

Art

An acclaimed photographer's black-and-white dreamscapes, in 3 New York shows

The renowned Mexican photographer Graciela Iturbide has captured the transcendent in daily life for more than 50 years.

Today at 5:00 a.m. EST

🔊 4 min



"Mujer ángel (Angel Woman), Sonoran Desert, México," 1979 (Graciela Iturbide/Collection of the Fundación MAPFRE)



By [Natalia Jiménez-Stuard](#)

NEW YORK — The world through the lens of Graciela Iturbide is one of empowered inhabitants, mythical creatures and sacred landscapes: Iguanas adorn the head of a statuesque woman. Angelic children are conduits between life and death. Ailing plants and trees receive medical care.

But these theatrical moments spring from daily life. The renowned Mexican photographer grounded her poetic images in the experiences she found living with the communities that welcomed her. Spending time among them allowed her to witness the unexpected.

“For me, photography has always been an excuse to learn about life,” said Iturbide, 83, speaking in Spanish during a talk and luncheon in her honor last month, “whether through my camera or through the reading I do before each journey.”



“Self-Portrait, Mexico,” 1989 (Graciela Iturbide/Collection of the Fundación MAPFRE)



"Dolores Hidalgo, Guanajuato, Mexico," 1978 (Graciela Iturbide/Collection of the Fundacion MAPFRE)



"Angelito mexicano (Mexican Cherub), Chalma, México," 1984 (Graciela Iturbide/Throckmorton Fine Art)



"Doña Guadalupe, Juchitán," 1988 (Graciela Iturbide/Throckmorton Fine Art)

These lessons generated an exquisite body of work developed over more than 50 years, much of it on view across three exhibitions in New York.

A collection of rediscovered vintage prints at Throckmorton Fine Art showcases Iturbide's early work and master printmaking skills. A show at Ruiz-Healy Art presents her time in Southern California and across the U.S.-Mexico border.

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The largest, a retrospective at the International Center of Photography, offers a comprehensive vision of her career, where across more than 150 images Iturbide's empathetic approach and artful eye shine through. Iturbide values building trusting relationships based on respect with the people she photographs.

"She's not looking at a culture that she wants to study," said Elizabeth Ferrer, an independent curator and writer specializing in Latinx and Mexican photography. "Meeting people on their own terms rather than on her terms, I think that's pretty rare and very special."



"El señor de los pájaros (Lord of the Birds), Nayarit, México," 1985 (Graciela Iturbide/Throckmorton Fine Art)



"Primer día del verano (First Day of Summer), Veracruz," 1982 (Graciela Iturbide/Throckmorton Fine Art)

Iturbide's dreamlike images often incorporate symbolism and explore identity, culture, ritual and death. A man longingly looking up toward passing birds appears to be growing his own set of wings from his shoulders. A woman floats toward the Sonoran Desert carrying a boom box.

Iturbide studied film after her family did not support her desire to become a writer. It was during her studies that she met legendary Mexican photographer Manuel Álvarez Bravo, who would become a pivotal figure in her life and career.



"Nuestra Señora de las iguanas (Our Lady of the Iguanas), Juchitán, México," 1979 (Graciela Iturbide/Collection of the Fundación MAPFRE)

"Manuel Álvarez Bravo wasn't really a teacher, but my mentor. He taught me about life, not just about photography," Iturbide said. "He taught me to be me. To make pictures for myself. To be confident in myself."

Álvarez Bravo encouraged her to take time with photography and to follow Mexico's Indigenous communities. Her early images documenting the Seri Indians in the Sonoran Desert would become a cornerstone of her career.

Although much of Iturbide's career has been photographing in Mexico, she has also explored her home country's spirit in the United States. In East Los Angeles, she documented cholo culture, embedding with a group of deaf women with the White Fence gang beginning in the 1980s.



"Rosario y Boo Boo, East LA," 1986 (Graciela Iturbide/Ruiz-Healy Art)



"La frontera, Tijuana, Baja California, México," 1989 (Graciela Iturbide/Ruiz-Healy Art)



"Cholos, pandilla White Fence, este de Los Angeles, Estados Unidos (Cholos, White Fence Gang, East Los Angeles, United States)," 1986 (Graciela Iturbide/Ruiz-Healy Art)



"Maravillas, pandilla White Fence, este de Los Ángeles, Estados Unidos (Maravillas, White Fence Gang, East Los Angeles, United States)," 1986 (Graciela Iturbide/Ruiz-Healy Art)

“I had the opportunity to get close to them and to learn about their culture,” Iturbide said. “It was a bit dangerous, but they were so kind with me and continued to invite me.”

Iturbide became friends with the women and would sometimes sleep on the floor of their small home, continuing to document them for more than 30 years. The images made Ferrer, having grown up in East L.A., see her neighborhood and the area’s gang culture differently.

“They care about their own culture, they care about their own community, and they care about self-expression,” Ferrer said. “It made me understand people that we might see as marginalized or victimized in a different light.”



“Autorretrato con los indios seris, desierto de Sonora, México (Self-Portrait With the Seri, Sonoran Desert, Mexico),” 1979 (Graciela Iturbide/Collection of the Fundación MAPFRE)

Iturbide’s lyrical gaze connects the three exhibitions, each helping viewers appreciate and better understand the cultures she explores.

“That is the wonderful thing about life,” Iturbide said. “As you go observing, you go interpreting everything you have received.”

Graciela Iturbide: *Serious Play*, through Jan. 12 at the International Center of Photography.

Graciela Iturbide: *Las Californias*, through Jan. 30 at Ruiz-Healy Art.

Graciela Iturbide: *Vintage*, through Feb. 28 at Throckmorton Fine Art.

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By [Natalia Jiménez-Stuard](#)

Natalia Jiménez-Stuard is a senior photo editor at The Washington Post. She oversees photography for International and a new Futures desk that examines the intersection of technology, business, health, climate and science. She previously led the National desk, covering the political landscape and the impact of policies on American life.

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