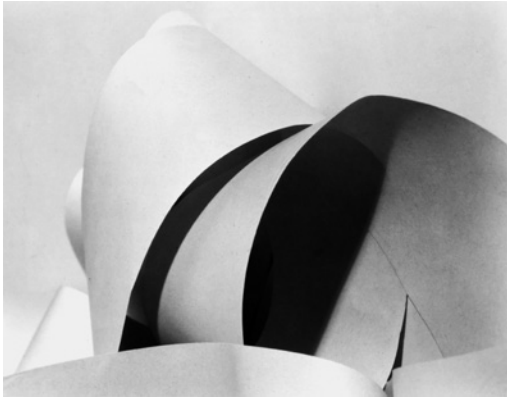


Manuel Álvarez Bravo

A Photographer on the Watch (1902–2002)

16 October 2012 – 20 January 2013





Ondas de papel (Paper Waves), vers 1928
Collection Colette Urbajtel / Archivo Manuel Álvarez Bravo, S.C.



Triptico cemento-2 / La Tolteca (Cement Triptych-2 / La Tolteca), 1929
Collection Familia González Rendón

The photographs produced over a period of eight decades by Manuel Álvarez Bravo (Mexico, 1902–2002) are more than simply a fundamental part of 20th century Mexican culture: their unique aesthetic value makes them a pioneering achievement of modern photography. Aside from their associations with the folk culture of an exotic land, the political rhetoric of muralism, and surrealist aesthetics, Álvarez Bravo's fascinating and complex photographs are a response to the sweeping changes sparked off by Mexico's 1910 Revolution: the gradual abandonment of rural life and traditional customs, the rise of a post-revolutionary culture with international influences, and the espousal of a modern culture related to the urban maelstrom.

Though the roots of his work lie in Mexican popular sensibility, its outlook is modern – an individual poetic discourse, both autonomous and coherent, which was built up over the years. It was influenced by painting, the graphic arts, literature and music, but above all by the cinema – the art form of his age – and constitutes an investigation into photography as an art: the photographer seems to be using pictures to ask himself questions about the relationships between images and words, bodies and objects.

This exhibition presents the works of Álvarez Bravo in a fresh perspective. In addition to the emblematic black-and-white photographs that are the distinguishing mark of his production, it includes previously unseen experimental works from his archive:

colour and Polaroid shots and experimental films from the 1960s. The selection shows aspects of his output which, though little known, are of great present-day relevance: iconographic motifs whose recurrence reveals a structure and intentionality far removed from the fortuitousness of Mexican "magic realism". The imaginary world of Manuel Álvarez Bravo – disconcerting and poetic at one and the same time – is a Mexican contribution to the language of modern photography. His work highlights how modern art, far from being a single central praxis, has arisen from a wide variety of standpoints, poetics and cultural contexts.

From pictorialism to constructivism

In 1916, at the age of fourteen, Manuel Álvarez Bravo was obliged to leave school and take a public service job. In the evenings he attended the Academia de San Carlos in Mexico City, read, listened to music, and looked at artworks. He mastered the technique of photography in his teens but it was not until 1923, when he met the pictorialist photographer Brehme, that he thought of taking up photography himself. His first shots were in the pictorial folk tradition of contemporary postcards and magazines.

Despite winning an award in a contest in Oaxaca in 1925, Álvarez Bravo destroyed his earliest works. He was stimulated by the "strange" photography practised in Mexico by Edward Weston and Tina Modotti to embark on another quest, this



La hija de los danzantes (The Daughter of the Dancers), 1933
Collection Colette Urbajtel / Archivo Manuel Álvarez Bravo, S.C.

time in search of “pure” photography, with forms tending towards abstraction. The synthetic, formal photography he produced prior to 1931 bore the deep imprint of Picasso’s aesthetics but also of the images of the Spanish avant-garde, embodied by Ramón Gómez de la Serna. It is more radically abstract than that of Weston and Modotti and closer to constructivism. Works dating from this period include *Colchón (Mattress, 1927)* and his *Juegos de papel* series (*Paper Games, ca. 1928*), in which abstract images are created by folding rolls of paper that symbolize his work as a government employee. One of his most synthetic and abstract works was awarded first prize in a major contest. Entitled *Tríptico cemento-2 / La Tolteca (Cement Triptych-2 / La Tolteca, 1929)*, it marked the advent of modern aesthetics in Mexican photography. The notion of construction, whether abstracted within the image or as a literal motif of the latter, was to be a constant feature of Álvarez Bravo’s output from this time onwards.

Vision as an epiphany

Around 1931 Álvarez Bravo discovered Atget and started taking photographs in the heart of Mexico City for a shop window contest. That same year he opened a gallery in his home and founded the Cine Club Mexicano with a group of fellow intellectuals. He read Sergei Eisenstein and invented his own form of visual dissonance: in both his stills and his film scripts, reflections and trompe-l’oeils of the metropolis



Obrero en huelga, asesinado (Striking Worker, Assassinated), 1934
Collection Colette Urbajtel / Archivo Manuel Álvarez Bravo, S.C.

– conjunctions of striking images marked by the theory of montage in film-making – began to appear. Vision, having become strange or impossible, was converted into something subjective and impulsive, something unstable and full of dream-like suggestions. A masterly example is provided by *Parábola óptica (Optical Parable, 1931)*, which Álvarez Bravo showed in reverse from 1945 onwards. Symbolized by the eye, vision is no longer a natural factor but a modern, cultural condition. Inevitably linked to the impulse to control space, it is multiplied or reversed by reflections, or obstructed by some other element or by the very position of the subject. Álvarez Bravo maintained close links with the art world: his first contacts were with painters such as Diego Rivera and Francisco Miguel and poets such as Xavier Villaurrutia, Luis Cardoza y Aragón and André Breton. Among the photographers was Henri Cartier-Bresson, with whom he struck up a lasting friendship in 1935. That same year they held a joint exhibition at the Palacio de Bellas Artes in Mexico City and, not long afterwards, their works were shown alongside those of Walker Evans at New York’s Julien Levy Gallery. That exhibition, “Documentary and Anti-Graphic Photographs”, broke new ground by establishing documentary photography, not only as a modern art, but as an avant-garde transcultural form as well. From this point onwards, Álvarez Bravo’s photographs were to be constantly present in both the United States and Europe.



La buena fama durmiendo (The Good Reputation Sleeping), 1938
Collection Colette Urbajtel / Archivo Manuel Álvarez Bravo, S.C.



Ensayo para la cámara bien enfocada (Exercise for the Well-Focused Camera), 1943
Collection Colette Urbajtel / Archivo Manuel Álvarez Bravo, S.C.

The cinema

In 1931 Álvarez Bravo bought the film camera that had been used to shoot Eisenstein's *¡Que viva México!* In 1934 he took it with him on a trip to Tehuantepec, in southern Mexico. It was during the shooting of an experimental film, which he was to entitle *Disparos en el Istmo (Shots on the Isthmus)*, that he came across the recumbent figure who was to become one of the hallmarks of his output: *Obrero en huelga, asesinado (Striking Worker, Assassinated)*, 1934). In 1945 he used it again in an experimental film with a script by José Revueltas, *¿Cuánta será la oscuridad? (How great will the Darkness be?)*.

Álvarez Bravo was of the stuff of which great film photographers are made but though he applied to join the Union of Film Production Workers in 1934, it was not until nine years later, in 1943, that he was accepted, and then as a "stills photographer". From the years between 1943 and 1959, when he left the film industry and started publishing art books, hundreds of stills and two short documentaries have survived: *El petróleo nacional (The Nation's Oil)*, 1940) and *Recursos hidráulicos (Water Department)*, 1952). Both films are evidence of his highly personal style of framing, which is evocative of his first constructivist photographs. As can be seen from the jottings and movie scripts in the notebooks he kept at the period, the aesthetic aims of his films and photographs were closely akin to one another. His scripts reveal the influence of Eisenstein's notion of montage and the dissonant, startling images of Buñuel's films: Álvarez Bravo lets

the pictures tell the tale on their own. In the minor experiments with movies he carried out between the ages of fifty and sixty, Álvarez Bravo captured images that had been left pending since the 1930s, images that obsessed him, such as mannequins, signs, dogs and people walking, but in colour and in motion.

An artist on the watch

Álvarez Bravo is not a photographer of scenes or groups but of shapes and objects, of elements isolated by his highly stringent framing, which reconstructs them on the basis of his painstaking poetics. He is a photographer of quiet landscapes and solitary, silent individuals, nearly always with their backs to the camera and sometimes asleep. He is a cold, slow photographer of solitude and calm: a hunter of images, an artist on the watch. The camera is a stationary eye; the world, a stage curtain. Álvarez Bravo often proceeds by setting up his tripod and camera in a spot where he feels some interesting image may emerge and waiting patiently to pounce on it. This method enables him to achieve what amounts to a blend of street and studio photography, in which the photograph is not spontaneous but composed. Hence the cinematographic slant perceptible in his interest in movement and the way he plays with an implicit temporal dimension by anticipating what is going to occur at a given time and place and waiting to record it.

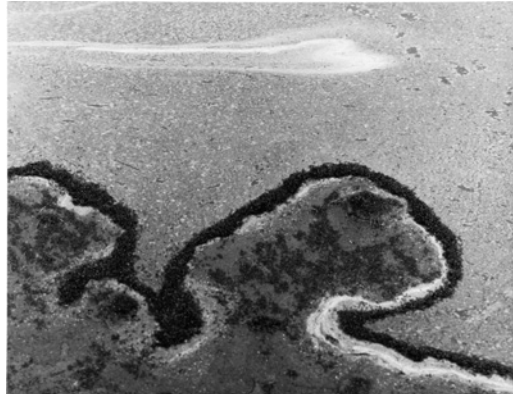


Retrato desagradable (Unpleasant Portrait), 1945
Collection Colette Urbajtel / Archivo Manuel Álvarez Bravo, S.C.

In nearly all his images, the photographer himself seems to have become imperceptible. This is obvious even in his nudes: the camera captures images of private gestures, of a dreamlike intimacy, in which the body uncovers itself but without fully letting go. These are silent, uncommunicative nudes – bodies withdrawn into themselves – which generate an aesthetic tension highly characteristic of Álvarez Bravo.

All this enclosure points in two interconnecting directions: the choice of what the camera is to frame and the outcome, the work born of the poetics of a form of photography which itself never fully opens up, poetry rather than documentation. In Álvarez Bravo's photographs, streets, fields and people have been internalized, in the full sense of the term: they are "in here" rather than "out there". This is perhaps the most emphatically Mexican dimension of his output. Manuel Álvarez Bravo, like the poet Pedro Calderón de la Barca, feels that life is a dream. The visible world is just another dream: a fragile, delicate, perishable image. The photograph turns into a poem, except that it captures what is changeable and intangible: the uncertain footsteps of human beings on earth.

Laura González Flores and Gerardo Mosquera, curators of the exhibition



Corriente, Texcoco (Stream, Texcoco), 1974-1975
Collection Colette Urbajtel / Archivo Manuel Álvarez Bravo, S.C.

related events

Tuesday 16 October, 6pm

■ panel discussion

"Manuel Álvarez Bravo : les images fixes d'un film ?"
[Manuel Álvarez Bravo: Stills from a film?]
With the participation of **Laura González Flores** and **Gerardo Mosquera**, curators of the exhibition, and **Rita Eder** and **Álvaro Vázquez Mantecón**, art historians

**Saturday 27 October, 24 November
and 29 December 2012, 3.30pm**

■ Children First!

tour and workshop "Pictures and Montages"

Tuesday 27 November, 6pm

■ Young Visitor's Tuesday

tour of the exhibition with a guide from the Jeu de Paume

Tuesday 11 December, 6pm

■ **tour** of the exhibition by **Gerardo Mosquera**, curator

■ publication

Manuel Álvarez Bravo, texts by Laura González Flores, Gerardo Mosquera, Iván de la Nuez, Roberto Tejada and Álvaro Vázquez Mantecón
Co-published by the Jeu de Paume / Fundación MAPFRE / TF Editores / Hazan, 288 pages, 24 x 30 cm, €45

Jeu de Paume – Concorde

exhibitions

16 October 2012 – 20 January 2013

■ **Manuel Álvarez Bravo, a Photographer on the Watch (1902–2002)**

■ **Muntadas. Entre / Between**

■ **Satellite Programme 5, Filipa César: Luta ca caba inda (The Fight Is Not Over Yet)**

23 October 2012 – March 2014

■ **Virtual Space, Print Error: Publishing in the Digital Age**

forthcoming exhibitions

26 February – 19 May 2013

■ **Laure Albin Guillot (1879–1962), the Question of Classicism**

■ **Adrian Paci: Lives in Transit**

■ **Satellite Programme 6, Suite for exhibition(s), first movement**

practical information

1 Place de la Concorde, 75008 Paris
access via the Tuileries Gardens, Rue de Rivoli entrance
www.jeudepaume.org
<http://lemagazine.jeudepaume.org>

information +33 (0)1 47 03 12 50

Tuesday (late opening) 11am–9pm

Wednesday to Sunday 11am–7pm

closed Monday

■ **exhibitions:** admission: €8.50; concessions: €5.50
free admission to the exhibitions of the Satellite Programme

Young Visitor's Tuesday: free admission for students and visitors under 26 every last Tuesday of the month from 5pm to 9pm

■ **guided tours and workshops:** free admission on presentation of the exhibition ticket of the day

Tours for individual visitors with guides from the Jeu de Paume

Wednesday and Saturday at 12.30pm

Family Tours

Saturday at 3.30pm (except last Saturday of the month) by reservation on +33 (0)1 47 03 12 41/rendezvousenfamille@jeudepaume.org

Children First!

visit and workshop for 7 to 11 year olds every last Saturday of the month at 3.30pm by reservation on +33 1 47 03 04 95/lesenfantdabord@jeudepaume.org

Young Visitors' Tuesday Tours

Tuesdays 30 Oct., 27 Nov. and 18 Dec. at 6pm

■ **panel discussions:** €3 or free admission on presentation of the exhibition ticket of the day

Jeu de Paume – extramural

exhibition

24 November 2012 – 26 May 2013

■ **Lartigue, Wide-Eyed Wonder (1894–1986)**
Château de Tours

25 Avenue André-Malraux, 37000 Tours
information +33 (0)2 47 70 88 46

Tuesday to Friday 2pm–6pm

Saturday and Sunday 2.15pm–6pm

closed Monday

admission: €3; concessions: €1.50

guided tours: Saturday at 3pm

forthcoming exhibitions

21 March – 19 May 2013

■ **Satellite Programme 6, Suite for exhibition(s), second movement**

Maison d'art Bernard Anthonioz

16 Rue Charles-VII, 94130 Nogent-sur-Marne
www.maisondart.fr

daily noon–6pm

closed Tuesday and public holidays

free admission

22 June – 3 November 2013

■ **Bruno Réquillart**

Château de Tours

The Jeu de Paume receives a subsidy from the **Ministry of Culture and Communication**.



It gratefully acknowledges support from **NEUFLIZE VIE**, its global partner.



Les Amis du Jeu de Paume contributes to its activities.

This exhibition has been organised by the Jeu de Paume and the FUNDACIÓN MAPFRE, Madrid.

FUNDACIÓN MAPFRE

With the collaboration of the Fundación Televisa, Mexico.



With help from the Instituto Cultural de México, Paris.



On the occasion of Le Mois de la Photo à Paris 2012.

In partnership with:



translation from Spanish: Jacqueline Hall

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