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## Graciela Iturbide's surrealist take on Mexico

The Photographers' Gallery retrospective covers a 50-year career documenting colliding cultures and belief systems



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In the images of Mexican photographer Graciela Iturbide, mystical forces seem to be at work. A woman walks through a walled cemetery, her arms filled with branches; the air is so thick with flying birds that she seems to be navigating a biblical plague. A group of skeletons, vampires and ghouls crowd the camera, half-menacing, half-comic (attendees at a Day of the Dead procession in a small town near Mexico City, it turns out). In a photograph made in the Sonoran Desert in 1979, another woman, this time wearing a veil, picks her way through parched, rocky terrain, her arms outstretched like an angel. She seems about to take off. She's also clutching a boombox. Can we believe what we're seeing? Are these scenes for real?

The contest between mystical visions and things more knowable is the throughline of an invigorating exhibition that has just arrived at The Photographers' Gallery in London. It is Iturbide's first retrospective in the UK for more than a decade. The artist, 82, has devoted a 50-year career to examining Mexico's multi-faceted, colliding cultures and belief systems, always with an eye for surprise and a sly sense of wit.

Born in Mexico City into a wealthy, rigidly Catholic family in 1942, she came to art relatively late, after the death of her daughter at the age of six. "I almost went crazy," she later said. Enrolling at university to study cinema and photography was a way of putting herself back together. Death figures prominently in her work — Iturbide has found many of her images in cemeteries, and once documented the funerals of *angelitos*, young children — but a powerful life force animates her pictures too. In images that thrum with motion, birds are another obsession.



'Cholas, East LA, USA' (1986) © Collection Nathalie and Nicolas Motelay

Iturbide's mentor was Mexican master Manuel Álvarez Bravo, who schooled her in the patient art of street photography and in darkroom techniques; she also met Henri Cartier-Bresson, and learnt from his compositional lightness and skill at playful cropping. Like these two, she is an instinctive surrealist, hunting for images that ambush the viewer. One of the prints exhibited here portrays a woman's foot, elegantly shod, striding along a pavement, chased by a writhing mass of iguanas. Not so much a dream as a nightmare conjured by André Breton or Dora Maar — though in fact this is a marketplace in southern Mexico, captured in 1984. These unfortunate creatures are destined for the pot.

Like the documentary photographers of old, Iturbide eschews colour or artificial light, shooting on black-and-white film, sometimes on 35mm, sometimes on medium-format. "Colour photography reminds me of Disneyland," she once declared; Mexico, at least as seen through her lens, is colourful enough. Responding to the tropical sun, she prefers hard light and deep, sculptural shadows, labouring in the darkroom to print blacks so hot that they seem to burn through the wall.



'Chickens' (1979) © Collection Leticia and Stanislas Poniatowski

Although Iturbide's work has fallen into particular projects and phases — often centred on locations or among groups of people — she most often follows her intuition about where to go next; her pictures sometimes feel like symbols of something you can't quite grasp ("My eyes see, but my heart photographs" is how she puts it). At first glance, it is hard to identify what makes "Chickens, Juchitán, 1979" so menacing; a woman clutching two chickens between her arms strides past a white wall. Then you notice that the wall is spattered with something dark and sinister. Paint, presumably, but it might as well be blood. A chronicle of deaths foretold.

Though her portraits of men feel a little skin-deep — she never seems to penetrate beneath their sharp suits or preening poses — when photographing women, Iturbide finds something more real. One of the most arresting works here is of a woman in a doorway, turning back to face the camera, hand on hip, draped in soft sunlight. The photograph might have felt objectifying — the woman, Rosa, is nude apart from her sandals — but Iturbide gives it a touching complicity. Shooting slightly from below, she gives her subject strength and statuesque dignity.

A similar quality touches one of the artist's most renowned images, drawn from the same series documenting the women of the indigenous Zapotec town of Juchitán de Zaragoza in southern Mexico. "Our Lady of the Iguanas" — an image of a Zapotec stallholder balancing live iguanas on her head in a fantastic crown — is not merely powerfully odd, it is an emblem of female empowerment in a city where women dominate all aspects of society, from the economy to religious practice. So celebrated has Iturbide's Iguana Lady become in Mexico that she has graced everything from road signs to mezcal labels.



'Angel Woman, Sonoran Desert' (1979) © Collection Leticia and Stanislas Poniatowski

Apparently timeless, teeming with Catholic and pre-Hispanic religiosity, Iturbide's work does not offer much sense of the tumultuous changes Mexico has witnessed in the past 50 years, still less its politics or yawning social divides. Yet in a country that has long been overrun by photographers from elsewhere searching for gritty social realism or images of the "exotic", that might be a kind of political stance in itself. While some have accused her of being a tourist in her own country, portraying cultures very different from her own, this undervalues the seriousness of Iturbide's approach. The picture of the figure with outstretched arms and a boombox, "Angel Woman" (1979), came from two months living with the Seri community in the Sonoran Desert in north-western Mexico. The *Juchitán de las Mujeres* project took a decade of repeated visits; at one point, Iturbide sold tomatoes in the local market to get to know its people better.

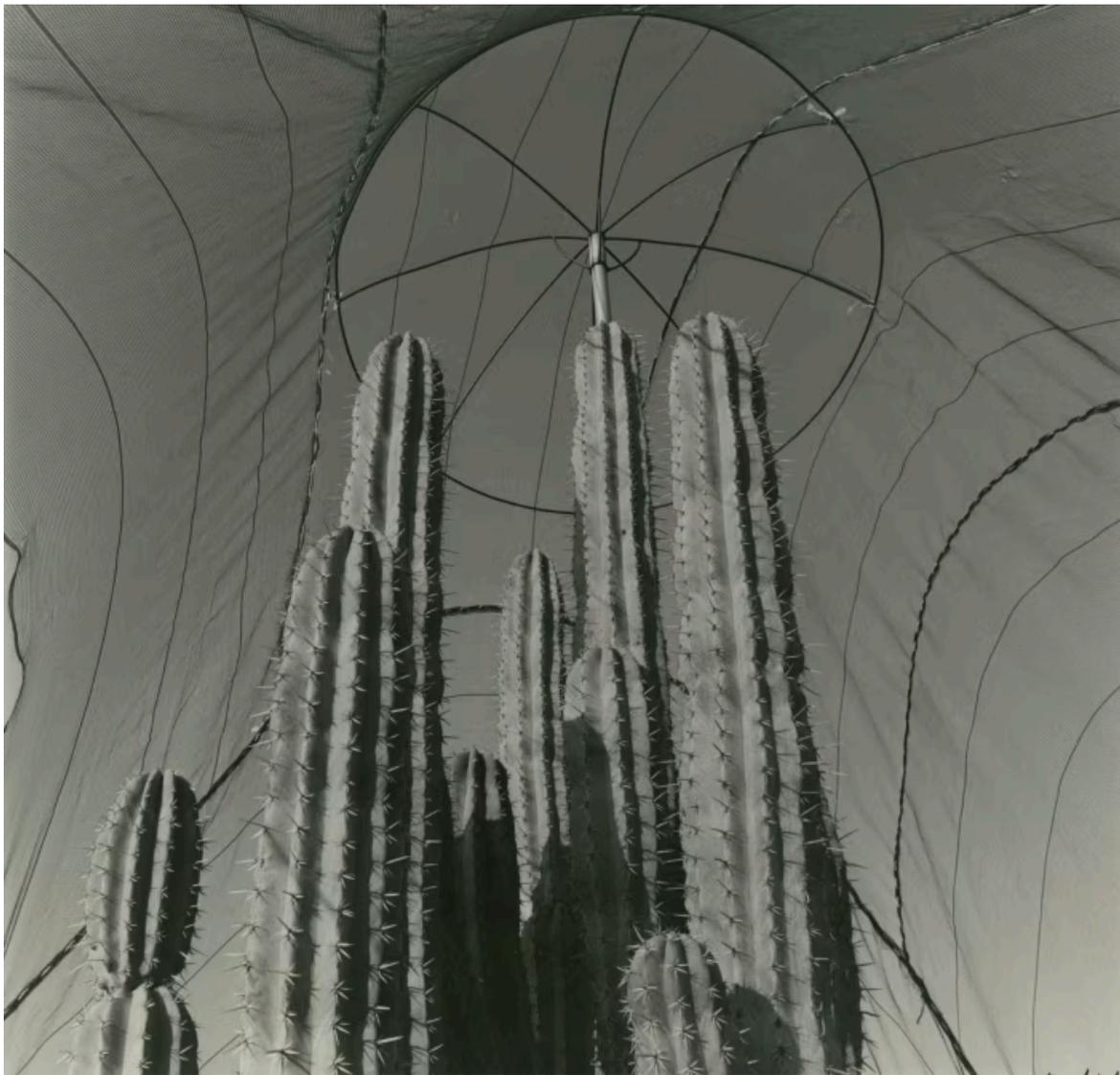
Two sections of the show represent sojourns in the US, equally serious attempts to reckon with difference. Between 1986 and 1989, she spent time with a Latino street gang called White Fence, based in Boyle Heights in East Los Angeles, trying to portray the lives of its members and their complex heritage and identity. “Rosario, Cristina y Liza, White Fence, East Los Angeles, 1986” portrays a trio of young women dressed in matching black jeans and white singlets, gesturing like they’re posing for an album cover — the very image of tough-girl swagger. But another portrait in the series shows one of those women, Rosario, in a more vulnerable light. She sits in the back of a car, looking disconcertingly girlish, fiddling with a bottle for her howling baby.



‘Flatlands’ (1999) © Private collection

A late-1990s road trip through the Deep South, from Memphis down to Clarksdale, Mississippi, yielded visions in a different key. Just off Highway 61, Iturbide found a house almost entirely swallowed by a suffocating blanket of bindweed, as if it is about to be sucked into hell. Iturbide shoots it dead-on; the picture speaks for itself. Elsewhere on the same journey, the artist crouched down low in a field of cotton to shoot a vacant billboard against a white-grey plane of sky; its very blankness seems emblematic. There is something enjoyably subversive in seeing a Mexican photographer turn her lens towards the US and finding only emptiness.

In recent years, Iturbide has retreated from making photographs of people altogether. Among the last images in the exhibition come works from a series, *Naturata*, made between 1996 and 2004 but only printed recently: medium-format studies of organ pipe cacti in the botanical gardens of Oaxaca City. Sometimes these mighty structures tower above us in architectural formations, thrusting up like fortresses or skyscrapers against a dark-tinted sky. Elsewhere, Iturbide moves her camera in close, reducing the plants to shadows and planes, spines and curves, an interplay of abstract forms.



'Oaxaca Botanical Gardens ' (1998-99) © Private collection

The most intriguing of these last pictures depict cacti bandaged with newspaper in what seems to be a kind of botanical A&E — a way of protecting the plants during repotting? Of allowing them to heal? Some kind of transfiguration is happening, if only we could figure out what it was.

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