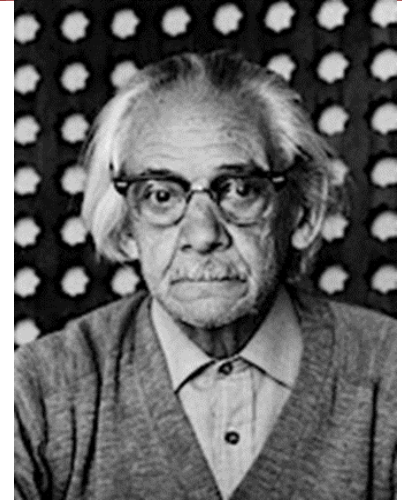


Latin American Photography Manuel Álvarez Bravo By Ricki Morse



In 2001 the J. Paul Getty Museum mounted an exhibition of Manuel Álvarez Bravo's century of work in celebration of his 100th birthday. Considered one of Mexico's premier 20th century artists, Bravo led Mexican art into Modernism, reaching beyond the political murals of Diego Rivera, José Clemente Orozco and David Alfaro Siqueiros, into the soul of the Mexican people and their culture. Often deceptively simple, his images are intricately composed with the sensitivity of a



Manuel Álvarez Bravo (1902-2002)

dance. His inherent subject matter is that of indigenous culture—life, death, time—as they unfold in individual moments.

One of our six Bravo photographs is included in the *Facing Forward* exhibition in the Photography Gallery,

and it surprises with its simplicity and depth. The boy squints into the glaring sun standing in the ruins of Tulum on the Caribbean. This ancient Mayan site, constructed in the 13th century CE by his ancestors, seems a natural setting for today's somber boy. Perhaps dreaming of the past or his own future, the surreal scene links the two figures, and we are aware of the influence of European Surrealism on Bravo's work as the image brings the past into the present. Like our cover image, *Portrait of the Eternal*, an archetype is evoked, adding a majesty and timelessness to the woman combing her hair—just as the simple boy brings his necklaced ancestor into the present.



Manuel Álvarez Bravo, *Niño Maya de Tulum (Mayan Boy from Tulum)*, 1942, platinum print, 1942. SBMA

Bravo was born in Mexico City. When he was eight, the Mexican revolution began, and it ended when he was eighteen with the expulsion of the dictator Porfirio Díaz and the founding of a constitutional state. Thus his world view was formed around the uprising of the indigenous Mexican peoples and the culture within his own family, his grandfather a portrait painter and his father a teacher and lover of music and art. Unlike most photographers who travel widely, Bravo made most of his photographs within a hundred miles of the family home in the heart of colonial Mexico City. Though his images are local, they

embody a broader understanding, capturing the spirit, striving and yearnings of his subjects.

Quetzalcótl, a silver gelatin print, broadens our grasp of his vision. He sees the Aztec god, a feathered serpent, in a twisted tree trunk, its leaves providing the creature's feathers, embedding indigenous mythology in the natural world. We see why Edward Weston was a great admirer, as were Henri Cartier-Bresson and Octavio Paz as well as his fellow artists in Mexico and Latin America. The Getty Museum titled their 2001 Bravo exhibition "Optical Parables." He expanded the surreal dream-landscape into a more human, universal vision which has opened the way for his students and contemporary photographers like Luis Gonzalez Palma to expand into new paths.



Manuel Álvarez Bravo, *Quetzalcótl*, 1968, silver gelatin print.

The first of Bravo's three wives was Lola Álvarez Bravo (1907-1993), now a widely collected photographer.



Lola Álvarez Bravo, *Self-Portrait*, 1956, silver gelatin print.

They were friends as children and were married in 1925. He became her teacher and she assisted in his studio as well as becoming the mother to his son, Manuel. In the early '30s she left to pursue her own career as a photographer, mounting her own first exhibition in 1944 at Mexico City's Palace of Fine Arts. She also operated her own gallery from 1951 to 1958 and gave her friend Frida Kahlo the first and only solo exhibition in her lifetime.

Lola, like her husband, was drawn to surrealism and grounded in the indigenous people of Mexico; however we see in her vision a more contemporary world. Also she was known for often oblique viewpoints, placing the viewer at an unusual angle to the scene. In *Untitled*, 1954, the sweeping grandeur and texture of the arches contrasts with the tiny people entering and leaving the space. She is able to pull the viewer

into the space she has created. We almost need to catch our breath.

The Manuel and Lola Bravo provide some background for my favorite work in *Facing Forward*, our much loved Luis Gonzalez Palma, *Loteria #1*, 1988-1991. ■



Lola Álvarez Bravo, *Untitled*, 1954, silver gelatin print.