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Photography 1

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Graciela Iturbide: Imaging the Multifarious Souls of the Heart of Mexico

Graciela Iturbide is a renowned Mexican photographer who is most famous for her photographs of indigenous culture in Mexico. In expressive and powerful images, Iturbide “captures the deep-rooted traditions and multilayered identity of her country’s people” (Snow 22). Iturbide remarked on her photography and her vision as an artist: “I try to seek the poetic parts of Mexico that please me; the pre-Hispanic parts, the religious parts, which fascinate me. I am a documentary photographer for myself” (Snow 26).

Iturbide is the complete opposite of photographer, Edward S. Curtis who photographed indigenous Native Americans a few decades earlier. Often against their will, Curtis would photograph the Native Americans in imaginary time capsules next to an eclectic hodge-podge of “cultural artifacts” (Johnson). He had little interest in capturing true Native American identity in his photographs. And while Iturbide’s works are similar to Curtis in the fact that the photographic subject is indigenous peoples, she submerges herself into their culture, becoming comfortable with her photographic subjects and making careful efforts to seek out their permission before taking snapshots of their images. Iturbide comments, “I hope that they realize there is someone who respects them behind the camera” (Snow 23). The people in her photographs do not become “the other” or “the outsider” who is visually cast into the lowest ranks of social hierarchy, but rather embody humanistic qualities the viewer can relate to. Gaining the trust of her subjects is a priority in Iturbide’s work and is an uncompromising,

ethical standard she holds herself to; it is a practice that resonates in her photography. “I feel,” Iturbide articulates, “that photography involves a complicity between the person being photographed and the photographer” (Snow 22). This relationship she establishes with her subjects gives her an edge on the other photographers in her line of artistic work.

Iturbide’s artistic identity in her photography was greatly influenced by photographer Manuel Alvarez Bravo. Bravo instructed a still photography class that Iturbide enrolled into in 1972. And since she was one of the very few students in the course, she took on an apprenticeship role (George 12). Bravo is a photographer whose vision is equated with Mexico’s muralist movement which was headed by the famous painter, Diego Rivera. K. Mitchell Snow states, “Iturbide clearly shared an affinity with Bravo’s interest in capturing the poetic moments of their country’s everyday life” (24); a common theme that repeatedly emerges throughout her images.

A famous photograph, *Angel Woman*, is one in a series of photographs Iturbide took in the late 1970s of indigenous Seri Indians of Mexico (Snow 22). The image is of a young woman, her back to the viewer, with long, black hair that runs down her back. She climbs a rugged mountain that overlooks a vast, unforgiving desert. With her arms outstretched, she possesses an angel-like quality; her arms resemble wings and it looks as though at any moment she will take flight into the white, heavenly sky that imitates her posture. The white skirt she wears also renders her angelic – it resembles the European Christian renditions of angels whose white robes flow in the same fashion as her garment. The woman holds an electronic stereo in her right hand which feels out of place juxtaposed against her traditional skirt and the desert landscape. Iturbide beautifully captures the spirit of traditional indigenous culture with this photograph, but illustrates how the effects of globalization have seeped to even the most remote parts of Old

Mexico. Her photograph demonstrates that the indigenous people of Mexico possess an ever evolving culture – a culture that is in constant battle between old world customs and new world technologies.

In her photographic work, *Juchitan, A City of Women*, Iturbide focused the lens of her camera to the indigenous culture of the Zapotec women. David Brownridge observes that the women in her photographic work are “strong and assertive, large, flamboyant and endowed with a generous spirit and powerful sexuality” (102). Unlike most parts of the world, the Zapotec people are a matriarchal society where women experience more social and economic power than men. The women are the authoritative force that holds the society together. Iturbide commented on Zapotec society, noting that “the men work but they give money to the women” (George 12).

The most celebrated image from Iturbide’s series of photographs in Juchitan is *Our Lady of the Iguanas*. This image has become the feminine icon of strength and independence that resonates within Zapotec society. In the photograph a woman stares confidently in the direction of the viewer. Her body looks strong and healthy and she is framed in an upward position which gives her a sense of authority over the viewer. After the attention is diverted from the woman’s face, a punctum appears with a second glance: upon her head rests a crown of live iguanas. The woman is selling the iguanas in the market place and wears the bulky, scaled lizards on her head in hopes of capturing the attention of a potential customer. In Zapotec culture an iguana is a source of food (George 13) and is displayed atop the head like any other produce for sale. Iturbide’s portrayal of women in the Juchitan series coupled with the female dominated Zapotec society offers the viewer a new lens in which to envision women. The influential photographs immerse the viewer into a reality where gender identity is redefined. The traditional gender role

of the subservient, substandard, and objectified woman holds no bearing in this society and demonstrates that patriarchal societies exist solely because of social constructs of gender.

In her more recent work, the *Cholos Project*, she focused on photographing a Mexican female gang in Los Angeles, California. One of the most prominent pictures of the series is *Cholas, White Fence, East L.A.* In the photograph, four Chicana women stand against a chain-link fence. One of the girls holds a young baby in her arms. Behind the female figures are murals of three important political heroes of Mexican history: Benito Juarez, Emiliano Zapata and Pancho Villa. Iturbide asked the women if they knew who the painted faces were and they responded that they were probably famous mariachis (Snow 26). Although the women identified themselves as Mexican, they lacked a cultural understanding of Mexican history. Iturbide observed that the Chicana women in her images “are people with a lot of nostalgia for Mexico, but they don’t know what Mexico is” (Snow 27). The women in this gang throw up signs with their hands but not in a threatening way – all of its members are actually deaf and mute (Snow 27). Within the context of the photograph the women are also metaphorically deaf and mute to their Mexican ethnic identity. This narrow view of identity becomes problematic because it does not allow for these women to also identify themselves within larger social categories.

From the women of Juchitan and to the gang members of Los Angeles, Iturbide’s photographic works are political testimonies of our narrow scope of perceived “identity.” And in pointing out our constricted thinking, the photographs force us to abandon our inherent societal programming in order to redefine and *challenge* the social constructs of gender and ethnic identity that we have become accustomed to. With her photography, I believe that Iturbide shows that surrendering to society’s rigid concepts of identity only intensifies the barriers of diversity among us and instead of taking the desired steps to embrace it.

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