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‘Graciela Iturbide’s Mexico’ Review: Life and Death South of the Border

When her 6-year-old daughter died in 1970, photographer Graciela Iturbide dove into art, pursuing images steeped in ritual, dignity, and the mysteries of being.

By William Meyers

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Graciela Iturbide's 'Angel Woman, Sonoran Desert' (1979) GRACIELA ITURBIDE/MUSEUM OF FINE ARTS, BOSTON

Boston

In the section headed “Death” at the “Graciela Iturbide’s Mexico” exhibition at the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, is a somewhat surreal photograph of two cardboard skeletons taped to a plate-glass window and shot from a point of view that makes it seem they are riding the tricycle parked on the sidewalk in front, “Day of the Dead, Mexico City” (1974). Death is an important part of the culture in Ms. Iturbide’s

Mexico, as it has been in the life of the photographer. She was born in 1942, married in 1962, and her 6-year-old daughter Claudia died in 1970; it was this traumatic event that precipitated her career in art.

There are nine prints in the “Death” section and incidental mementos mori elsewhere among the nearly 140 prints in the exhibition. All the prints are black-and-white silver gelatin, of modest format, and exquisitely executed. In “House of Death, Mexico City” (1975) a man sits on a makeshift ramp in front of large painted figures of a skeleton in bridal gown and veil and of a horned male devil; the man is looking to his left, where two blurred women seem to be walking into the frame. Of the crowd in “Procession, Chalma, State of Mexico” (1984), those in front are wearing masks and costumes, with the central figure dressed as a skeleton; way in back someone holds up a baby, the alternative to death.

A vitrine holds two contact sheets, each with a dozen 2-by-2-inch frames taken in 1978 in a cemetery in Dolores Hidalgo, Guanajuato. (Following the progression of images on a contact sheet is like examining a CT scan of a photographer’s thinking process.) It was a fateful day for Ms. Iturbide.



After the death of her daughter, she had been compulsively shooting *angelitos*, the corpses of children fitted with wings before burial. Sixteen of the frames on the contact sheets are of a man and woman bringing a child's coffin to the cemetery and burying it, and eight frames are of a deteriorating male corpse sprawled on the ground. At the moment the burial of the child was done, an enormous flock of birds rose up and flapped away; Ms. Iturbide interpreted this as an omen freeing her of her obsession.

And it got her interested in photographing birds: a huge flock against a troubled sky, "Birds, Dolores Hidalgo, Guanajuato" (1978); an individual bird, "X-ray of a Bird with Francisco Toledo, Oaxaca" (1999); and two slaughtered "Roosters, Juchitán" (1987) dripping blood. The birds seem portents, although it is hard to tell of what. Kristen Gresh, the museum curator responsible for the exhibition, comments in the wall texts on the ambiguity that is a feature of so many of Ms. Iturbide's images.



Graciela Iturbide's 'Birds on the Post, Highway' GRACIELA ITURBIDE/MUSEUM OF FINE ARTS, BOSTON

Ms. Iturbide has a special talent for making part of an object do for the whole, a sort of visual synecdoche. The two women in "Ascension, Chalma, State of Mexico" (1984) stand in their bare feet on the rough textured bark of a sloping tree limb; we see only their feet and the bottom of their skirts, but that and the connotations of the title testify to their pilgrimage. The woman in "Fallen from Heaven, Chalma" (1989) is seen in profile from the shoulder down; still her carriage and the way she holds up the excess material of her long white dress make the picture serve as a headless portrait.



Graciela Iturbide's 'Fallen from Heaven, Chalma' (1989) GRACIELA ITURBIDE/MUSEUM OF FINE ARTS, BOSTON

“The Seri” and “Juchitán” are sections devoted to Ms. Iturbide’s extended stays with indigenous peoples in remote areas. The first has two prints of one of her best-known images, “Angel Woman, Sonoran Desert” (1979); she is seen from the back, long black hair hanging down, wearing an incongruously voluminous skirt, poised as if to fly across the empty plain, and in her right hand holding—of all things—a boom box. “Juchitán” has an equally well-known image, “Our Lady of the Iguanas, Juchitán, Mexico” (1979); shot from below, the sturdy woman stands serenely indifferent to the flock of live iguanas perched on her head. “Juchiteca with Beer, Juchitán” (1984) is also in this section, a round-bellied woman with glorious plump cheeks about to enjoy her *cerveza*.



Graciela Iturbide's 'House of Death, Mexico City' (1975) GRACIELA ITURBIDE/MUSEUM OF FINE ARTS, BOSTON

The revelers in “Fiestas” include “The Gardener, Oaxaca” (1974), a man in a fancy dress wearing white gloves and a tinsel crown and leaning against a doorjamb; “Tlaxcala Carnival” (1974), another man in a dress and white gloves, this one wearing a mask and sombrero with feathers, standing alone, arm akimbo, in a barren landscape; and “Holy Thursday, Juchitán” (1970s), a somber, white-haired man separated by lattice from the figure of a white-gowned man who is blindfolded.

The people who inhabit “Graciela Iturbide’s Mexico” are invariably presented with dignity, however extraordinary their rituals and animating tics; they persevere in a land of intense sunlight, dark shadows and whirring birds.

—*Mr. Meyers writes on photography for the Journal. See his photographs at www.williammeyersphotography.com.*

Correction: An earlier version of this story misspelled the curator’s last name.

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