



Featured in  
Issue 227

## Graciela Iturbide on the Democratic Nature of Photography

On the occasion of her retrospective at Fondation Cartier pour l'art contemporain, Paris, the photographer reflects on some of her best-known projects

+2 BY CHARLOTTE JANSEN AND GRACIELA ITURBIDE IN INTERVIEWS | 05 MAY 22



**Charlotte Jansen:** Right from your earliest encounters with photography you seem to have been fascinated with the medium.

**Graciela Iturbide:** There were 13 children in my family and my father used to take photographs of all of us. I loved those photos: they were memories. So, I would take them from his drawer and hide them to look at them later – until my parents would find out and punish me. My family was very conservative. I started my studies in cinema at the age of 28, when I was already married and had children, but the idea of me becoming a photographer was still difficult for them to understand. The first images I encountered as a child, other than family photos, were in *Life* magazine. I didn't realize I was looking at the work of famous photographers like Robert Capa and Henri Cartier-Bresson, but I loved the images and the memories they contained. I still believe photography is a very democratic discipline for that reason: regardless of location or social class, photography is always inscribed with memory.



Graciela Iturbide, *Rosario, Cristina y Liza, White Fence Gang*, 1986, silver gelatin print.  
All images courtesy: the artist

**GI:** He not only helped me discover this new world of photography: he taught me about life. He was a very deep man, a poet, a wonderful person. How lucky I was to know him!

**CJ:** Looking at the subjects you portrayed between the 1970s and '90s – which ranged from children's funerals and indigenous matriarchs to transgender communities and Cholo gangs – your work often plays with the dynamic between knowing your subjects intimately but also being an outsider who doesn't belong to these communities or events. What's the relationship between voyeurism and photography for you?

**GI:** It's essential that my subjects trust me, that there is complicity. I often live side by side with them for long periods. I never take photos in secret and I've never used a telephoto lens. My subjects always know I'm there as a photographer and, if I feel someone doesn't want their picture taken, then I don't take it. I think we're all voyeurs to an extent, but I never hide what I'm doing from my subjects. In fact, my 2000 series about the transgender community in Mumbai came about because people approached me to take photographs of them embracing. I don't go looking for certain types of encounters, or certain types of people. I leave my camera open to surprises, and life presents me with these gifts.



Graciela Iturbide, *Autorretrato (Self-Portrait)*, 1979, silver gelatin print.

**CJ:** Your most famous series is 'Women of Juchitán' [1979–88], for which you visited the eponymous indigenous town in the Mexican state of Oaxaca. What was your experience like with the Zapotec at that time?

**GI:** In the 1970s and '80s, Juchitán was completely different from anywhere else in Mexico: it was very special. The women were always so happy – laughing all the time, making sexual jokes and playing around. They were very feisty and corpulent; they would invite you to their homes and feed you. They were also in control: driving the economy, overseeing the money. It was a very matriarchal community – and very theatrical, too; whenever there was a wedding taking place, they would laugh and cry as if it were their own daughter getting married, but it was all for show.





Graciela Iturbide, *La niña del peine* (The girl with the comb), 1979, silver gelatin print

**CJ:** I've always loved *Fiesta del lagarto* (Festival of the Lizard, 1988), which depicts a woman sitting in a chair, laughing and holding a beer.

**GI:** That woman was always partying! I took that photograph at the Festival of the Lizard, which they don't celebrate anymore. In my experience, Zapotec women always drink a lot, but they never get drunk; they're strong – unlike the men! They dance, they do processions, and they drink and drink and drink. A lot of people photograph the Zapotec now, but Juchitán has changed a lot, it's modernized and, to me, it's less interesting.

**CJ:** How did you come to photograph the women of the Mexican American White Fence Gang in Los Angeles?

**GI:** In 1986, I was invited to contribute to a publication titled *A Day in the Life of America* [1987], which featured work by 100 photographers. I wanted to do something that related to Mexicans and the idea of the American dream. A friend of mine, who is a Chicana painter, took me to meet these women, who are all deaf and who belong to a gang in East LA.

I stayed at their homes for two days and I photographed everything. There were so many tensions between the gangs; it was very dangerous. But I stayed in contact with them over the years, and I even returned to photograph them several times. In fact, one subject, who was a baby in the early photographs, I also photographed as an adult. They are still my friends, and they still send me photos.



Graciela Iturbide, *Bolivia*, 2013, silver gelatin print

**CJ:** There often seems to be an undertow of pessimism in your work.

**GI:** Well, that's life, isn't it? I take pictures of things that surprise me. Life is full of happiness and sadness. I interpret what I see, but viewers also have their own readings and I love that. There are so many different perspectives on what exists.

**CJ:** Alexis Fabry – the curator of your current exhibition, 'Heliotropo 37', at Fondation Cartier pour l'art contemporain, Paris – said you are reticent about magical realist readings of your work. Yet, your photographs have a profound sense of mystery and symbolism.

**GI:** I don't like magical realism and I don't belong to a movement: I simply take pictures of what I see. Although I am no longer religious, I was raised Catholic, so it could be that I have a spiritual instinct. I've read many of the writings of the 16th century Spanish mystic San Juan de La Cruz, but I also love the 13th century Sufi poet Rumi. And I like religious paintings. Ultimately, I am drawn to the mystery of humanity.



Graciela Iturbide, *White Fence, East LA, USA, 1986*, silver gelatin print

**CJ:** In the wall texts at Fondation Cartier, you refer to your work as being a quest. What is it you are searching for?

**GI:** Inevitably, my work has an autobiographical element: it's connected to my childhood, to my dreams, to my spirit, to what I feel in the moment I take a photograph. I'm probably somewhat selfish, in as much as the photographs I take are for myself. Yet, everything I've done, everything I've seen, has allowed me to understand the world better, in this moment in which I'm living. I'm currently photographing volcanoes, lava and black sand in Lanzarote. Listening to the sound of the volcanoes on this island has made me think a lot about evolution, about how we began as humans. Now I finally understand where I came from.

*Graciela Iturbide's 'Heliotropo 37' is on view at Fondation Cartier pour l'art contemporain, Paris, until 29 May 2022.*

*This article first appeared in frieze issue 227 with the headline 'The Matriarch', as part of a special series titled 'Photography Now'.*



## GRACIELA ITURBIDE

Graciela Iturbide is a photographer. She works and lives in Mexico City.