

# Graciela Iturbide's Photographs Capture Mexico and Latinos in the U.S.



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In the early 1980s Mexican photographer Graciela Iturbide distinguished herself as the most prominent photographer in Mexico and Latin America. Recognition of her work with top awards in Paris and Japan over the next two decades solidified her international reputation. In 2008 Iturbide won the Hasselblad Award, the highest distinction a photographer can receive.

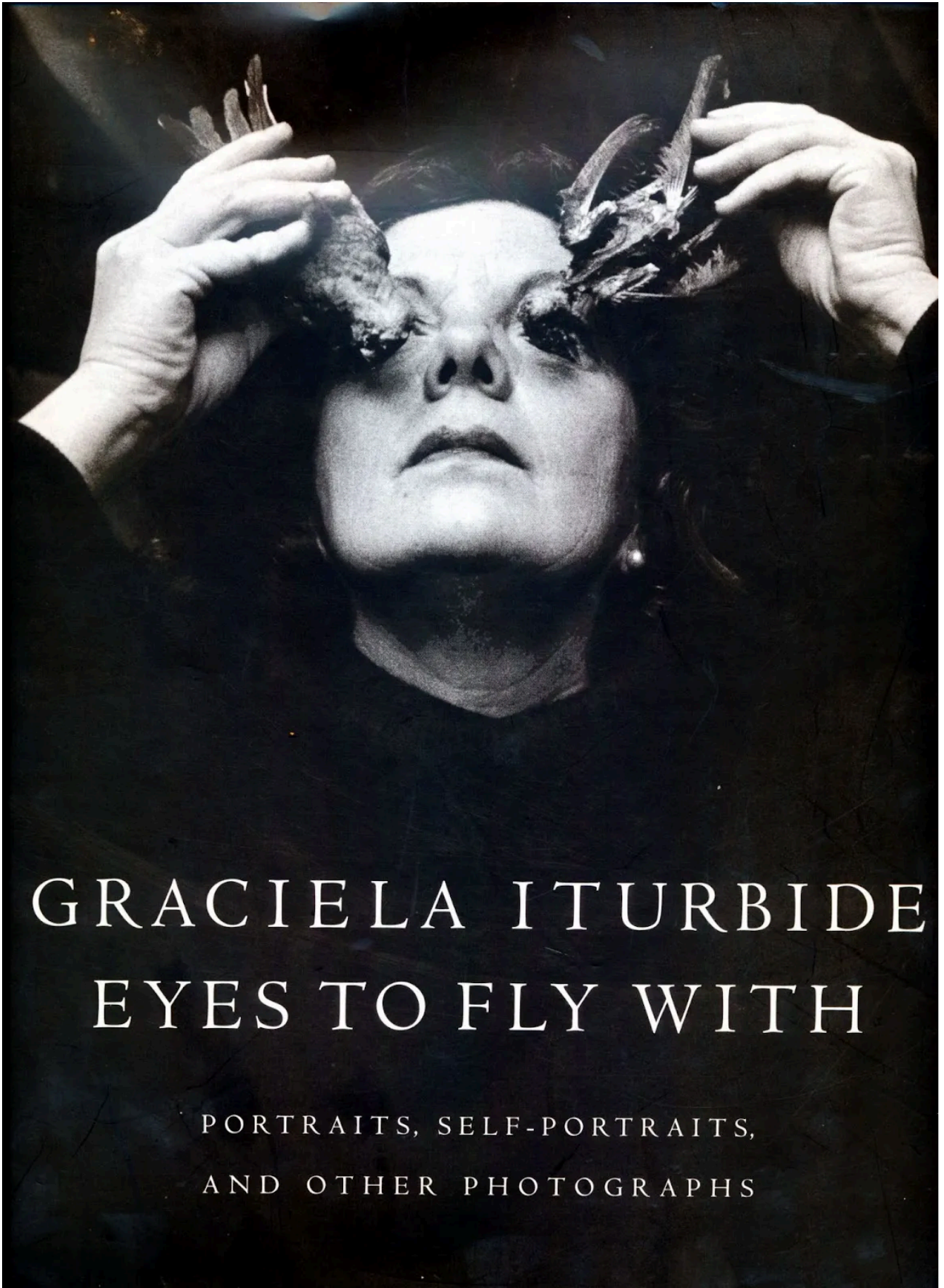


*Graciela Iturbide, “Mujer Angel [Angel Woman]” Courtesy of Ruiz-Healy Gallery. Photo by Ricardo Romo.*

Iturbide’s photographs, including her famous portrait “Mujer Angel [Angel Woman]”, are currently on exhibit at Ruiz Healy Gallery in a San Antonio exhibit. Gallery owner Patricia Ruiz-Healy followed Iturbide for many years and chose her work for the inaugural opening of Ruiz-Healy Gallery in 2006. The current exhibit is open until June 2024 and travels to Ruiz-Healy Gallery in New York City in 2025.

The University of Texas 2006 publication, *Graciela Iturbide Eyes to Fly With: Portraits, Self-Portraits, and Other Photographs*, is an excellent starting point for understanding Iturbide’s brilliant photographic career. Harriett and I met Iturbide in 2006 and joined her for conversation and dinner in 2016 when she returned to San Antonio for a solo show at the Ruiz-Healy Gallery.

Iturbide's photographic journey began in Mexico City in the early 1970s. While studying filmmaking at Mexico’s Centre for Film Studies at the National Autonomous University of Mexico, she enrolled in a photography class with the famous Mexican photographer, Manuel Alvarez Bravo. When Bravo selected her for an apprenticeship, Iturbide gave up thoughts of producing movies and spent the next year under his tutelage.



GRACIELA ITURBIDE  
EYES TO FLY WITH

PORTRAITS, SELF-PORTRAITS,  
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Bravo was a superb mentor, and Iturbide learned to train her eyes to see the exceptional as well as to recognize distinctive features in the ordinary. She once told a reporter that she used her eyes and heart to select her subjects. She also learned from Bravo that patience is a critical element of successful photographic shooting. After two years of training with Bravo, Iturbide ventured off on her own.

In 1978 the Ethnographic Archive of the National Indigenous Institute of Mexico commissioned Iturbide to photograph the country's Indigenous population. Iturbide chose to document the way of life of the Seri Indians from Mexico's northwest extending to the U.S. border with Arizona. Iturbide spent a year in a Seri Indian community and while there recorded one of her most famous photographs, "Mujer Angel" ["Angel Woman"].

Author Alejandro Castellanos describes the photograph, "Mujer Angel" as an excellent synthesis with which it "expresses the true identity of the Seris and the recognition that all these cultures, in one way or another, find themselves in a liminal position [space between past and present] like the feminine figure in the midst of a desolate landscape but attached to the world by means of a portable jam box."





*Graciela Iturbide, outside of Ruiz-Healy Gallery, 2016. Photo by Ricardo Romo.*

“Mujer Angel” established Iturbide as a major artist and drew the attention of Mexico’s greatest living artist, Oaxacan painter Francisco Toledo. In 1979, Toledo invited Iturbide to photograph the Zapotec village of Juchitán de Zaragoza in Oaxaca, Mexico. Iturbide spent six years working in Oaxaca, but in her first year, she captured an amazing photo of a woman going to the farmer’s market with a stack of iguanas on her head that became internationally famous.

It is customary in rural communities for women to carry heavy loads on their heads, often their laundry, but also sacks of grain or vegetables. Iturbide’s trained eye knew the uniqueness of this image and her photo “Nuestra Senora de las Iguanas,” stands as one of the most famous images to come out of Mexico in the 20th century. CNN reporter Marina Garcia-Vasquez captured the essence of its significance. She wrote, “Four decades after she [Iturbide] shot it, the image remains a symbol of multiple political struggles: feminist liberation, indigenous sovereignty, and wider social justice.

In 2007 news reporters for the paper *LA Observed* Kevin Roderick covered the Iturbide Getty exhibit “Cholas, White Fence, East L.A.” The Cholas from White Fence were marginalized young women, some of whom posed with young babies in their arms. Iturbide told Roderick, “These people live in the United States, but they have a nostalgia for Mexico. They have the Virgen de Guadalupe on tattoos and on the wall. It’s everywhere.” She seemed surprised that these young women had such a romanticized and unrealistic image of Mexico given her understanding of Mexico’s problems with unemployment, poverty, and inequality.





*Graciela Iturbide, “White Fence” exhibit at Ruiz-Healy Gallery, 2016. Photo by Ricardo Romo.*

Iturbide came to South Texas in 2004 at the invitation of rancher Helen Groves and her daughter Cina Forgason. Groves hosted Iturbide at her legendary Las Norias Ranch, once the southmost part of the King Ranch. Iturbide’s remarkable photographs of the ranch included images of extensive dunes on the Gulf of Mexico which may have reminded her of the Sonora Desert sands where she spent time with the Seri Indians twenty years earlier. A photograph of a ranch building with birds flying around the area is part of the current Ruiz-Healy exhibit. Iturbide is intrigued with birds and flight and often captures these graceful flying creatures in her photographs.

Iturbide lives in Coyoacán, Mexico near the home of Frida Kahlo. She is modest about her career and seldom explains what makes her photographs so special. In an essay, *Amazing Graciela*, published in 2007 by *Texas Monthly*, Iturbide told writer Katharyn Rodemann that her images, “like good poetry, are infinitely suggestive. To relate to them best, you must allow yourself to live in those very instances [my] shutter clicked.” Over a dinner conversation some years back Iturbide told me that every photographer, in some fashion or another, constructs a reality and that reality is determined by the photographer’s life experiences and emotions.





*Graciela Iturbide, South Texas series. Courtesy of Ruiz-Healy Gallery. Photo by Ricardo Romo.*

Like her mentor Manuel Bravo, Iturbide works only with black and white film. Her compositions are of a remarkable quality and in many instances, as in the case of the woman with the iguana headdress, she manages to empower her subjects. CNN reporter Marina Garcia-Vasquez added that “Graciela Iturbide’s documentary photography captures Mexico’s culture through haunting portraits of marginalized communities, portrayed with complexity and compassion.”

In the introduction to Iturbide’s UT Press book, Alejandro Castellanos wrote, “Without stridency or discord, Iturbide has gone beyond the barriers of identity and nationality to reveal the details through which everyday events become poetic motifs.” In reading about Iturbide’s life, I discovered that she has long had a passion for poetry, and early in her life she considered studying and writing poetry. Because her photos have a poetic quality and a narrative sensitivity, they have a timeless element and are destined to be remembered and admired for years to come.



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