

Iconic Mexican Photographer Graciela Iturbide Comes to Light in 'A Lens to See'

by [Marco Aquino](#) | September 07, 2016 at 8:00 AM



Graciela Iturbide's *Autorretrato con los indios Seris*, 1979

As part of this year's Fotoseptiembre, Ruiz-Healy Art will present "A Lens to See," a solo exhibition of photography by Graciela Iturbide. The selections, gathered from the Wittliff Collections at Texas State University, one of the largest archives of contemporary Mexican photography, mark the first time Iturbide has been exhibited in a commercial gallery in Texas, and span a period from the early 1970s to 2006. Among the work are some of Iturbide's most iconic photographs, including *Our Lady of the Iguanas* and *Angel Woman in the Desert of Sonora*, both of which depict the strength and dignity of indigenous women.

Before becoming one of Latin America's most celebrated artists, Iturbide began her career studying filmmaking at the Centro Universitario de Estudios Cinematográficos, part of the Universidad Nacional Autónoma in Mexico, and worked as an assistant to Manuel Alvarez-Bravo. While embracing her status as a protégé of Alvarez-Bravo, Iturbide has built a career of international acclaim that steps beyond the shadow of the great Mexican photographer.

In 1987, Iturbide received the W. Eugene Smith Memorial prize for *Juchitán*, a photo essay developed over a 10-year period during which she lived and worked among the indigenous people of the small town located in the state of Oaxaca. “I think the way she has documented these specific groups of people in Mexico is simply remarkable,” said gallery director Patricia Ruiz-Healy. “She doesn’t simply go to a place and take a few pictures and leave, she actually lives in the area for years and that’s how she gains the confidence and trust of a lot of her subjects, specifically in the area of Juchitán, where she produced a lot of her most well-known work, as well as in Sonora, in the desert where she also spent quite a bit of time back in the ’70s.”

In 2008, Iturbide earned the Hasselblad Award, one of the highest distinctions in the world of photography. Her work is included in several major collections such as the Metropolitan Museum of Art and the Museum of Modern Art. In 2013, Iturbide’s work was exhibited at the Tate Modern, following a similar exhibition of Alvarez-Bravo’s work.

In “A Lens to See,” as in much of Iturbide’s oeuvre, the female presence takes center stage whether it’s through self portraits, images of indigenous Mexican women, or photographs depicting the personal belongings of Frida Kahlo, one of the 20th century’s most recognized artists and a kindred spirit. Much like Kahlo, whose pregnancies resulted in miscarriages or abortions due to an injury she suffered at the age of 18, Iturbide is a woman who committed her life to art after the death of her 6-year-old daughter in 1970, and whose lasting legacy is a body of work that highlights the enduring strength of the female spirit.



El señor de los pájaros, 1984

Taken from the 2006 series *Frida's Bathroom*, five photographs in this exhibition depict items ranging from Kahlo's corsets and prosthetic leg to crutches and a bloodstained robe. Each object, carefully selected by Iturbide, stands as a testament to the crippling pain endured by Kahlo throughout her lifetime, and is photographed with the same level of dignity and respect as her human subjects. Like the female figure in *Our Lady of the Iguanas*, Kahlo's belongings boldly stand before the viewer as if to say, "I was here."

In email correspondence with the *San Antonio Current*, Iturbide described her affinity to the work of Kahlo stating, "I have always admired Frida for the work she produced throughout her lifetime despite her being in so much pain since she was a young girl. When I entered her bathroom after getting permission to photograph so many of these objects related to her pain, I realized how much I admired her work for its therapeutic qualities. It was a very emotional experience for me to be able to photograph and reinterpret these objects in her own bathroom. I have never been a Frida maniac, one who elevates her to sainthood, but I believe she was a great woman and a very good artist."

Another point that the selections in the Ruiz-Healy exhibit make clear is Iturbide's striking use, or inclusion, of animals in her work. Here, birds and iguanas adorn human figures, as if becoming one, eliciting unknown mythical beings. In *Bird Man*, black birds fly above and fill the sky, perhaps signaling the presence of a higher consciousness.

In our correspondence, Iturbide explains: "The animals that appear in my photographs, in general, are the animals that live with the people from the villages. There are photographs of other animals that have also received attention such as the birds I did for an essay. There is a poem by San Juan de la Cruz and one by Attar, a Sufi poet, in which they talk about the conditions of the birds. These readings served me in a spiritual manner to bring me closer to the birds."

Taken together, the work in "A Lens to See" is an artist's interpretation of life, tragedy, and the beauty found within, but most importantly, it's among the finest contributions to contemporary art by a living artist. "She's a world-class artist," Ruiz-Healy said. "To have her show in this city is a great privilege."

"Graciela Iturbide: A Lens to See"

Free Opening reception: 6-8pm Thu, Sept. 8 11am-4pm Tue-Sat through Oct. 15 Ruiz-Healy Art, 200 E. Olmos Drive, (210) 804-2219