

LOLA ALVAREZ BRAVO

A pioneering figure in the rise of modernist photography in Mexico, Lola Alvarez Bravo (1903–1993) was a profound humanist who used the camera to chronicle her beloved country over a remarkable six-decade career. Her artistic formation took place in the midst of Mexico's great post-Revolution cultural renaissance, an era when popular arts and the values of native people became crucial influences for artists and intellectuals who advocated an autonomous sense of Mexican identity. Alvarez Bravo was a central figure in the vibrant milieu that gave rise to Mexico's modern art movement: She was married to (and learned photography from) Manuel Alvarez Bravo, and she counted among her friends such luminaries as Diego Rivera, Frida Kahlo, María Izquierdo, and David Alfaro Siqueiros. In addition to her work as a photographer, she was also a teacher, gallerist, and filmmaker.

Alvarez Bravo produced many of her most memorable photographs—portraits, scenes of people in the city and countryside, and nudes—from the late 1930s to the 1950s. Much of her work was produced on assignment, as chief photographer for the Instituto Nacional de Bellas Artes y Literatura, a position she held for thirty years; for other government agencies; and as a photojournalist for newspapers and illustrated magazines. While reviewing her contact sheets she would sometimes come across an image that affected her. "I like this one very much, this one is for me," she would decide. Over time, she amassed a body of photographs, perhaps a couple hundred, that she embraced as truly her own. It is these images that form the basis of this exhibition.

Above all, Alvarez Bravo's work expresses a fascination for people and human activity, from the commonplace to the extraordinary. She took great pleasure in picturing the hum of daily life—outdoor barbers; letter writers in Santo Domingo; participants in religious rituals; children playing; people reading, sleeping, waiting, and watching. Endlessly intrigued by the infinity of small dramas that played out around her, Alvarez Bravo was a storyteller who depicted her subjects with honesty, curiosity, and an abiding affection. Through photography, she could preserve the life around her, exalt and cherish it.

Aperture sincerely thanks Elizabeth Ferrer, whose curatorial insight captures the unique spirit of Lola Alvarez Bravo and her extraordinary photographs.

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EARLY CAREER

Lola Alvarez Bravo's early career was inextricably bound with that of her husband, Manuel Alvarez Bravo (1902–2002). The two played together as children in Mexico City during the years of the nation's Revolution, even though she was the pampered daughter of a wealthy furniture exporter, and he came from a large, struggling family. When Lola's father died in 1916, she went to live with an older half brother in the same tenement building that was home to the Alvarez Bravos. After a long courtship, Lola and Manuel married in 1925. They moved temporarily to Oaxaca, where he worked as a government accountant and pursued photography in his spare time. Lola joined Manuel on outings to make pictures, though he would not always allow her to use the single camera they shared in those years. He did teach her the skills necessary to assist him in the darkroom when, by the early 1930s, photography became his full-time vocation.

Lola credited Manuel as one of her abiding artistic influences. They often photographed similar subject matter, such as street scenes in Mexico City's historic center, arresting storefront displays, and indigenous people. In fact, Lola claimed a handful of images known as Manuel's as her own, such as the portrait of the painter Marion Greenwood included in this exhibition. Nevertheless, she developed a distinct artistic voice. Unlike Manuel, who would consciously infuse his images with layers of symbolism and transcendent meaning, Lola's photographs were about *this* person, *this* moment in time.

Shortly after the Alvarez Bravos' separation in 1934, Lola turned to the camera to earn a living. Her early assignments included documenting popular art objects for the cultural journal *Mexican Folkways*, photographing artworks, and producing photo-essays for a government magazine, *El maestro rural* (*The Rural Teacher*). She quickly gained confidence with the camera, and by the end of the 1930s was making a living and expressing herself creatively through the medium of photography.

PORTRAITURE

Before she became known as a creative photographer, Lola Alvarez Bravo established her reputation in Mexico as a portraitist. Since the beginning of her career she had photographed friends, many of whom also happened to be the leading artists and writers of the day. Her work in this genre is extensive, and she ultimately created a visual compendium of the country's twentieth-century cultural elite.

Many of Alvarez Bravo's friends became willing creative subjects who collaborated with the photographer to produce the signature images by which they became known. She portrayed *los tres grandes*, the muralists Diego Rivera, José Clemente Orozco, and David Alfaro Siqueiros, as well as such other leading painters as Rufino Tamayo, María Izquierdo, and Juan Soriano. Her oeuvre also contains portraits of nearly every Mexican writer of note, including Octavio Paz, Carlos Fuentes, and Carlos Monsiváis.

Alvarez Bravo's best-known portraits are of her dear friend Frida Kahlo; it was these photographs that played a decisive role in reviving interest in the photographer late in her life, in the early 1990s. Kahlo was one of Mexico's most photographed women, and Alvarez Bravo's studies of her stand out for both their intimacy and frankness. In addition to making numerous portraits of Frida Kahlo, Alvarez Bravo also directed a never-completed film featuring the artist in 1951. Two years later, she honored Kahlo by mounting her only solo exhibition held in Mexico during her lifetime, at the Galería de Arte Contemporáneo.