

Graciela Iturbide's Mexico





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Photographs

Kristen Gresh

with an essay by Guillermo Sheridan

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Introduction: Dreams on Paper

Graciela Iturbide's two most well-known images are majestic photographs of indigenous Mexican women: *Our Lady of the Iguanas/Nuestra Señora de las Iguanas* and *Angel Woman/Mujer ángel*, both from 1979. These photographs have taken on lives of their own as they have been appropriated by many, both for their intrinsic power and as symbols of the plight of Mexico's indigenous peoples. Yet while they helped establish Iturbide's reputation as a great photographer, they represent only a small part of the variety and depth of her contribution to photography. To gain a fuller picture of the scope of Iturbide's work and her evolution as a photographer over the past fifty years, one must examine how her photography reflects an exploration of both her personal and her national identity—how, for her, photography is a way of life and a way of seeing and understanding Mexico and its beauty, rituals, challenges, and contradictions.¹

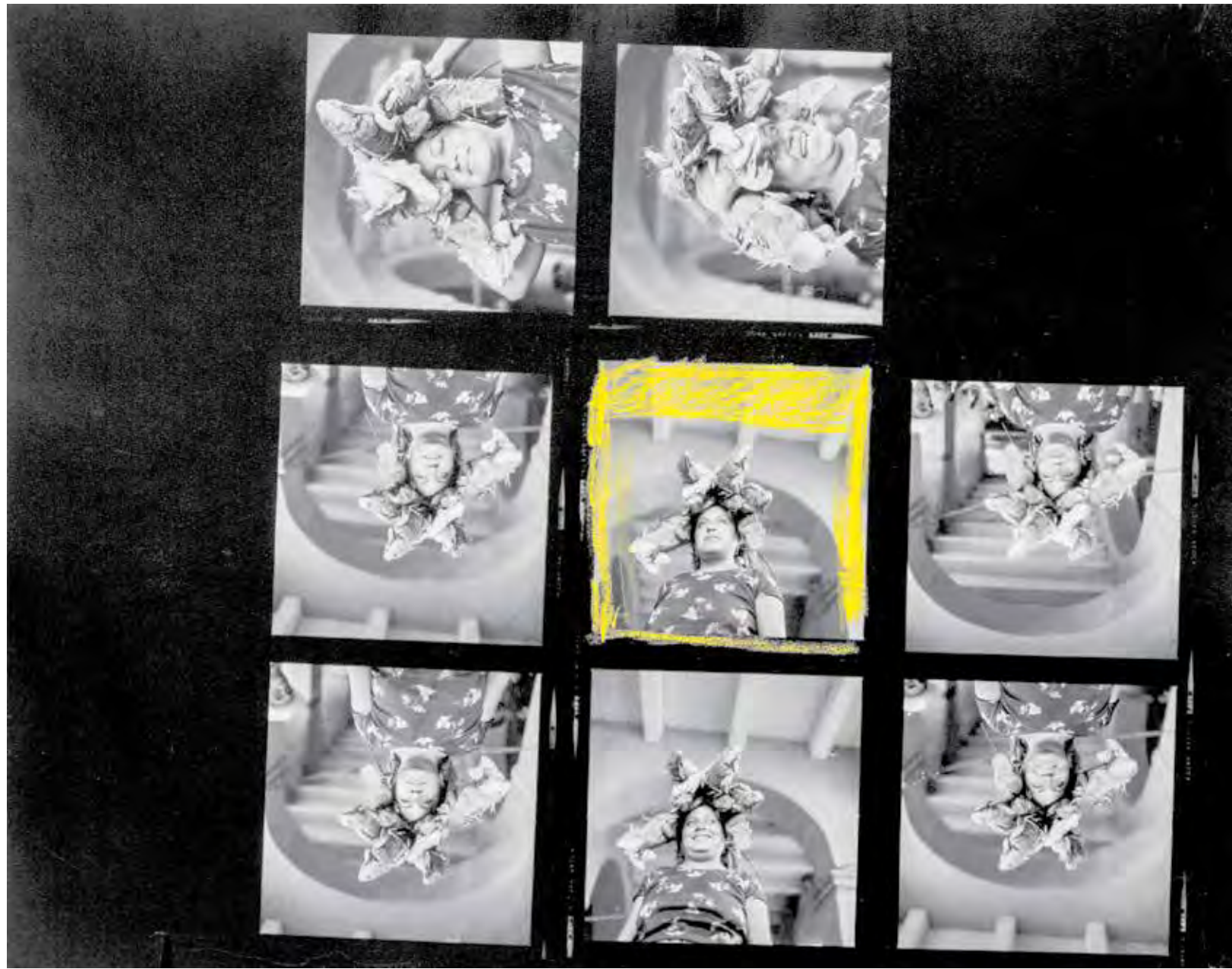
Iturbide's photographs go beyond documentary, anthropological, and ethnographic photography to express an intense personal and poetic lyricism about her country. They capture everyday life and its cultures, rituals, and religion. They also raise questions about Mexican culture and inequality in telling a visual story of Mexico since the late 1970s, a country in constant transition, defined by tensions between urban and rural life and indigenous and modern life. Iturbide's emphasis on indigenous populations serves as a reminder of the paradox of Mexico, a nation extremely rich in natural resources, even home to one of the richest men in the world, and yet a place where half of the population lives in poverty. Iturbide's photographs question the politics of inequality in her native Mexico, among other incongruities, through her focus on

the dualities of human presence and nature, the real and the unreal, and death and dreams.

Iturbide's decision to follow her dreams and begin a life as a photographer took a great deal of courage. She had to reinvent herself, and to do that she resisted the traditional expectations for women in the bourgeois society in which she was raised. Born in 1942 in Mexico City, Iturbide was the eldest of thirteen siblings. When she was growing up, she was fascinated by her father's camera and considered the box of family pictures to be their household's greatest treasure. As a young girl, she dreamed of being a poet, and she found solace in acting at her Catholic boarding school. Although she was given her own camera at age eleven, almost two decades would pass before she began to seriously pursue photography. First, at age twenty, she married the architect Manuel Rocha Diaz in 1962, and in the following years she became the mother of three children.²

It was not until 1969 that Iturbide, then twenty-seven, began her formal education in the arts. It was a politically tumultuous time in Mexico City, as it was in cities around the world. The year before, just as the capital prepared to host the 1968 Summer Olympics, student demonstrations against government repression had ended with the Tlatelolco massacre, in which the government's forceful use of the army and police to violently break up the protests resulted in the deaths of dozens if not hundreds of students and civilians, as well as the disappearance of many.

Iturbide enrolled in Mexico City's prestigious University Center for Film Studies at the National Autonomous University of Mexico with the goal of becoming a film director. Once there, while studying



Figs. 4-5. Contact sheets for *Our Lady of the Iguanas* | *Nuestra Señora de las Iguanas*, 1979



FIG. 8. Contact sheet for *Birds of Death* | *Pájaros de la muerte*, Dolores Hidalgo, 1978

show Mexico's national symbol receiving medical care, with IVs, splints, and other types of treatments. Iturbide has since come to see the cactus series as complementary to her 2005 series *El baño de Frida* (Frida's Bathroom) because they are both about being "in therapy," or healing. For Iturbide, her photographs of Kahlo's corsets, prosthetic leg, and other medical objects pair conceptually with her images of healing cacti, and perhaps with her personal feelings about suffering and healing. She says, "All this [is] to say that in life everything is connected: your pain; your imagination, which perhaps can help you forget reality. It's a way of showing how you can connect what you live with what you dream, and what you dream with what you do, and that is what remains on paper."⁷⁷ What remains on paper—Iturbide's indelible photographs—are culminations of her dreams, symbols, reality, and daily life.

Iturbide's personal photographic journey can be summarized with two poetically titled photographs that combine the cultural, natural, and spiritual worlds. The first, *Ascension* / *Ascensión*, shows the legs of two women in a tree, and its title evokes a religious experience (fig. 9). The photograph, taken at the popular pilgrimage site of Chalma on one of the artist's many sojourns there, evokes questions of belonging and spirituality that are essential elements throughout her work. As part of her own journey, Iturbide's projects become life defining for her, and they produce photographs layered with many associations. The second image, *Voyage* / *El viaje*, is a symbolic summary of her career (fig. 10). It is an unlikely representation of a bicycle, a mode of transport, from which dangle several chickens bundled together by their feet, apparently on their way to or from the market. The photograph brings together aspects of routine daily life and the unexpected, the natural world and the cultural world, in an image that makes a lasting impression on the imagination.

Iturbide's photographs have led her, and us, on a path of meaning through the labyrinth of life in Mexico. Echoing Paz's *Labyrinth of Solitude*, which explores the Mexican spirit through its perspectives on death, celebrations, and identity, Iturbide's own life has taken her down multiple paths, with many turns, and she has always kept photographing, providing us with a diversity of perspectives and



FIG. 9. *Ascension* | *Ascensión*, Chalma, 1984



17 Sonoran Desert, 1979



18 Seri Women | Mujeres Seris, Sonoran Desert, 1979



21 *Manuel*, Sonoran Desert, 1979



Juchitán

The photographs Iturbide took in Juchitán represent her deep connection to and involvement with her Juchitec sitters. She immersed herself in the community intellectually by reading about Zapotec traditions, in particular through the work of the ethnologist, artist, and intellectual Miguel Covarrubias and the magazine that the artist Francisco Toledo published, *Guchachi'resa*. Socially, partly because of her own status as an independent woman, she was taken in by the female members of the community, whom she describes as “big, strong, politicized, emancipated, wonderful women.” Drawn to their social organization and lifestyle, Iturbide photographed their daily life, both private and public moments, in this city in southern Oaxaca.

Mexican and northern artists had long been attracted to Juchitán, a historic place of mythic proportions, for its folkloric qualities. In the 1930s, Manuel Álvarez Bravo, Lola Álvarez Bravo, and Henri Cartier-Bresson photographed there. Frida Kahlo's visual identity as a Mexican woman was specifically inspired by the Tehuana women native to the Juchitán region. Kahlo's self-created image was largely drawn from ideas of women in the Tehuantepec region, known for their notably rare matriarchal, sexually liberated society. Through Kahlo's dress and her self-portraits, she embodied the pre-Hispanic cultures depicted by her husband, the muralist Diego Rivera. Many artists rendered Kahlo, in her Tehuana-clothed body, as a work of art herself. In the early part of the twentieth century, other artists produced heroic portraits of Tehuana women as well, including the photographers Tina Modotti and Edward Weston. Decades later, when Iturbide traveled to the region to photograph Juchitán and its people, she saw the mythical place in a different,



27 *Chicken | El pollo*, Juchitán, 1986



28 *Cleaning Chickens | Limpia de pollos*, Juchitán, 1985





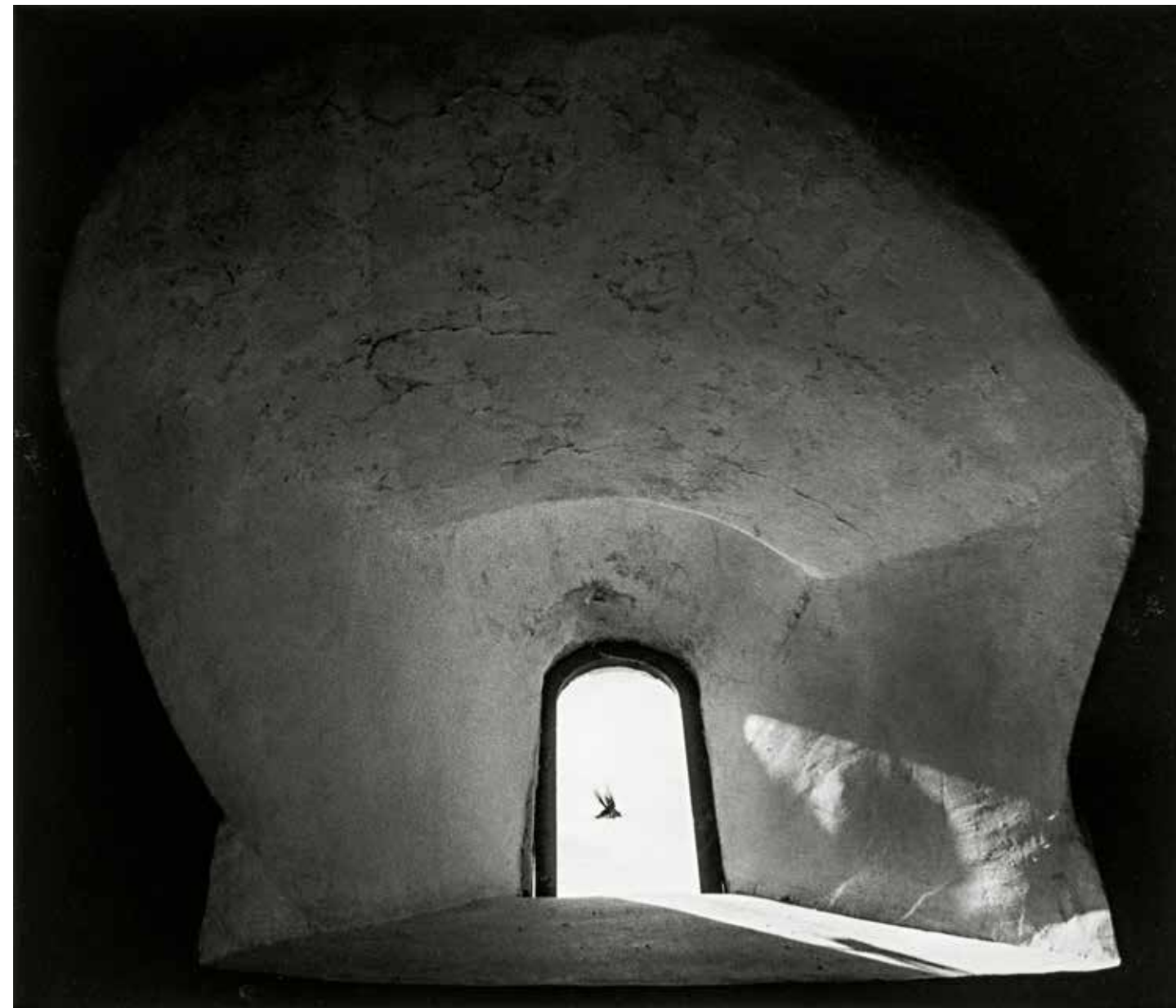
82 Cemetery | Cementerio, Juchitán, 1988



83 Death Bride | Novia Muerte, Chalma, 1990



90 *Eyes to Fly With?* | *¿Ojos para volar?*, Coyoacán, Mexico City, 1991



91 *Bird* | *Pájaro*, Actopan, Hidalgo, 1985

