabello blanco de la mujer de edad avanzada, cuya mirada da la impresión de que ella está en otro mundo. Los oscuros alrededores que contrastan revelan el humilde estilo de vida de esta familia. La muchacha, mirando intensamente a la cámara, pueda o no estar consciente de que dos niños pequeños la están mirando por la ventana. Uno se pregunta: ¿Cuál es el destino de esta jovencita?

Otro rito el cual Iturbide cree tiene raíces españolas se puede ver en *El rapto, Juchitan, Oaxaca, 1986.* Aquí una mujer joven está acostada en la cama con una mirada lejana. Según la tradición, la mujer debe de demostrar su virginidad antes de casarse con su prometido en matrimonio. En esta fotografía ella ha pasado la prueba porque hay flores esparcidas por la cama. Para explicar el propósito de tales costumbres y de su trabajo en general, Iturbide dice: "México es significativo solamente cuando es entendido como una combinación intricada de historias y prácticas." [2]

La relación de México con el mundo de animales también se puede ver en el trabajo de Iturbide. Acerca de *El señor de los pájaros, Nayarit, México, 1984,* Iturbide dijo que ella primero soñó pájaros. Una oración repetida en su sueño era: "En mi país, yo sembraré pájaros." [3] Después, ella encontró a un hombre rodeado de pájaros en una isla cerca de las Islas Marías de Baja California, México y ella se sintió con el deseo de tomarle una fotografía. El hombre era el que cuidaba de la isla. En su trabajo, Iturbide dice que ella quiere que estén presentes los sueños y la imaginación. La atracción simbólica con los pájaros en su vida puede ser vista en el libro más reciente de Iturbide, cuyo título es *Eyes to Fly With (Ojos para Volar).*

Nuestra Señora de las Iguanas, Juchitan, Oaxaca, 1979 retrata a una vendedora en el mercado que lleva su mercancía como una corona en la cabeza. Según Iturbide, las bocas de las iguanas han sido cosidas para que no muerdan. La cara radiante de la mujer transmite confianza y fuerza al igual que muchas de las mujeres a quienes Iturbide ha tenido como amigas durante su temporada en Juchitan.

Según Iturbide, "Lo que los ojos ven es la síntesis de lo que tú eres o lo que has aprendido a hacer." Lo que hace que el trabajo de Iturbide sea original y cautivador es su enfoque imaginativo, su curiosidad insaciable y su habilidad de estar, en sus palabras, "…alerta y al mismo tiempo invisible." [4]

The presentation of *Seasonal Celebrations, Daily Life* at Sheldon Memorial Art Gallery has been made possible through the generous support of the Wake Charitable Foundation, the Nebraska Arts Council and the Nebraska Art Association.

ENDNOTES

[1] Iturbide, Graciela. *Eyes to Fly With.* Austin: University of Texas, 9.

[2] Snow, K. Mitchell, "Lens of Ritual & Revelation," *Americas* 51, no. 1 (1999), http://www.americas.oas.org/jan99_art22.htm

[3] Iturbide, *Eyes to Fly With,* 16.

[4] Ibid, 15.