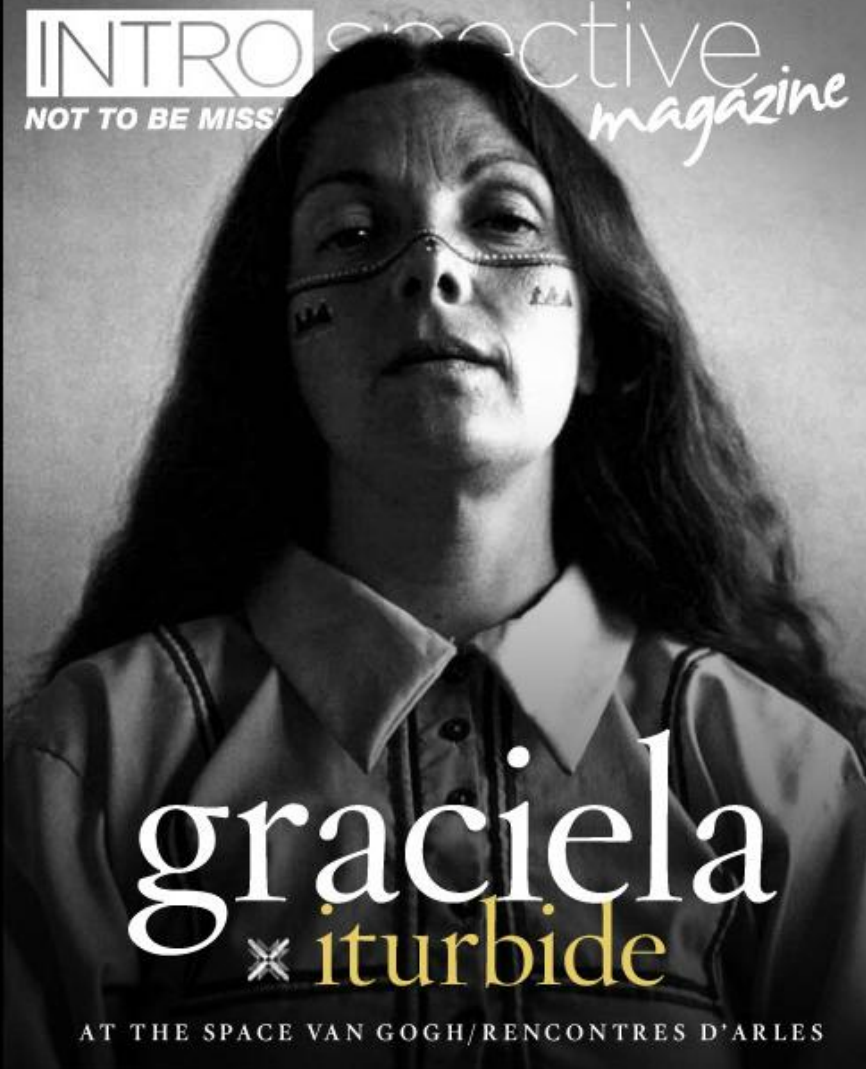


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graciela
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AT THE SPACE VAN GOGH/RENCONTRES D'ARLES

NOT TO BE MISSED: **GRACIELA ITURBIDE IN ARLES**

by *Marlena Donohue*



exican artist Graciela Iturbide is among the preeminent fine-art photographers working today. Iturbide's growing reputation aligns her — if not her exact approach — with seminal names like Edward Weston, Alfred Eisenstaedt and, certainly, Iturbide's mentor, the late Manuel Alvarez Bravo (1902-2002), regarded today as an undisputed international master of the genre. Since meeting Bravo 40 years ago, Iturbide, now in her 60s, has seen her work become the focus of countless publications and major museum shows, sought by the most discriminating public and private photo collectors globally — the Getty, for one.

Jaipur, India, 1999. Previous page: Graciela Iturbide's *Self-Portrait with the Seri, Sonora Desert, Mexico, 1979.* All images courtesy of the artist and Rose Gallery.



In 1969, Iturbide was a young wife and mother from an educated upper-class Mexican family in a particularly patriarchal culture. She turned to art when that renegade social era and personal tragedy (the sudden death of a young daughter) led her to intense self scrutiny. Iturbide made the breakaway decision to study film and photography, enrolling at the Centro Universitario de Estudios Cinematograficos in Mexico City under the tutelage of a not-yet-famous Bravo, becoming his assistant, dear friend and eventually professional peer.

Bravo introduced Iturbide to ancient Mesoamerican and folk traditions, to Diego Rivera, Frida Kahlo and the literary intelligensia, opening her grasp on uniquely Mexican complexities like a nearly lost indigenous pre-history, the odd overlay of strident Catholicism, appalling poverty, relentless joy, deep ties to community and the earth, and privilege vested in a tiny aristocratic class.

Through the 1970s, Iturbide made her own name recording native people, their villages, crafts, routines and rituals. She lived among the women of Juchitán, producing gorgeous, poetic images (short-sightedly mistaken for anthropological photo essays) of matriarchs at "female only" markets selling, among other things, iguanas displayed as tangles of live reptiles perched on their heads. In the late '80s and '90s, she bravely moved from the indigenous portraits that won her fame to fragments of botanical gardens and open nature, images that to this eye are some of her most stunning and mature work. In these we see birds — one of her favorite motifs and symbols — coalesce like sooty stains clogging a corner of sky, wild dogs are silhouetted beautifully on a hillside in the outlands of India. Just like her images of human subjects, that manage to be both iconic and staunchly real, her nature photos feel equally immediate, discovered firsthand, inanimate but no less able to suggest that the prosaic holds the mythic.

Magnolia (1), Juchitán, Mexico, 1986

i interviewed Iturbide years back and she said that taking photographs for her was not a way of presenting the timeless, but of being intensely in time, intensely present with and through her subjects. For Iturbide, the lens seems a way to know and understand herself in relation to others, in relation to the vast world. A career survey of Iturbide's work was organized by the Mapfre Foundation in Spain, and jointly curated across three continents by the artist, the artist's dealer, Rose Shoshana of Rose Gallery in Santa Monica, and Barcelona-based independent curator Marta Daho. The show runs through September 18 at the Espace Van Gogh/ Les Rencontres d'Arles in Arles, France.

Speaking to me from LA and Italy respectively, Shoshana and Daho shared their insights on the artist and the exhibition.

Carretera 61, de Clarksdale, Mississippi, a Memphis, Tennessee [Highway 61, from Clarksdale, Mississippi to Memphis, Tennessee], USA, 1997





Mexico, 1969

Rose, you are Graciela's exclusive dealer. You assisted in selecting this show, right?

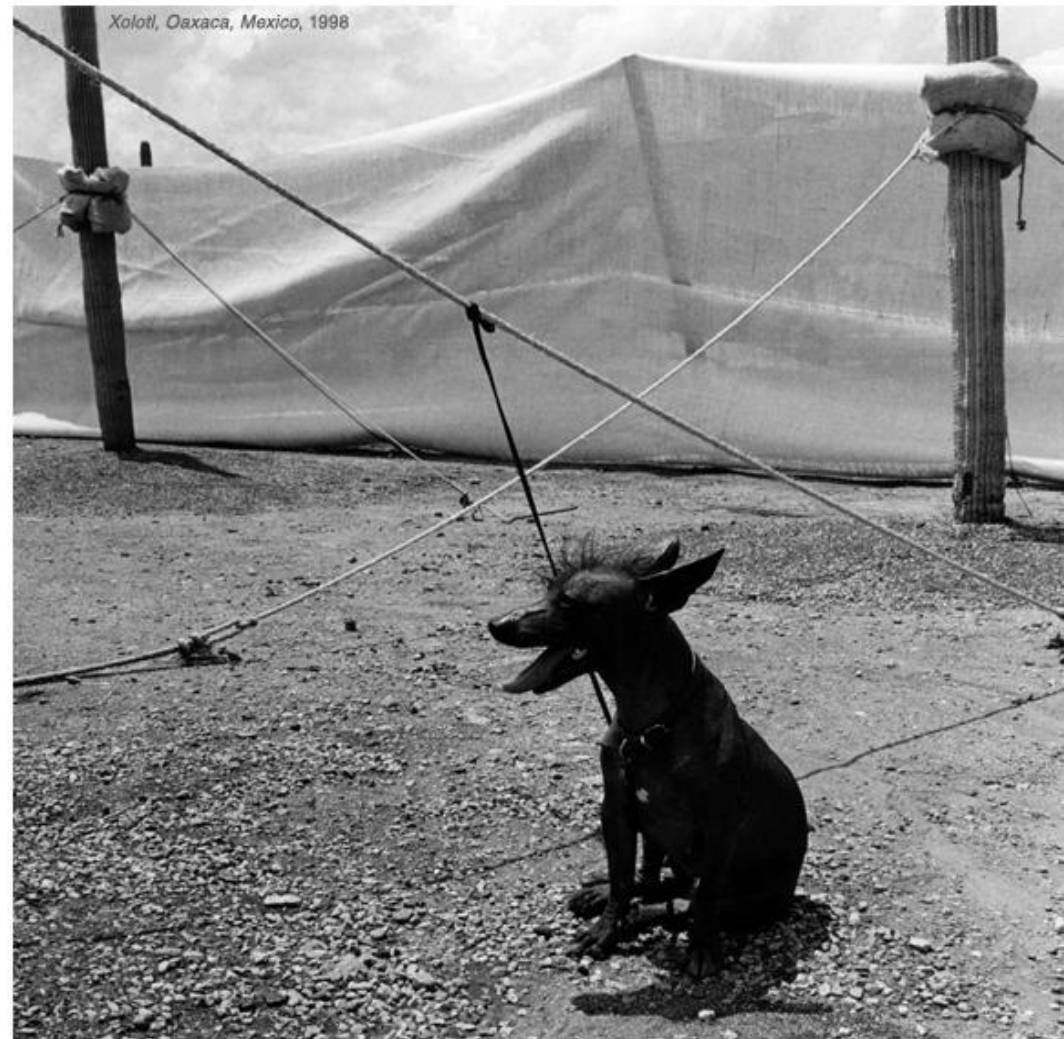
RS: As always, Graciela very kindly included me in the selection process but with this exhibition, it really was a great collaboration between Graciela and Marta.

Marta, how did you come to be the curator of this show?

MD: I'm a freelance curator; I had seen the images in reproduction and was captivated. I proposed the project and she accepted. I started deep research done with Iturbide and when the pre-project was ready we located the right museum; we were extremely happy to work with one of the best museums for photography in Spain, which is the Mapfre Foundation. They opted to acquire the works in the exhibition for their private collection.

You have three voices, each on a different continent. How did you curate from Spain, Marta?

MD: Graciela and I met every time that she was in Europe and I made several trips to Mexico to study her archives. We worked hand in hand; our work was a marvelous process full of complicity.





This show was widely traveled before coming to Arles, no?

RS: The exhibition opened in Madrid at the Mapfre Foundation, in June 2009, went to the Fotomuseum Winterthur in Switzerland, then to Centro Guerrero and the Casal Solleric, both in Spain, and on to the Pinacoteca Sao Paulo in Brazil. I'm in the process of conceiving some version of the show for major US venues.

Marta, what was your vision or goal here?

MD: In 2005 when I began the project, Graciela's stature was established, but not so much for the remarkable work done in the past 15 years. The shows of her work were partial and limited to her most well-known pictures of the '80s taken in Latin America.

RS: I would say that this is the first museum exhibition in which the profundity of her many talents and ideas are integrated so beautifully. By this I mean her portraits, landscapes, objects and all the multitude of subjects that interest her coalesce and speak back and forth visually and conceptually around recurring themes in a most elegant way.

MD: My aim was to show her lesser-known work of recent years in relation to her earliest and more famous images, to provide a sense of the work's evolution, its transformation through the years, Iturbide's new interests, what photography and art mean to this artist.

RS: I think Marta shows us in this exhibition how photography functions for Iturbide herself, as opposed to what is said about Iturbide — both are important but they can be quite different.

MD: I was particularly interested in refining interpretations of her work that are simplistic, too literal and far from Graciela's concepts. To consider her an anthropologist or to define her work as some sort of magic realism — these are two ways to avoid the real complexity of her work.

Novia muerta [Death Bride], Chalma, Mexico, 1990

Territorio de los Seminolas (Seminole Territory), Florida, USA, 1998



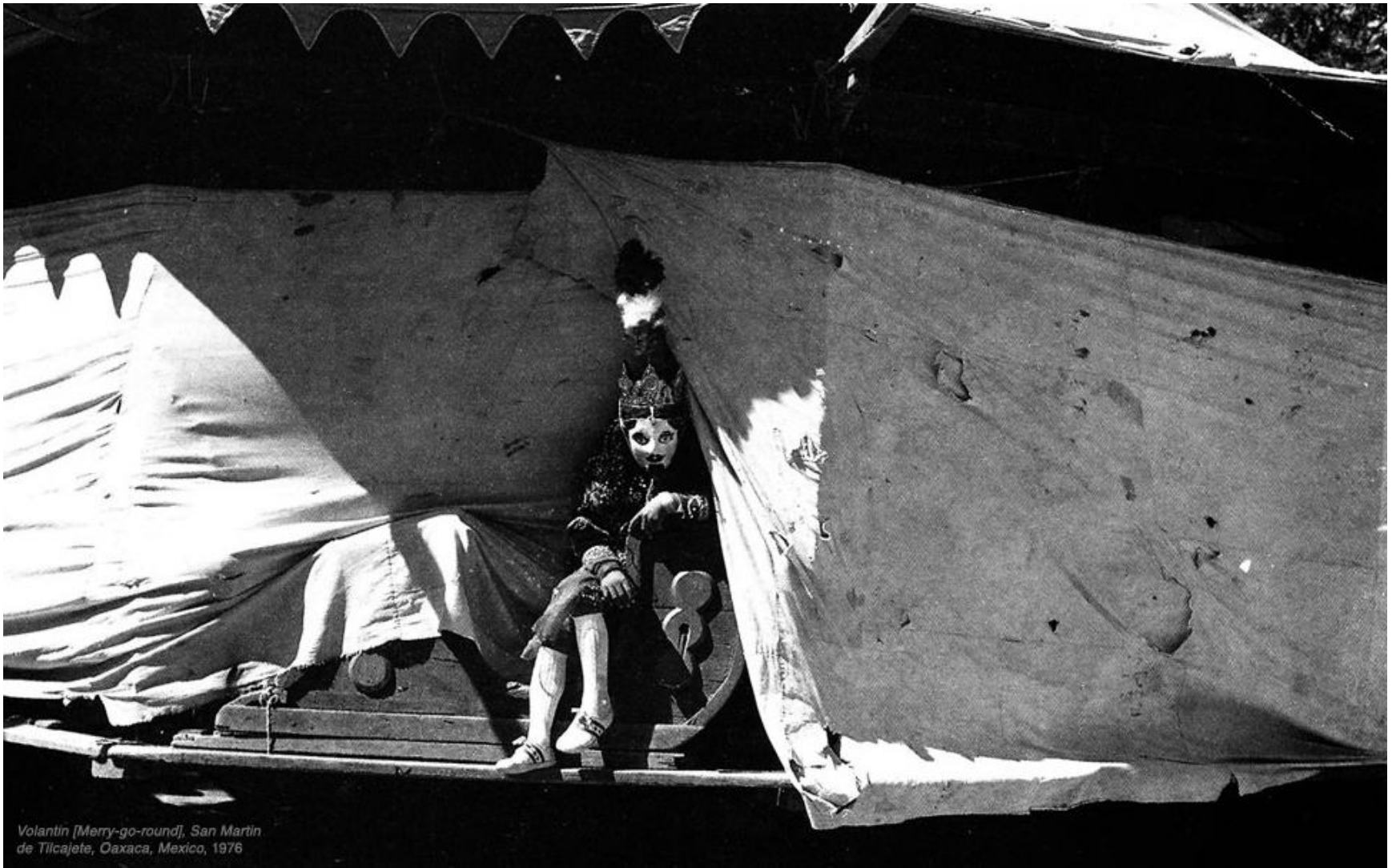
How do each of you see the design of this show as addressing these complexities?

RS: As you and other writers have noted, whether Iturbide is capturing people or nature, the defining perspectives of connection to her subjects and revelation through experience are the same. So if anything, the development is more thematic than chronological.

MD: Her long and prolific career is difficult to narrate as a linear process. Certain subjects group together in terms of projects captivating her over a certain time, but she does not really work in series. Her most important projects are highlighted, but interwoven to give a sense of her overarching viewpoint and ideas.

Rose, you have known Graciela for a very long time, you were the dealer of record for her famous mentor Bravo, you are the publisher of the major books on Bravo and Iturbide. From both that intimate and professional perspective, do you have a favorite Iturbide subject or image?

RS: Graciela has an enormous affinity for birds. They appear as characters in what might be seen as her visual novels. Her images of these amazing flying and feathered creatures are my favorites. Maybe I view her as a most extraordinary and restless bird with a camera, alighting, or dropping anchor at a locale or spot that catches her eye, partaking and interacting with all that surrounds her and then flying back to her nest in Coyoacán to review her journey.



*Volantin [Merry-go-round], San Martín
de Tilcajete, Oaxaca, Mexico, 1976*



Marta, do you have a favorite?

MD: I can't say I have a favorite, but the images loosely called "Juchitán de las Mujeres," or in English, "Juchitán, A Town of Women," have been very important to her career.

Can you talk a bit about these?

MD: The village of Juchitán in the region of Zapoteca, Mexico, occupied Iturbide for a decade. She got an invitation to go there from the famous artist Francisco Toledo who had an exhibition in mind.

Carnaval [Carnival], Tlaxcala, Mexico, 1974

Can you explain why that village and that locale?

MD: Juchitán was a very special place for different reasons. First, social rules were different from those elsewhere in the country. It is the women who run the economic system or market, and the only men who have access are muxés, transvestite homosexuals who, far from being stigmatized, are an integral part of the community. Also significant is the legendary sexual freedom enjoyed by Juchitán women and the eroticism that permeates the Zapotec language, its oral tradition and its literature. Finally, Zapoteca and Juchitán were places where pro-indigenous activism and the fight to defend indigenous rights and culture were born.

RS: It was an area that attracted artists and intellectuals since the 1920s. Bravo made a film there in the '30s, Tina Modotti, Henri Cartier-Bresson, Edward Weston, Paul Strand and a long list of others were drawn to photograph the place.

And it became the sort of exotic fantasy locale that Westerners knew mainly via these representations, made by mostly European artists and exemplifying through their lens — literally — all that was “wild, primitive, different” about Mexico or so-called native peoples in general.

MD: Foreign photographers have been fascinated by a foreign culture but I think that is more related to a commercial strategy than who is authoring the image. It can be seen as part of the process of colonialism and globalization, in which the culture of each country is clothed, so to speak, in monolithic identities, ignoring that each culture is a reality constantly modified by the external influences.

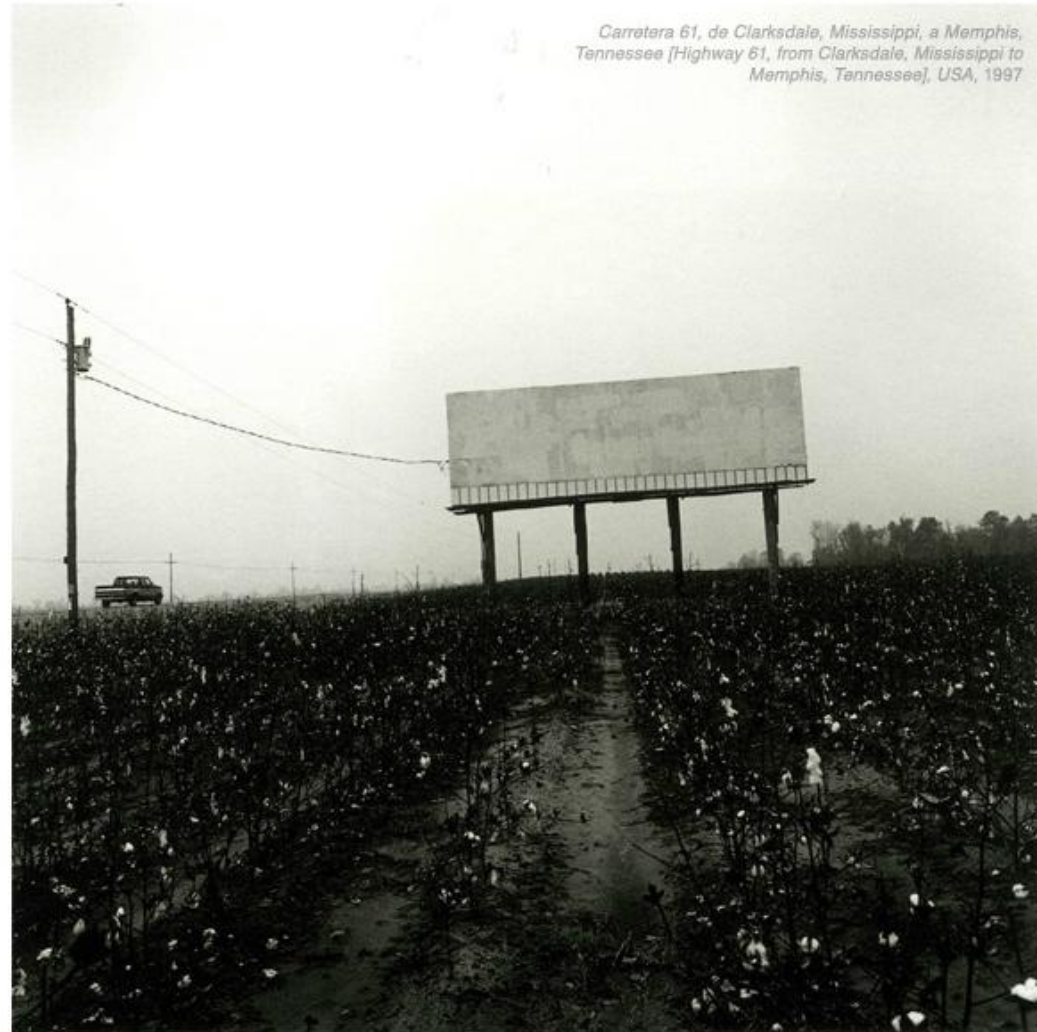
Top: *Roma [Rome]*, 2007. Bottom: *Nayarit, Mexico*, 1994



So fine art as well as mass media sometimes participates unwittingly in marketing the fiction of ethnicity and cultural diversity. Iturbide and her images seem to exemplify an effort to understand the evolving reality that is lived culture.

MD: In her 1979 portraits of the Seris Indians of the Sonora Desert, and the resulting book, *Iturbide* reflects on a people whose existence is divided between an ancestral past and the new customs imported by capitalism. Here she reveals her capacity to include in the picture what usually resists the photographic representation — in this case, the cultural identity of a community evolving, that is being transformed.

RS: It is important to note that in her images of the Seris or of Juchitán, Iturbide is not the removed spectator making an art piece, or someone there to view at a distance these objects of curiosity. She was there to form relationships, to know, and art results in the process of this reciprocal perspective.





MD: Iturbide entered Juchitán through its women. She prepared for festivals and celebrations with them, took part in the peaceful enjoyment of ordinary everyday life, and they “adopted” her. Strong, independent and politicized are the words she uses to describe them.

What she experiences, discovers and learns ultimately forms the background for her photographs; this is not anthropological study, nor a documentation of their traditions, but time shared with them. And though her point of departure is personal, she refuses to idealize the indigenous world, or any subject. There is no hint of romanticism in this or other work, and if anything she resorts first and foremost to her sense of humor.



**So if that project brackets her early fame,
how do you bring us to the present?**

MD: "Landscapes and Objects" is a section of the show in which we group this new and less well-known direction in her work. In the mid- and late-1990s, there is a radical transition, human figures begin to disappear and her work becomes more contemplative. It gives way to a more intimate and solitary experience with the landscape.

RS: In the late 1990s I urged Graciela to come to the US and begin a new body of work. She traveled through the southern United States on a car journey with the poet Roberto Tejada; she made photos and he wrote. We made an important publication of images and text. This was the beginning of Graciela's connection with the landscape and random poetic objects she encountered in it. This was followed by her first visit to India, where she produced really fine portraits, landscapes, objects

happened upon, and the many images of birds that I am so fond of. All of this work from the late '90s had the same immediacy of earlier work, but it was more contemplative. She came at issues like earth, community and ritual in less frontal and literal ways. You start to see a bit more of her early interest in experimental film and the use of symbols more than storytelling.

MD: I think Graciela's art — all good art — reminds us that art helps us imagine. We always look and know through our imagination, and that this imagination is not only our own dreamlike poetic removed from reality but a very fine tool to understand our world.

Top: Perros Perdidos [Lost Dogs], Rajasthan, India, 1998. Bottom: Chalma, Mexico, 2008

Is this show such a tool?

MD: If not the show itself, certainly the images in it. Iturbide's images can drive us toward a vision of the world that's almost mystical, and in other cases confront us with social and cultural issues that are key in our present. We see the fragility of indigenous culture, the loss of richness of cultural diversity in a more and more standardized world, the conflicts between tradition and progress, but also the scar of the absence and death, which runs alongside the intensity of life. It is precisely this deeply vital perspective that allows Iturbide to reveal the lace that knits together reality and representation.



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Autoretrato en el campo [Self-Portrait in the Country], Pachuca, Mexico, 1996.

