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‘Graciela Iturbide: Serious Play’ Review: A Photographer’s Haunting Views of Mexico

The artist’s first New York retrospective, currently on view at the International Center of Photography, reveals a cinematic eye and a taste for the mystical.

By Brian P. Kelly

Dec. 12, 2025 4:00 pm ET



Graciela Iturbide’s ‘Angel Woman, Sonoran Desert, Mexico’ (1979). GRACIELA ITURBIDE

New York

Seer. Shaman. Documentarian. Poet. Anthropologist. Storyteller. These are just a few of the labels that could be applied to Graciela Iturbide, the Mexican photographer who is currently receiving her first New York retrospective at the International Center of Photography. For those who are unfamiliar with Ms. Iturbide’s work, this show of almost 200 pictures will be a revelation, opening a door onto her haunting and haunted visions. For those who do know the artist, it’s an opportunity to bask in

the presence of her best-known images while discovering new works that deepen one's appreciation for her singular eye.

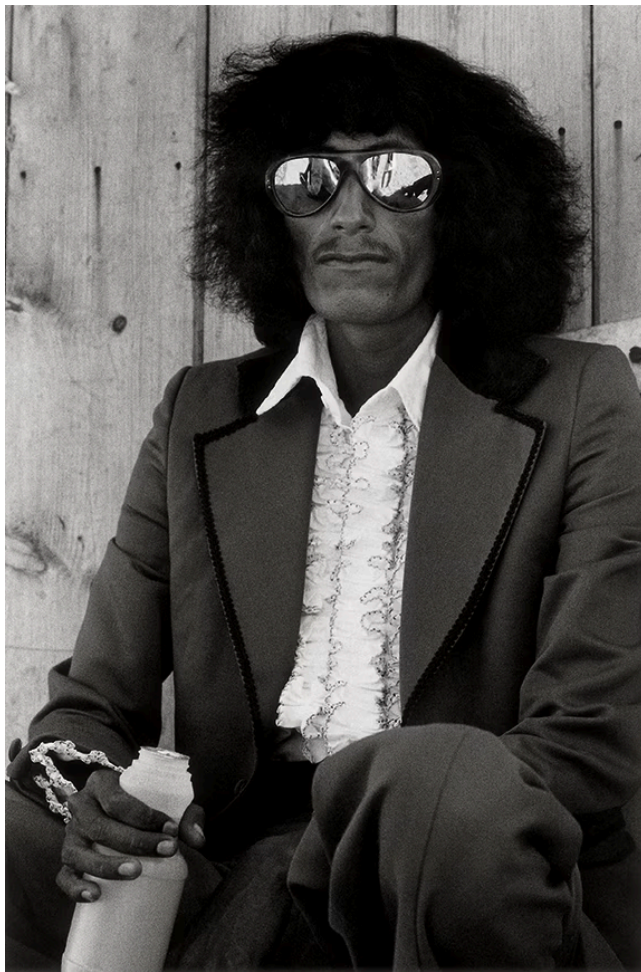
Ms. Iturbide was born in Mexico City in 1942, and her traditional Catholic upbringing clearly shapes her interests, her photographs often featuring rites, rituals and mystical elements. Her time spent at the Center for Cinematographic Studies is also evident in her pictures: While a student, she discovered that the still image captivated her more than the moving, yet throughout her oeuvre there is a cinematic quality.



'Self-Portrait With the Seri, Sonoran Desert, Mexico' (1979). GRACIELA ITURBIDE

Her Mexican heritage is the big tent in which these other personal elements mingle, and though she was a city girl her focus often settles on more remote parts of the country and their indigenous communities. This thematically organized show—curated by Carlos Gollonet, chief curator of photography at the Spanish Fundación MAPFRE, which lent all the works in the exhibition—opens with a 1979 self-portrait in which the photographer has adorned her face with the traditional paint of the Seri people.

That photo was taken during a project documenting the group, and we see more of the series nearby. In it, we discover a people caught between tradition and modernity: The Seri, more than most indigenous groups, have retained their culture and language in the face of Spanish and Mexican influence, but the realities of trade and



'Sonoran Desert, Mexico' (1979). GRACIELA ITURBIDE

invasive modernity with her. Ms. Iturbide is a master of magical realism of the photographic kind. And while some criticize the literary variant of that particularly Latin American genre for being too whimsical or unbelievable, Ms. Iturbide is immune to such assessments: She provides photographic evidence of seemingly otherworldly scenes, demanding our attention, earning our belief.

proximity complicate the situation. In Ms. Iturbide's photos we see how older generations hold most tightly to the past: Portraits show granite-faced elders dressed in traditional garb, while images of younger individuals evince a more permeable culture as mirrored aviators, canned goods and even a tuxedo jacket sneak into the frame.

Most striking is "Angel Woman, Sonoran Desert, Mexico." Ms. Iturbide's most well-known image shows a woman with flowing waist-length hair and billowing skirts looming above a hardscrabble landscape, a modern boombox clutched in her right hand. She is at once guardian angel and angel of death, watching over hallowed ground while carrying a tool of



'Our Lady of the Iguanas, Juchitán, Mexico' (1979). GRACIELA ITURBIDE

The stoicism of her Seri project is contrasted by the more lighthearted photos she took of people in Juchitán, highlighting the matriarchal culture there. A woman wears a group of iguanas on her head like a halo; a child playfully peeks out between the wings of a rooster held aloft; a woman melts into the darkness of a doorway while holding a bull's head in front of her face.

These alternately grave and impish modes recur throughout the show, aptly subtitled "Serious Play," often combining in a single image. A 1990 photo in a section dedicated to Mexican attitudes toward death apes Toulouse-Lautrec's "The Hangover (Suzanne Valadon)" (1887-89). Its solo female drinker, heavily made up, offers a grimacing smile; on the wall behind, a mural of a skull is a memento mori, leering at her shot glass and cigarette.



'Mexico' (1969). GRACIELA ITURBIDE

The struggle between man and nature is also a frequent subject, one that Ms. Iturbide constantly refreshes. Her eye for cinema is evident in the brash photos she took in 1992 of the annual sacrifice of hundreds of goats that takes place in the Mixtec Mountains of Oaxaca. These non-PETA-friendly images are bloody if not gory, shocking but utterly captivating. Best among them is the picture of a woman who tugs on a goat's hooves, the animal largely out of frame, struggling against its weight as she grips a blade between her teeth. More earnest are photos taken in that state's botanical gardens, depicting the ways people tend to plants in environments where they don't belong. These dialectical images, of the natural and manufactured, the captured and cared for, show limbs hung with IV bags that feed nutrients to the flora, cacti supported by cathedral-like scaffolding, and stalks labeled with toe-tag-like notes.

The most uneven section of the show is dedicated to more recent images, in which Ms. Iturbide has become increasingly abstract and experimental. While the photos here are less universally strong than what's come before, they are no less haunting. Murmurations of birds swirl above rugged plains, landscapes shift into geometric compositions, and uncanny juxtapositions—a shirt dangling from a tree as a lone bird swoops by—lend seemingly simple pictures eerie characteristics. The lasting power of Ms. Iturbide's vision, at once supernatural and unsettlingly real, cannot be denied, and a trip to the ICP offers the rare chance to commune with this remarkable artist.

Graciela Iturbide: Serious Play

International Center of Photography, through Jan. 12, 2026