

Visual Arts

Graciela Iturbide in Boston: from slaughter to surrealism

The photographer's images of her native Mexico, on show in Boston's Museum of Fine Arts, revel in the country's extremes



Graciela Iturbide's 'Our Lady of the Iguanas' (1979)

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In a gobsmacking retrospective at Boston's Museum of Fine Arts, Graciela Iturbide's photographs practically erupt from the walls, wounding with their painful perfection. In pictures that are by turns shocking, subtle, witty and tragic, the exhibition rolls out Iturbide's 50-year portrait of her

native Mexico. A woman clutches a live chicken to her side, its fate intimated by the volcanic splatter on a background wall. A little girl in a white dress and angel wings sits disconsolately in a car, turning away from whatever she has just witnessed through the grimy windshield. An ebony-haired matron in a blood-smeared dress clenches a knife between her teeth and a goat's hooves in her fists. The minutiae of everyday life expand into ambiguous symbols; routines are transmuted into metaphor.



'Chalma' (1974)

Born in 1942 in Mexico City, Iturbide has spent a lifetime interweaving anthropology and poetry, close study with leaps of inspiration, fact and spirit. She has reconnoitred indigenous and urban cultures, memorialising various vanishing ways of life. Early in her career, she received a government grant to spend several months with the Seri people, who had only recently abandoned their nomadic traditions and settled down in the Sonoran Desert. Later, when Iturbide was putting together a book on the project — and after she had already made her final selections and completed the layout — her editor pointed to an unprinted image in the contact sheets.

This became “Angel Woman”, among her most stunning works. A female figure steals away from us across a rocky slope, black veil and gauzy white skirts blowing at her back. The luminous desert, as cottony as a shelf of clouds seen from an aeroplane window, stretches out beneath her towards a distant wall of mountains. It would be a timeless image, except for the boom box clutched in the woman's right hand, which gives the mystical scene a touch of the surreal.



'Angel Woman, Sonora Desert' (1979)

Iturbide shoots with a third, unconscious eye, seeing things that only later coalesce into icons. She relies heavily on the buffer that the camera provides, which allows her to frame scenes that might not otherwise register at all. That distance also lets her immerse herself in harrowing rituals such as a village's mass slaughter of goats. (That topic gets alarmingly thorough treatment at the MFA, occupying an entire gallery.)

Her work with the Seri launched her on a quasi-ethnographic career, during which she made the rounds of village feasts and captured the clash of ancient rites and contemporary consumer culture. In the exhibition catalogue, curator Kristen Gresh tries to head off accusations that Iturbide appropriates or exploits. "Her photographs . . . do not exoticise her subjects because she seeks, through them, to understand a culture that is also her own," Gresh writes.

I'm not convinced. True, she befriends people, stays in their homes, gains their trust, and requests permission to photograph them. Yet she remains an outsider, a lady from the bourgeois precincts of Coyoacán, examining her country's rural customs. And we, looking through her lens from the safety of an art museum, share her excitement at each rare specimen she brings back. By the time she's done editing, cropping and printing, the individuals whom she charmed into becoming her subjects lose their ordinariness and idiosyncrasy. Instead, they are reconstituted as Art.



'Chickens, Juchitán, Mexico' (1979)

Take “Our Lady of the Iguanas”, a famous shot of a monumental, unsmiling woman wearing a crown of reptiles. The MFA displays the session’s contact sheet, allowing us to track Iturbide’s method. On that morning, she glimpsed a woman strolling through an indoor market in the village of Juchitán (near Oaxaca) with a few of the scaly creatures squirming on her head. In some shots the woman is laughing, struggling to readjust the bumptious beasts. We meet her as fellow humans navigating a public space, and we share the moment’s humour. In the final version, though, Iturbide shoots from below, so that the woman looms, her face as impassive and noble as an Olmec

mask, and her torso and dragon-like headgear fill the entire frame. The market's arch and beamed ceiling have vanished into an inky background.

Iturbide turned this market vendor into a modern Medusa, at once individual and emblematic. The town erected a statue of the heroic figure at a major junction, and the photo has been reproduced on highway signs, murals and municipal office buildings. In 1993, the American muralist Annie Sperling rendered a colour version of "Our Lady of the Iguanas" on a 1,000 sq ft wall in Los Angeles's Silver Lake neighbourhood.

Iturbide is enthralled by death. Her sensibility is informed by personal loss and supercharged by Mexico's intoxication with mortality

Mexico's extremes and wild juxtapositions offer plenty of material to a photographer of Iturbide's Surrealist tendencies. She studied with the dean of Mexican photographers and Surrealist fellow traveller, Manuel Alvarez Bravo, and early on she asserted her allegiance to the European avant-garde. The year she was born, Picasso fashioned a bull out of a bicycle saddle and handlebars; 30 years later in Mexico City, she came across a bicycle with a bull's head mounted on its crossbar and snapped its

resonant portrait. Once, during a period of crisis, she administered a self-treatment that would have pleased the Surrealists' guru André Breton: she picked up a bird that had hurled itself against a window and died, supplemented it with a live one bought at the market, and placed the pair in front of her eyes for a startling self-portrait.

Iturbide is enthralled by death. Her sensibility is informed by personal loss and supercharged by Mexico's intoxication with mortality. After the death of her young daughter, Iturbide began obsessively photographing angelitos, dead children whose families dress them as angels and bury them in white coffins. One day in 1978, she followed a grieving family to the cemetery in Guanajuato, planning to photograph the interment of their little child. The contact sheet tells the story of that strange hour. The procession files past the corpse of a man mysteriously left sprawled in the road, his face gnawed away by birds. The father digs the tiny grave and lowers the coffin. On the way back, the dead man is still lying there. Then something prompts Iturbide to raise her camera towards the sky, where a flock of birds — carrion feeders, maybe — scatters into the clouds, like a shattered shadow.

Iturbide documented the showdown between death and life that day, and it ended in a draw.

'Graciela Iturbide's Mexico', to May 12, mfa.org