

FT Magazine Photography

Graciela Iturbide on grief, joy and the power of birds

For the great Mexican artist, taking photographs was a way to process the loss of her young daughter



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Graciela Iturbide will often crouch down to get her shot, so that her subject towers slightly over the viewer. It is a simple gesture but one that elevates the people in the Mexican photographer's work — often women, frequently indigenous or marginalised — to a position of power.

There is Rosa, whose portrait Iturbide took in Juchitán, southern Mexico, in 1979, naked but with little sense of vulnerability as she enters a grimy shower block. Sun dapples her body, hand on hip, as she grins a little and looks towards the lens. In the same small town, where the population is predominantly indigenous Zapotec, a picture from 1986 shows two barefoot women [holding an alligator](#) between them, their colourful clothes evident even in Iturbide's trademark grainy, high-contrast black-and-white film. It too is an image full of humour and life.

"I'm a feminist, yes," Iturbide says from her home in Mexico City, where she was born to a well-off Roman Catholic family in 1942. "But I only ever shoot what surprises me. The work is a product of me trying to understand the things, the people, that I encounter. It's about learning."

Her most famous image, made at the beginning of a [long, international career](#), bears this out. It is a portrait of a Zapotec woman, Zobeida, in a market in Juchitán carrying a brace of live iguanas on her head. “In Juchitán, women are driving the economy,” Iturbide tells me. “The men will work too, but they give their money to the women and it’s they who choose how it’s spent. The women are in charge, which wasn’t the case, often still isn’t the case, in the rest of Mexico.” In the picture, “Our Lady of the Iguanas” (1979), the animals are resting atop each other, Zobeida’s head tilted up to the heavens and the faces of the reptiles poking outwards like the thorns on Christ’s crown. Zobeida is calm, the iguanas poised.

The photograph went on to be bought by institutions around the world, including the V&A in London. And it was proudly taken up by Mexicans, reproduced on murals around the country and on the [walls of Chicano areas in the US](#), as well as in a statue in Juchitán (it even featured on bottles of local mezcal, without Iturbide’s permission). This month, it will be the star attraction of a major retrospective of the artist’s work at Fondation Cartier in Paris, a return to the city that hosted her second-ever solo show, at the Centre Pompidou in 1982 (her first was in Mexico in 1980).



'Nuestra Señora de Las Iguanas', Juchitán, Oaxaca, 1979

“Being a woman helped me in my work,” Iturbide tells me. “I was treated really well by the women of the places I have visited, they took care of me, they invited me to their houses to sleep,” she continues, cigarette in hand, a bulldog stretched out on the sofa beside her. Books and artefacts collected on her travels line the shelves behind her. Iturbide lives in the historic [Coyoacán neighbourhood](#) of Mexico City, home at various points to Luis Buñuel, Frida Kahlo and Leon Trotsky.

Across the street is her red-brick studio, designed by her son Mauricio Rocha, an architect, housing a vast archive of negatives. “When I go to a new place, I am trying to become part of the community, or at least to build some kind of connection, to allow them to share their culture with me, to feel comfortable with me,” she says. “In Juchitán I worked in the market, selling tomatoes, which helped.”

In Iturbide’s photographs of indigenous communities, she does not replicate the traditional, stereotypical depictions of Amerindian people, nor linger too much on the poverty and violence inflicted by western encroachment on their lands. She says she does not seek out politics in her work, instead living by the maxim of her mentor [Manuel Álvarez Bravo](#), regarded as the godfather of modern Latin American photography, that everything is inherently political. In 2015, however, she was commissioned by the UNHCR to produce a series of images of [refugees in Mexico and Colombia](#). She chose to concentrate on small moments of human happiness — children playing, a young couple cheek to cheek — throwing their desperate circumstances into sharp relief.



'Rosa', Juchitán, 1979

While in Juchitán in 1986, Iturbide witnessed *el rapto* — “the abduction” — a ritual heralding the marriage of a young couple that has rarely been documented by outsiders. “It’s a tradition, I believe taken from Spanish gypsy culture, that when a girl and a boy in Juchitán are in love, the boy will creep into her room and take the virginity of the girl with his finger in the middle of the night. The girl will know he is coming, it’s consensual. Come morning, the women of the community will visit the bedside to check if the girl has bled, proving she is a virgin. If she’s not a virgin she’s sent back to her parents, though I’ve heard that some girls will sneak in a little flask of chicken blood.”

One of Iturbide’s images from the time features a girl, her face turned away, lying in bed under a white sheet. The room is spartan. A paper calendar hangs on the wall and the bed is covered with red paper flowers. Once the ritual has “proven” she is a virgin, “the girl must stay in bed resting for eight days straight”, she says. “There will be many visitors, who will throw red confetti, fill the place with red flowers and women will sing incredibly erotic songs. She will receive a blessing, the community gets drunk together, they eat together, and eventually the couple will marry.”



‘El rapto’, Juchitán, 1986

Iturbide started taking photographs in 1970, aged 28, but she credits her interest as stemming from her father, an amateur photographer, and the boxes of his prints she discovered as a child. There were family snaps of her and her 12 siblings, but also older photographs: pictures of her grandparents and the farm they owned before it was lost during Mexico's land reforms, a tiger her father apparently kept as a pet, the archaeological sites he had worked on as a young man. The young Graciela would steal the photos, hoarding them to return to and study.

To her conservative parents, her interest in photography was a childhood hobby. By 19 she was expected to marry and play the good wife. At first she complied and within three years she and her husband, the architect Manuel Rocha Díaz, had produced as many children. In 1970, however, their six-year-old daughter Claudia died after a short illness. Grief tore the marriage apart and the couple divorced, to the disapproval of Iturbide's mother and father.

Having previously been forbidden from going to university, now estranged from her parents, she enrolled to study film at the Centro Universitario de Estudios Cinematográficos in Mexico City, but quickly migrated to stills photography under the tutelage of Manuel Álvarez Bravo. She embraced leftwing politics and revelled in the freedom the camera gave her to travel. Nonetheless, the change of circumstances did not come without pain.

"Now I am able to speak about it," she tells me, "but it was very difficult for me. Full of grief, I started going to the burials of young children in the cemeteries of Mexico. There's a tradition in Mexico that when a baby dies, we build a tomb of flowers, with paper decorations. We leave the child food and medicine."

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Attending these burials was a habit, however morbid, that produced almost a decade of images. They are beautiful, but unlike the later works they are full of trauma, her subjects' mirroring her own. One photograph taken during this period of intense depression shows a woman in a wooden hut sat beside a young girl's body, the girl shrouded in white and covered in flowers; another is of three women dressed in black, their eyes downcast. The intrusion of a photographer at such a charged moment could have been uncomfortable but, the artist says, Mexicans are more inclined to be open about death.

In "Dolores Hidalgo" (1978), named after a city in the central Mexican state of Guanajuato, we see the lifeless body of a newborn baby, a tiny face partially obscured by paper lilies. "I saw a man who was with his whole family walking to bury a child. I asked him if I could follow him and take some photographs. I always asked. He said yes, but some steps along the path, we saw an adult body, out of a grave, decomposing. We were all so shocked. I remember details like the tennis shoes this dead man was wearing, his upper half was gone however — vultures perhaps. We didn't know how the body came to be left there, lying in the open. I took it as a symbol, as if Death had visited me to tell me to stop, to stop with this strange therapy, this constant ritual of visiting cemeteries, that it is too painful."



'Dolores Hidalgo', 1978

But the omens did not stop there on this strange gothic day of revelation. After the family had buried their child, a huge flock of birds took flight. Iturbide photographed them, her camera pointed straight up to the sky, and in the resulting images — [the “Pájaros” series](#) — the sheer number of birds seems to darken the sun. “I wondered if I was dreaming, but it was a reality. From then on, instead of cemeteries, I started to photograph birds — birds in flight because they represented liberty. Taking those photographs set me free from my suffering.”



'Pajaros en el poste de luz, Carretera a Guanajuato, Mexico, 1990

Her work of the past five decades has moved beyond Mexico. Many of her bird photographs were taken during trips to India, again eschewing clichéd images of the country. Some feature flocks, others single birds nesting. One of her most haunting pictures is [“Perros Perdidos, India”](#) (1997), in which the eye is drawn less to the lost dogs of the title, silhouetted on a cliff, than to the two birds circling above. Nor does Iturbide’s work always feature people: she has taken many photographs of cacti and tangled telephone wires, interiors and architectural details.

A rare series in colour, taken last year as a commission from Fondation Cartier, features an onyx mine in central Mexico. Iturbide likes the granular detail that monochrome images produce, so even when making these colour photographs she chose a landscape with a limited palette: yellow, grey and reddish brown. Great blocks of unearthed rock are shown in chains against the deep blue Mexican sky, the raw onyx annotated with codes, presumably by the miners. Yet there are no people here, which gives the pictures a melancholic, almost post-apocalyptic feel.



'Bolivia', 2013

She says nothing is set up, but that she will often retrofit ideas or narratives around an event that she comes across naturally. For instance, Iturbide has recently returned from the Canary Islands where she photographed rocks, volcanoes and traces of lava. “It got me thinking of the Big Bang,” she says, “and when I came back I started studying Darwin and the other evolutionists because I wanted to understand what I had photographed. I’m now obsessed with evolution, which all stems from something visual.”

But her interest in venturing beyond her home country is as much pragmatic as artistic. “It is terrible in Mexico at present, we are dominated by drug traffickers,” she says. “Women are being killed, shootings can happen anywhere. The traffickers, for example, have taken over some of the villages near Juchitán. It’s very difficult for me to travel now, because I always travel on my own. Photographing people might also put them in danger too. I just have to wait and see if I can go back to these communities I love so much.”

For now, however, she is content that her past work reveals elements of Mexican life — places and people, happy moments, the bad and the sad — that do not make it on to the news. “I discovered Mexico by taking photographs,” she says. “[My] career fell from the sky.”

“Graciela Iturbide: Heliotropo 37”, runs at Fondation Cartier, Paris, from February 12 to May 29; fondationcartier.com