

Artists

Legendary Mexican Photographer Graciela Iturbide on Risking It All For Life Behind the Camera

A recently rediscovered trove of vintage photographs by Graciela Iturbide is currently on view at Throckmorton Fine Art in New York.

by Katie White

1 hour ago



Graciela Iturbide, *El jardinero*, Oaxaca, México (1974). Courtesy of Throckmorton Fine Art.

Graciela Iturbide is Mexico's greatest living photographer—though outside of her homeland, some are just learning her name. For over 50 years, Iturbide's black-and-white photographs have defined a lyrical, visceral, and mythic vision of her homeland.

"I take pictures of what surprises me," said Iturbide during a recent conversation at Throckmorton Fine Art. The gallery, in midtown Manhattan, is currently presenting "[Graciela Iturbide: Vintage](#)," a best-in-class exhibition of her most celebrated photographs in rare vintage prints. "I am a street photographer, not a studio photographer," said the 83-year-old artist.



Graciela Iturbide, *La Señora de las Iguanas* (1979). Courtesy of Throckmorton Fine Art.

Even those unfamiliar with her work may recognize *La Señora de las Iguanas* (1979), her unforgettable portrait of a Zapotec woman with iguanas perched on her head like a crown. Snapped at market in Juchitán, Oaxaca, the image is surreal, dignified, and gritty all at once, blending Catholic Madonna imagery with indigenous culture. Over the decades, the photograph has become an icon all its own. Today, murals of *La Señora de las Iguanas* can be found in Los Angeles and San Francisco. In Juchitán, there's a bronze sculpture of *La Señora* that's become a meeting point for protests.



Graciela Iturbide, *El Primer Día del Verano* (1982). Courtesy of Throckmorton Fine Art.

In recent years, Iturbide—and her photographs—have reached an even higher echelon of global recognition. In 2025, she was awarded Spain's prestigious Princess of Asturias Prize for the Arts, making her only the second Latin American photographer to earn the award—Sebastião Salgado being the first. In New York, the International Center for Photography recently presented "[Serious Play](#)" in collaboration with Fundación MAPFRE, marking the first institutional retrospective of Iturbide's work in New York. In February of this year, the [San Diego Museum of Art](#) will open a large-scale solo exhibition devoted to Iturbide.

And right now, in New York, two gallery shows of her work are on view, one at Throckmorton, and the other on the Upper East Side at Ruiz-Healy Art with "[Graciela Iturbide: Las Californias](#)," featuring photographs made in the borderlands between California and Baja California from the 1980s to 2019.



Graciela Iturbide, *Outside the Palacio de Bellas Artes, Mexico City* (1980-82).
Courtesy of Throckmorton Fine Arts.

Among the many exhibitions and accolades, Iturbide, whose demeanor is lively, humble, and direct, finds a particular poignancy in the Throckmorton exhibition. She's known Spencer Throckmorton, the gallery's founder, for 40 years. The two were introduced by Rose Shoshana of Santa Monica's [Rose Gallery](#), who is Iturbide's West Coast representative, and collaborated on the exhibition. But the exhibition is also another kind of homecoming for Iturbide; nearly half the prints in the show were only recently rediscovered after decades in obscurity.

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Lost Icons

Some months ago, Throckmorton Fine Art received a call, asking the gallery to assess the collection of a New Mexico art dealer who had fallen ill.



Graciela Iturbide, *La niña del peine*, Juchitán, México (1980). Courtesy of Throckmorton Fine Art.

Soon after, Rivera flew to Mexico with the 19 images for Iturbide to sign. While there, Iturbide opened up her archives, and together they pulled additional photographs to create the exhibition now on view, comprised of all vintage prints.

"She was very emotional looking at this material, because she sold most of her vintage in the course of 50 years," said Rivera. "She still has a few in her archives, but some of the classic images, you're not going to find this quality paper. It was one of those moments when the images arrived here at the gallery, as we opened the box, all of us literally couldn't breathe. We inhaled and exhaled deeply."

"It brought back an era of my life," Iturbide said.

Risking It All for Photography

Graciela Iturbide is now one of the most famous photographers in the world, but she built her career against the odds.

Born in 1942 in Mexico City, she was the eldest of 13 children in a conservative Catholic family. At age 11, she was gifted a Brownie camera by her father, which she took great pleasure in. However, her life seemed destined for a more traditional path. "My father was kind of patriarchal," she said. A young Iturbide had wanted to study literature at university, but her father forbade her. In 1962, she married architect Manuel Rocha Díaz. The couple had three children. In 1969, her life changed forever when she enrolled in Mexico City's Centro Universitario de Estudios Cinematográficos. She initially had dreams of becoming a film director. But that changed when she met Manuel Álvarez Bravo, the most famous Mexican photographer of a generation, a teacher at the school. Álvarez Bravo became a mentor to Iturbide, who took up photography with passion. "I found out about the School of Film. I studied cinematography. That's where I met Manuel Álvarez Bravo, and I left everything," she recounted. "I learned a lot from him. He taught me how important it is to read, to see art, to be impregnated by culture."



Graciela Iturbide, *Doña Guadalupe, Juchitán* (1988). Courtesy of Throckmorton Fine Art.

In 1970, the artist's daughter, Claudia, died tragically at age 6, and Iturbide threw herself even more deeply into her work. Eventually, she and Manuel Rocha Díaz split up. She spent most of 1970 and 1971 traveling with Manuel Álvarez Bravo and honing her craft.

"My family took it badly because I got divorced," she said of that time. "I went to university and became a photographer. I even acted in a film and won an award for it." What interested her, she discovered, was life on the street, images of everyday people made monumental. With her camera, she became herself. "While my family was very conservative," she said, "I was even more rebellious."



Graciela Iturbide, *Vendedora de Zacate (Sponge Vendor)*, Oaxaca (1974). Courtesy of Throckmorton Fine Art.

The exhibition stretches back to the early years of her career with a number of remarkable photographs from the mid-1970s. The earliest is *El jardinero, Oaxaca, México (The Gardener, Oaxaca, Mexico)* (1974), which shows a gardener dressed in a king's costume for carnival, as well as the famous images *Vendedora de Zacate (Sponge Vendor), Oaxaca* (1974) and *Casa de la Muerte, Mexico City (House of Death, Mexico City)* (1975).

How She Captured Her Most Famous Image

In Graciela Iturbide's photographs, ordinary women become powerful icons. In *Mujer Ángel, Desierto de Sonora, México* (1979), a woman carrying a tape recorder through the desert appears like a sacred and spectral being. In another, a sponge vendor looks more like an angel with fluffy white wings—the sponges fanned out around her.

Her images are always a collaboration between her and her subject. "You have to be sensible about when to take a photograph. There has to be a complicity," she said with conviction. "I will never take a photograph if the person doesn't want me to."



Graciela Iturbide, *Mujer Ángel, Desierto de Sonora, México* (1979). Courtesy of Throckmorton Fine Art.

Iturbide has gone to great lengths to integrate herself into the communities she photographs; such was the case when she captured *La Senora de las Iguanas*. Iturbide had been working at the same market selling chicken, tomatoes, and tamales. "They were my friends. I was one of them," she said of the women working in the market. Zobeida Díaz, the woman pictured in *La Senora de las Iguanas*, was another vendor who sold the lizards. One summer day, Díaz arrived with the iguanas upon her head, as she sometimes did. "I said, 'Please, just a second. Let me take a picture.' and after I took the photos, she removed the iguanas to sell them," she said.

The lesson? "You have to act quickly," she said.

Frida Kahlo's Ghost

Mexico's great photographers—Tina Modotti, Lola Álvarez Bravo, and her mentor, Manuel Álvarez Bravo—are those whom Iturbide considers her artistic heroes. Still, in Mexico, there is almost no artist whose shadow looms as large as Frida Kahlo's, and our conversation ultimately turned to Kahlo. "I am not in the cult of 'Santa Frida,'" said Iturbide with a small smile, meaning those for whom Kahlo's life earns almost saintly veneration, but in 2005, she was invited by the Frida Kahlo Museum to photograph some of the artist's most intimate effects. While these works are not currently on view at Throckmorton, the gallery has exhibited a selection of these photographs in the past.

After Kahlo's 1954 death, Diego Rivera closed off Kahlo's bathroom and closet. Rivera, in mourning and perhaps trying to shield more intimate aspects of the artists' private lives, demanded that the private spaces remain sealed for 15 years after his own death. Just over 50 years after Kahlo's death, Iturbide visited Casa Azul to photograph these time-capsule spaces that had been locked away for decades. Iturbide knew she could do the project well, but it had to be in her own way. "They had asked me to photograph some of Frida's clothing," she recalled, "But I said that wasn't for me to do these perfect setups of the wardrobe."



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mx Felicitamos desde el Museo Frida Kahlo a Graciela Iturbide, reconocida con el Premio Princesa de Asturias de las Artes 2025.

Su mirada íntima sobre los objetos personales de Frida Kahlo —capturados en la Casa Azul en 2005— reveló una Frida profunda, humana y luminosa. Gracias, Graciela, por transformar la memoria en arte.

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🌐 Congratulations from the Frida Kahlo Museum to Graciela Iturbide, who's been awarded the 2025 Princess of Asturias Award for the Arts.

Her intimate photographs of Frida Kahlo's personal belongings — taken at La Casa Azul in 2005 — revealed a deep, human, and radiant side of Frida. Thank you, Graciela, for transforming memory into art.

🖼️ El baño de Frida, Coyoacán, Graciela Iturbide. 2006. Ciudad de México. © Graciela Iturbide, ©COLECCIONES FUNDACIÓN MAPFRE

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She discovered her entry point soon enough, however. "When walking around the house, I went into the bathroom where all her therapeutic tools were kept—her bodices, crutches, prosthetics," she said.

Working in black-and-white, and also in color (rare for Iturbide), she created an oblique and intensely intimate portrait of Kahlo through these private objects of care. In one startling image, Iturbide photographed her own bare legs and feet in Kahlo's bathtub, a composition that echoes Kahlo's famous painting *What the Water Gave Me (Lo que el agua me dio)* (1938). The image is a portrait of physical pain across decades, as Iturbide's feet appear scarred from her own recent operation.

"What I found in that bathroom, those elements surprised me. I admired that, despite obstacles and pain, she kept working," Iturbide considered. "I arranged everything to try to interpret what it was like for her. Doing that project, I realized how passionate she was about her painting and how



Graciela Iturbide, *El jardinero*, Oaxaca, México (1974). Courtesy of Throckmorton Fine Art,

The coexistence of pain and beauty, ritual, and the way small objects can become totemic masks and shields—be it a ceremonial costume or even simply a towel or pair of stockings—are ideas Iturbide returns to again and again in her work. For Iturbide, to be a photographer, there is a balance between “being very disciplined and passionate person, and being open to surprises in life.”

Rivera puts it more succinctly. “I really believe that the only way to get this type of work is by feeling it. You have to feel it to get it.”



Katie White

Editor

