

Art and Cake, October 19, 2017

PhotoGRAPHIC at Rose Gallery
September 8 - October 21, 2017

By Jody Zellen



Graciela Iturbide (b. Mexico City, 1942) has been making photographs of people and places in Mexico and abroad since she first picked up a camera in the late 1960s and today she is considered one of Mexico's most noted photographers. To celebrate her life and career, the J. Paul Getty Museum has published a graphic novel with drawings by Zeke Peña and prose by Isabel Quintero entitled *PhotoGRAPHIC The Life of Graciela Iturbide*. Tearsheets and drawings from the book accompany the exhibition of works of and by Iturbide. While one can flip through a copy of the graphic novel as well as other books featuring Iturbide's photographs on a table in the gallery, one only gets a real sense of the book from the tearsheets that are collaged to the gallery's front desk and from the few studies in accompanying vitrines. On the entry wall, Peña has painted a large portrait of Iturbide based on a photograph by Mauricio Rocha. Painted above the portrait are silhouettes of birds in flight, a reference to many of her iconic photographs.

Unfortunately, Peña is only represented by a few small drawings and studies for the book. What stands out, and what is missing from the exhibition, is the process of transforming archival

images into a graphic novel and what drove Peña and Quintero to investigate Iturbide's life and work. When this is represented, it is fascinating. For example, one vitrine displays an image of Manuel Alvarez Bravo in the landscape in front of his camera. Early in her career, Iturbide worked with Bravo as an assistant and later travelled with him photographing the indigenous people of Mexico. Peña extrapolates from the image creating a page for the graphic novel that depicts the young Iturbide learning from her mentor with an accompanying text in her voice describing her trip to Mexican farmlands and the text: "Don Manuel has a poetic sense of time. He does not stage moments to photograph. He waits... And I learn to do the same."

Although a graphic novel, the book does not simplify Iturbide's life and attitudes toward her work. It traces her 50 year career while asking basic questions like, why photography? Why black and white? Why not digital? Peña's illustrations both reproduce and interpret photographs of and by Iturbide with grace and ease. The exhibition is packaged as a celebration of the graphic novel and works in concert with a mini retrospective of Iturbide's amazing photographs.

On view are images representing the different themes within her work, ranging from her experiments in Surrealism as in the image *¿Ojos para volar?*, 1991, a photograph of the artist holding two small dead birds in front of her eyes, to some of her documentary works from 1979 depicting the people and landscape in the Sonoran desert. Also included are iconic photographs — many capturing birds in flight like *Untitled, Jaipur, India*, 1998 where Iturbide pictures a cow walking down a sidewalk causing a flock of pigeons to take flight. A suite of images taken in East LA in the mid 1990s, as well as some Dye Transfer prints from 2005, her only experiments with color, are also shown.

While the graphic novel provides a guided tour of Iturbide's work through drawing, text and reproduction, the photographs on the wall give viewers an opportunity to take in the actual power and beauty of her images.

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