

What makes an image surreal is not the artful crafting of illusion but the eruption of the accidental into the everyday.



Look at the photograph by Graciela Iturbide of a small child held on someone's lap. The child is a boy, and the person holding him is his older sister. What is the first impression the photograph gives? It isn't one of sweetness or innocence, but rather of a strangeness that is difficult to identify. The boy's eyes are closed. His head is thrown back at what could be read as an unnatural angle, but could just as well be read as perfectly natural. Something seems not quite right. Is he sick? The composition recalls paintings or sculptures of the Pietà, where the Madonna carries the dead Christ. But here, the girl is too small, too fragile, to be a mother, and that peculiarity of scale is odd, too.

The boy's face is covered with a veil, nothing sinister about that: It's there to keep dust away. But the veil's pattern adds to the picture's strangeness. The white dots of the veil rhyme with the boy's two front teeth and with the five whitish fingernails on the girl's right hand. The floral motif along the edge of the veil is echoed by the flowers on the girl's dress. Her hair wisps one way, his another. And all those dots make you think of some terrible illness. This is a photograph Iturbide made of two siblings on Holy Thursday in the Mexican town of Juchitán de Zaragoza in 1986. But it is also something more mysterious than its subject or its setting.

Consider another photograph, a recent one, posted this month on a mesmerizing Instagram account called [@gangculture](#) by the artist Trevor Hernandez. Against a dirty wall is a form, something between a sack and a mattress, stuffed with who knows what and encased in a sheath of synthetic yellow material. Bound by three yellow ties, it slumps against the wall. "Bound," "slumped": The form reminds us of a human body, particularly of a human body under duress. Hernandez was walking down the street in Los Angeles when he saw this thing, whatever it is, and photographed it on his phone. Why does it make us think of execution, torture or other sinister situations? This photograph, compositionally simpler than Iturbide's, is in color and doesn't feature people. But both his picture and hers make us reach for the same word: "surreal."

Surreal photographs naturally draw the mind to Surrealism, which has a formal and well-documented history. The movement's initial impetus was literary: how to sidestep conscious processes and make dream states visible. Certain writers made use of free association to create works that were influenced by Freud's theory of the unconscious.



Image courtesy of ROSEGALLERY

In the first “Manifesto of Surrealism,” in 1924, the poet André Breton wrote that he believed “in the future resolution of these two states, dream and reality, which are seemingly so contradictory, into a kind of absolute reality, a surreality, if one may so speak.” The Surrealist movement then went on to establish itself in the work of visual artists. While painters like André Masson and Joan Miró practiced visual automatism, others, René Magritte, Max Ernst and Salvador Dalí among them, used meticulous technique to create optical puns and illusions.

The photographers in the movement included Man Ray, Andre Kertesz and Hans Bellmer, who used unusual lenses (or no lens at all), mirrors, double exposures and darkroom tricks. The work that resulted is often playful, bizarre and intellectual. But only rarely is it productively accidental, enchantingly dreamlike and charged with a palpable but irretrievable meaning. Rather than being surreal, much of the work made by the Surrealists was, well, “surrealist.”

In trying to theorize suggestibility, the Surrealists missed some of the ways in

which suggestibility works: through analogy, understatement and incompleteness. But the surreal image — which, at its most resonant, breaks through consciousness instantaneously and surprisingly — is an elusive thing. Eugène Atget, whom the Surrealists claimed as an important forerunner, was less artful and more successfully surreal than they were. Some of Andre Kertesz’s straightforward photographs, the ones that are not images reflected in trick mirrors, are genuinely surreal, as are a number of the images made by Henri Cartier-Bresson in Mexico in the 1930s. And American street photographers like Walker Evans, Helen Levitt and Berenice Abbott have produced a rich body of surreal photographs. But photographers whose work involves staged scenes of the grotesque, made with artificial light and actors, frequently miss the mark. Again, what is lost is inadvertency and the element of surprise — the sense that the power of the image is independent of the photographer’s plans.

This unpredictability is what draws me to Iturbide. She has worked all over the world but is best known for the photo-

graphic projects she has undertaken in her native Mexico since the 1970s. Like most convincingly surreal photographs, Iturbide’s are often ostensibly about something else: the lives of Zapotec people in the matriarchal communities of Juchitán, for instance, or the customs of Seri people in the Sonoran Desert. But out of these quasi-anthropological engagements, she arrives at images that seem to contain other forms of knowing. Her photographs are firmly of this world — birds in flight, children dressed up as angels, animals at the moment of sacrifice — but they have an expectant and otherworldly air.

This talent for finding the surreal in the banal is one of the many ways in which Iturbide is influenced by Manuel Álvarez Bravo (1902-2002), her teacher and mentor. Drawing on the Mexican traditions that confront death, they both created densely poetic images. Look, for example, at Bravo’s photograph of a fallen sheet, made in the 1940s. By chance or by design, a white cloth rests on a tiled floor. This simple subject opens up a cascade of associations: the cloth looks like a shroud;

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its folds and bends appear to trace the contours of a human body; its placement on the ground makes you think of a corpse. This picture, an ancestor to the one Hernandez posted on Instagram, echoes another by Bravo, “Striking Worker, Assassinated” (1934), which shows a union leader lying in the street with a bloodied face moments after he was murdered. But what was raw photojournalistic reportage in the earlier picture is transformed into a different kind of strength in Bravo’s photograph of the fallen sheet. The dead man is an instance of death, but the sheet on the floor becomes Death itself.

Surrealism of this kind often relies for its effect on humanity in the absence of actual humans. In a 1929 photograph by Eli Lotar, two rows of calves’ feet outside an abattoir imply a butcher, who is nowhere to be seen. But the feet also make us think of our own feet and, horrifically, of amputation. They have a stance, an attitude, just as Bravo’s fallen sheet has an attitude. Attitude also suffuses the trees in a long-term project of Iturbide’s, in which she photographs “plants in therapy.” Taken in Mexico, Italy, Japan, Mozambique and elsewhere, these photographs are far from ordinary botany or taxonomy. One image from Rome, for instance, features tall plants covered at the top with a black cloth. Are they executioners? Or the condemned?

Certain objects tend to recur in surreal photographs: shirts, bedding, ladders, chairs, shoes. Designed to accommodate our bodies, altered by their encounters with us, they retain something of that humanity even when they are not being used. Forms that mimic the human are frequent, too: animals, trees, silhouettes, prostheses, wigs, mannequins, puppets. And there are many surreal photographs that feature actual humans, humans whose bodies (like those of Iturbide’s Holy Thursday siblings) stray into otherness. But there’s no guarantee that any given photograph will be surreal. Most photographs are not interesting. Then a strange one turns up, a real winner, and it is difficult to pin its strangeness down.

The surreal image caught on the fly can remind us of our vulnerability much more powerfully than manipulated photographs can. A double exposure that gives a man two heads is too definite, like something from a horror film. Its heavy-handed “surrealism” robs it of pathos. But a protuberance on the trunk of a tree, or a chair with a missing leg, or a twisted metal railing in the midday sun, being more am-

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biguous, can be more surreal. A main feature of surreal images is that they invite active verbs: Things pour and shimmer; they push and spray and brood, as though they had intentions. These kinds of images, in which the inanimate is suddenly animate, generate an open-ended visual conspiracy.

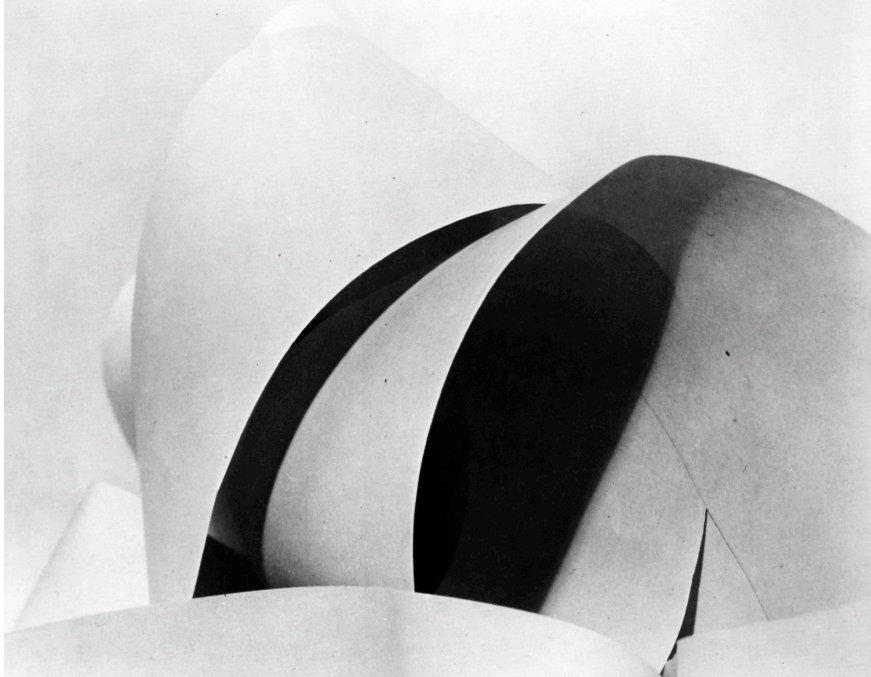
The photographic surreal, like the sublime or the obscene, is subjective. It cannot be locked down to a theory, codified and filed away under an “ism.” Rather, it arrives like a metaphysical gift, showing up when it is least expected to conquer logic and haunt the imagination.

The Boston Globe

April 14, 2009

Mexico's most-focused eye

By Mark Feeney



Juego de papel, 1926-27

NORTH ANDOVER - No major photographer has had a career as long as Manuel Álvarez Bravo (1902-2002). More important, few have amassed such a strong body of work.

Two factors contribute to his not being better known. Álvarez Bravo spent his life in Mexico, far from leading museums, galleries, photo agencies - the standard means of building an international reputation. And his work defies simple categorization. If Álvarez Bravo had done fewer things so well, he'd probably be more famous.

The Robert Lehman Art Center at Brooks School has done an excellent job of giving a sense of how widely he ranged. "Manuel Álvarez Bravo: Photographs" includes nudes, cityscapes, landscapes, portraits, ethnic studies, and much else besides. It runs through June 14. There are 57 photographs in all, 56 by Álvarez Bravo. The other, by Graciela Iturbide, shows him at work in the 1970s. Hands clasped at chin as he stares at his viewfinder, Álvarez Bravo looks as though he's praying to his camera.

Álvarez Bravo came of age amid the cultural efflorescence Mexico enjoyed in the 1920s. There are photographs in the show of Frida Kahlo and Rufino Tamayo's hands. Diego Rivera praised his work. His friends included Tina Modotti and Edward Weston. His "Mattress," of 1927, is as much a study in coiled spirals as Weston's "Half Shell Nautilus" of the same year.

Álvarez Bravo was very much like Henri Cartier-Bresson, nearly his exact contemporary, in being deeply influenced by Surrealism; and it's an influence that stayed with him. One can see it early, in such images as "Box in the Grass" or "Fire Workers" (with their helmets, masks, and suits, the firemen look like creatures from another planet). One can see it later, in the '70s, in the witchy tendrils of "Reed and television" or supplicating fronds of "Window on the Agaves."

This attraction to the surreal is even visible in Álvarez Bravo's early flirtation with abstraction. One of the two "Paper Games," from 1926-27, looks like a maquette for the Sydney Opera House. That's a feat of aesthetic time travel any Surrealist might envy: digging into one's unconscious to predict the architectural future!

Álvarez Bravo and Cartier-Bresson met in Mexico, in 1934, and had their work exhibited together a year later. Yet where Cartier-Bresson moved on to photojournalism and a global career, Álvarez Bravo stayed in Mexico and practiced photography outside the constraints of journalism. Always there was a surpassing interest in form. Notice the round perfection of the wheels in "Bicycles on Sunday" or how elegantly the geometric tiles in the background of "Braids" frame the woman's hair in the foreground.

With that formal interest came a no less pronounced documentary impulse. "In life," Álvarez Bravo said, "everything has social content." Like many Mexican artists and writers between the wars, he celebrated his native culture. That culture could be construed traditionally, as in Day of the Dead ceremonies or a young Indian woman, "Margarita of Bonampak," whose magnificent slab of face could make her a candidate for national madonna. That culture was also modern, though. Álvarez Bravo photographed doctors, athletes, and Mexico City storefronts.

Pictures from the early '30s like "Window With Ship Model" and "Optical Parable" (which turns an optician's shop into a Surrealist dreamscape) recall Berenice Abbott's chronicling of commercial Manhattan a few years later.

The most powerful example here of Álvarez Bravo's descriptive power and awareness of his place in Mexican society is "Striking Worker Assassinated," from 1934. It's political, of course. How could it not be? Yet there's no hint of agitprop. Formally, it's almost classical, recalling Manet's "Dead Toreador" and Goya's "Disasters of War." Yet there's no sense of aestheticization or disengagement from the world. What we see is a small miracle of balancing the moral with the artistic.

MANUEL ÁLVAREZ BRAVO: Photographs

At the Robert Lehman Art Center at Brooks School, 1160 Great Pond Road North Andover, through June 14. Call 978-725-6232 or go to www.lehmanartcenter.com.

Los Angeles Times

October 21, 2007



"Sombreros, Ecuador": Manuel Alvarez Bravo focused on a storefront with columns of fedoras in a 1984 shot. His photos are at RoseGallery.

Manuel Alvarez Bravo: Out of the shoe box



"Mechon": A hairpiece belonging to Alvarez Bravo's then-wife Doris Heydn lies on kitchen floor.

ON the wall of his studio darkroom in Mexico City, Manuel Alvarez Bravo posted a scrap of paper on which he'd scrawled "Hay Tiempo." "There is time."

In 2002, time ran out for Alvarez Bravo, who died at age 100. But by then, with photographs recasting everyday Mexican City street life as lyrical dreamscapes, he had created a celebrated body of work rooted in Mexico's post-revolution artistic renaissance that flourished in the 1930s.

At 95, Alvarez Bravo, slowed by ill health, revisited a lifetime's worth of themes, sifting through shoe boxes crammed with neglected proof sheets and negatives that had accumulated in his studio over the last 60 years, work he'd shunted aside in his perpetual push to produce something new. A selection of these previously unpublished pictures form the core of "Manuel Alvarez Bravo: Ojos en los Ojos, The Eyes in His Eyes" on display at Rose Gallery in Santa Monica's Bergamot Station.

Gallery owner Rose Shoshana, who befriended Alvarez Bravo and his wife, Colette Alvarez-Urbajtel in the early '90s, sparked the project. "I wanted to give him project to look forward to" after he was hospitalized in 1997, she says. "Going through some boxes of old proofs and negatives I came across images I'd never seen before and came up with the idea of doing a show focusing on more abstract pieces. Don Manuel did not like to look back, but this opportunity was sort of imposed on him to look at work he hadn't done anything with and see it with new eyes."

The archive finds featured in "Eyes" include an eerie group portrait of masked surgeons that evokes a Dutch Masters painting, a storefront stocked with columns of fedoras.

What do the images signify? Alvarez Bravo was not eager to explain. "He wanted to hear your take rather than tell you what he thought the work was about," Shoshana says.

The artist did assert exacting controls over which prints made the cut. "Many times, I'd ask for certain images, Colette would have prints made. We'd go into don Manuel's room to show him and he'd say, 'This isn't the way it's meant to look.' They would be torn up and we'd try again. He was very specific about what he liked."

The project yielded surprising finds, says Guillermo Sheridan, who wrote an essay for the show's companion catalog. He mentions "Cacahuates," circa 1980, which arrays a grid of peanuts against a black piece of paper. "Nothing could be more simple," he says. "But suddenly these objects seem infused with mystery and affirmation. Bravo had a gift for interacting with the most commonplace things and turn them into something magical."

-Hugh Hart

RoseGallery, Bergamot Station, 2525 Michigan Ave., Santa Monica, (310) 264-8440, through Nov. 3. Closed Sundays and Mondays. www.rosegallery.net.

ARTFORUM

CRITICS' PICK

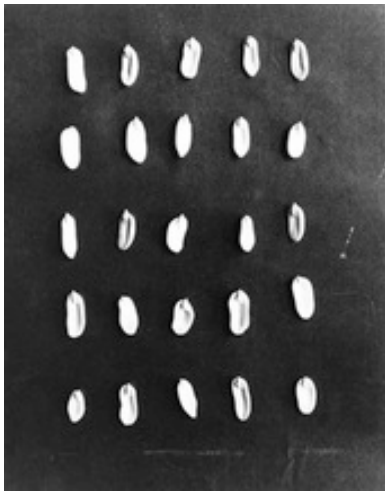
Los Angeles

Manuel Álvarez Bravo

ROSEGALLERY

Bergamot Station, 2525 Michigan Avenue, G-5

September 15–November 3



Cacahuates (Peanuts), ca. 1980,
8 x 10 inch Silver Gelatin print.

As Susan Sontag noted in *On Photography*, a photograph has multiple functions: to create beauty, to possess, to document, to mask, to reveal. The forty gelatin silver and platinum palladium prints by Manuel Álvarez Bravo in this exhibition, shot predominantly in Mexico in the 1930s, catalog delicately decisive moments: an anamorphic congregation of snails on a white background; a twist of braided hair juxtaposed with a zigzagging wrought-iron fence; a mathematical grid of peanut halves. Most of the prints here are previously unseen (or unpublished—a well-made catalogue accompanies the exhibition), and each confirms the rigor of Bravo's photographic eye and the force of an inner vision that is inexplicable and compelling. His images are poetic and transgressive, tranquil and unsettling. Bravo shares a formalism with his fellow modernists (Edward Weston, Alfred Stieglitz), social concerns with revolutionary peers (Tina Modotti), and a penchant for Surrealist fragmentation and disorientation (André Breton, Luis Buñuel). His images frame repetition and patterns in a way that converts the quotidian into an event, and in their technical and aesthetic virtuosity reconfirm his position in the modernist-photography firmament. It's invigorating to spend time with art that is dedicated to skill and vision and unfettered by postmodern critiques that can be creatively debilitating. Likewise, though many modernist photographers are now neatly canonized—and therefore tamed—Bravo's images communicate with immediacy across the decades.

—Micol Hebron

Los Angeles Times

October 19, 2007

An experience that's twice as nice

By Leah Ollman, Special to The Times

The oeuvre of Manuel Álvarez Bravo, who died in 2002 at age 100, just keeps delivering. At the Rose Gallery, a selection of the Mexican photographer's most profound and well-known images ("The Good Reputation Sleeping," "The Crouched Ones," "Optical Parable" and more) is paired with an assortment of unfamiliar pictures culled from his archive toward the end of his life.

The photographs date from c.1920 through the '80s, but most were made around the time of his richest work, in the '30s, and printed later under the artist's supervision. The selection is more affirming of Bravo's gifts than revelatory of any unknown dimensions. Like the broad body of known work, it can be navigated in radically different ways: through the spectrum of Mexican politics and culture (the show opens with an elegant study of Tamayo's hands); modernist formalism (impeccable images of objects, from hats to peanuts, repeated in striking patterns); and a surreally tinged intrigue with the body, its surrogates, its parts in isolation, wrapped, partly revealed.

An exquisite subset of Bravo's work focuses on women's hair. The breathtaking classic, "Portrait of the Eternal," is complemented here by an odd and wonderful image of a glossy, disembodied tress on patterned tile, and another of a thick, twisting braid whose striations rhyme with the patterned fencing and ridged corduroy garments that fill the rest of the frame.

Like the proverbial river of Heraclitus, Bravo's fertile, dynamic work can't be experienced the same way twice.

RoseGallery, Bergamot Station, 2525 Michigan Ave., Santa Monica, (310) 264-8440, through Nov. 3. Closed Sundays and Mondays.
www.rosegallery.net.

KCRW

Art Talk

Manuel Alvarez Bravo: Eyes in His Eyes

By art critic Edward Goldman

TUE SEP 25, 2007



La Buena fama durmiendo, 1939

And now, it's time to raise the bar – from amusing to amazing. The great Mexican photographer Manuel Alvarez Bravo, who died in 2002 at the age of 100, left an artistic legacy of rare complexity and breadth. In thousands of images inspired by his homeland, he celebrates its landscapes and people with a poetic mixture of candor, sensuality, and solitude. Some of his most iconic images, along with a number of never-before seen photos, are currently on view at the Rose Gallery. The exhibition coincides with the publication of a new monograph on Bravo, for which the artist himself helped select many unfamiliar images. On the KCRW website, you can see his famously seductive and slightly disturbing reclining nude with a bandage around her pudenda. In another black and white photo, you will see a young woman slowly dissolving into deep shadow. A single ray of light shines on the luxurious, long waves of her black hair that she combs, as if in a trance...



Retrato de lo eterno, 1935

Manuel Alvarez Bravo: Eyes in His Eyes

On view at Rose Gallery through November 3rd

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