

The Museum of Modern Art

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THE MUSEUM OF MODERN ART MOUNTS MAJOR RETROSPECTIVE OF THE WORK OF MASTER PHOTOGRAPHER MANUEL ALVAREZ BRAVO

On View from February 20 to May 18, 1997

*Rare Vintage Prints Featured, Including 80
Works from the Artist's Personal Collection*

The most comprehensive exhibition ever devoted to the career of Manuel Alvarez Bravo (b. 1902), a leading modern master and the only photographer among the great 20th-century Mexican artists, opens at The Museum of Modern Art on February 20, 1997. Organized by Susan Kismaric, Curator, Department of Photography, *Manuel Alvarez Bravo* examines the artist's long and productive career, from his early experiments with abstraction, through modernist works inspired by international trends such as Surrealism, to the realization of a personal style concerned with Mexican customs and rituals.

On view through May 18, the exhibition features rare vintage prints from museums and private collections, including 80 works from the artist's personal archive. Many have not been seen since they were first exhibited in the early 1930s.

This exhibition is sponsored by a generous grant from CEMEX. Additional support is provided by the Mex-Am Cultural Foundation, Inc., and Aeromexico. The Museum gratefully acknowledges the assistance of the Mexican Cultural Institute, S.R.E. Educational programs accompanying the exhibition are supported by the New York City Department of Cultural Affairs Cultural Exchange Program.

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“Manuel Alvarez Bravo enjoys an international reputation as one of the most important photographers in the history of the medium,” remarks Ms. Kismaric. “Between the two wars, he was one of the inventors of the modern vocabulary of photography. The fact that he was able to achieve such mastery is all the more impressive when one considers that he did not live in one of the principal centers of photographic activity, such as New York or Paris. For artistic discourse and support, Alvarez Bravo was mostly dependent on the input of a few original talents and the words and images in books and journals.”

The Exhibition

Surveying 70 years of achievement, from the 1920s to the 1990s, the exhibition includes some 175 photographs from all phases of the artist's career, focusing on his seminal work from 1920 through the 1940s. The chronological organization of the exhibition emphasizes certain recurrent elements in the artist's work: sympathy for the lower classes, an air of mystery, a sense of the surreal, and a preoccupation with death. Throughout his career, Alvarez Bravo has subtly integrated two opposing ideologies: that of the Mexican muralists, with their emphasis on the revolution of the people and an indigenous art; and that of an international art that transcends culture, time, and place with its emphasis on formal invention. “Alvarez Bravo's success in reconciling these divergent artistic attitudes and strategies has been his genius,” notes Ms. Kismaric.

The exhibition opens with the artist's formal experiments with abstraction from the 1920s. Following an early exploration of pictorialism, Alvarez Bravo joined other advanced photographers in Europe and the United States who rejected that aesthetic in favor of a vigorous modernism based on the principle that photographs should look like photographs, not paintings.

He pursued an art in which his subjects—coils of paper, a rolled mattress, a cluster of cacti—were stripped of all complexity and distilled to their essential shapes and geometric patterns.

Even while he was experimenting with abstraction in the 1920s, Alvarez Bravo had begun making pictures of people involved in everyday activities, recording and thus preserving aspects of Mexican culture. He continued to do so throughout his career, working in the countryside, in the villages, and in Mexico City, making pictures of funerals, Mexican cultural objects, and Catholic shrines and artifacts. The continual interweaving of the people, their work, the landscape, religion, and the presence of death in Alvarez Bravo's work is evident in such photographs as *Burial at Metepec (Enterramiento en Metepec)*, 1932; *Day of All Dead (Día de todos muertos)*, 1933; and *Striking Worker, Assassinated (Obrero en huelga, asesinado)*, 1934. Along with these works, the exhibition also features little-known romantic landscape photographs the artist made in the 1930s and 1940s, which celebrate his sense of national pride.

Many of the works in the exhibition are concerned with the idea of looking or seeing, mixing irony with an homage to the medium of photography itself. For example, in *The Daughter of the Dancers (La hija de los danzantes)*, 1933, a young woman peers into a mysterious portal in a wall; in *Laughing Mannequins (Maniquís riendo)*, 1930, a row of glamorous cardboard women looks at the viewer and laughs.

In the late 1920s Alvarez Bravo began making pictures that exploited the power of photography to transform the ordinary into the fantastic, a device that was to become a hallmark of his work. In *The Crouched Ones (Los agachados)*, 1934, the artist imposes several layers of mystery on a simple scene of men eating and drinking. Framed so that the viewer seems to be

looking into a box, the photograph shows five men, their upper bodies obscured by shadow, sitting on chain-linked stools that make them look like captives. In *Conversation near the Statue (Plática junto a la estatua)*, 1933, a group of men are seen talking, seemingly oblivious to the sensuous, monumental nude stretched out beside them.

Like many photographers of the 1920s and 1930s, Alvarez Bravo was embraced by the Surrealists. Although he did not consider himself part of that movement, he enthusiastically accepted an invitation to provide a cover for the catalogue of the International Surrealist Exhibition of 1940, held in Mexico City. The result was one of his most celebrated images, *The Good Reputation Sleeping (La buena fama durmiendo)*, 1939. This photograph depicts a nude woman, her ankles, thighs, and wrists wrapped in bandages, stretched out in the sun and enigmatically flanked by several small cacti.

Since the 1950s Alvarez Bravo's photography has been largely a renewed exploration of earlier subjects. In the 1960s, for example, he focused on making color photographs of previously considered subjects, while in the 1970s he began making platinum prints from earlier negatives. The exhibition also includes examples of a group of female nudes he began in 1976, as well as mid-1990s studies of the vines that grow outside his house.

"This exhibition is the culmination of the Museum's long association with the artist," remarks Glenn D. Lowry, Director of the Museum. "Photographs by Alvarez Bravo first entered the collection in 1942, two years after the Department of Photography was founded. In 1943, his photographs were included in The Museum of Modern Art's *Masters of Photography*, which traveled in the United States and Canada for five years. The artist was also represented in such important MoMA exhibitions as *Twenty Centuries of Mexican Art* (1940) and *The Family of Man*

(1955). In 1971 a small retrospective of 60 photographs was shown at the Museum. It is not until the present exhibition, however, that MoMA has done full justice to the range and depth of this master's accomplishment."

Publication

Manuel Alvarez Bravo, by Susan Kismaric. 240 pages; 198 illustrations, including 170 tritone plates and five in color. Ms. Kismaric's extensive interviews with Alvarez Bravo are incorporated into her essay. She also examines for the first time how Alvarez Bravo's work was influenced by European photography of the 1920s through his contact with magazines and his friendship with Tina Modotti. Clothbound, \$60.00, distributed in the United States and Canada by Harry N. Abrams, Inc., New York, and paperbound, \$27.50; both available in The MoMA Book Store.

Travel

The exhibition will travel to the Centro Cultural Arte Contemporaneo, A.C., Mexico City, from mid-June to mid-September 1997. Other venues are under consideration.

Public Programs

The Museum of Modern Art will present the following lectures in conjunction with the exhibition *Manuel Alvarez Bravo*:

Manuel Alvarez Bravo in Context: Photography in Mexico 1920-1945

Tuesday, March 11, 1997, 7 p.m.

Speaker: James Oles, Assistant Professor, Art Department, Wellesley College

Lens of Revelations: Manuel Alvarez Bravo and His Influence

Tuesday, April 15, 1997, 7 p.m.

Speaker: Liz Ferrer, Curator, Americas Society Art Gallery

The programs will be held at the Museum's Roy and Niuta Titus Theater 2. Tickets: \$8.00, members \$7.00, students and seniors \$5.00; available at the Lobby Information Desk. For further information, the public may call the Department of Education at 212/708-9781.

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No. 6

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