

#75 September 2022 Cameraderie
Lola Álvarez Bravo (1903-93)



Self-Portrait, ca. 1950.



Lola Álvarez Bravo was a Mexican photographer who concentrated on capturing her contemporaries and the lives of ordinary people. Her Wikipedia article is here:

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lola_%C3%81lvarez_Bravo. From the Wikipedia article:

[She and Freida Kahlo met in 1922, and] formed a close, lifelong friendship.

[Bravo's] images focus on the subtle meanings of everyday life captured by the camera.

In 1937 Álvarez began working as a photographer at the Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México (UNAM) in the Institute of Aesthetic Research. She took photographs to document archaeological sites, visiting various regions of the country. Five years later she was appointed head of the photography department of the Dirección General de Educación Extraescolar y Estética, where she remained for the next 30 years. She taught photography classes, led workshops and curated traveling presentations. Simultaneously, Álvarez continued her work as a photojournalist, becoming the only woman to work in the field throughout the 1950s. She photographed factories, farms, fire stations, schools, hospitals, and orphanages throughout Mexico to accompany magazine articles and undertook assignments in advertising and fashion photography. In her spare time, she made portraits of friends and colleagues, as well as their works.

In 1950, she rented a garage and converted it into a gallery with a sculpture garden. It officially opened the following October, as the *Galería de Arte Contemporáneo* (Gallery of Contemporary Art). It was in this gallery in 1953, that Álvarez presented the only solo showing of Frida Kahlo's work in Mexico held while the artist was living.

Álvarez helped attend...Frida Kahlo's body after her death in the summer of 1954.

In 1953, when asked by a journalist from *Excélsior* to identify Mexico's most important painter, Mexican painter Alfonso Michel replied, "Lola Álvarez Bravo", because "her compositions are those of a woman who knows how to see the thing itself". By ignoring icons like David Alfaro Siqueiros, José Clemente Orozco, and Diego Rivera [the three most famous Mexican muralists], Michel placed Álvarez's skill with composition and imagery firmly in the context of fine art, raised her photography to the same level as painting, and praised her skill with no regard to her gender.

The University of Arizona Center for Creative Photography (CCP) (#70, March 2022) houses a collection of Bravo's photographs. The CCP link is here: <https://ccp.arizona.edu/> . They have an online gallery of hundreds of their collected photographers, including Bravo. Here is the link to the CCP's online archive of 176 of Bravo's images: <http://ccp-emuseum.catnet.arizona.edu/view/people/asitem/A/12?t:state:flow=9461d591-9b2a-44e3-b2d9-68068e9596f5>. Note that each image has an "ENLARGE IMAGE" button.

Here are excerpts from the text on the CCP page for her:

[She and her photographer husband, Manuel Álvarez Bravo (future article)] played a vital role in the cultural circle that included artists Diego Rivera, Frida Kahlo, Rufino Tamayo, Maria Izquierdo, and David Alfaro Siqueiros.

[She photographed] "the life I found before me." She traveled throughout Mexico photographing people in everyday circumstances with honesty and respect. Her assured formal aesthetic, which often bordered on the abstract, included strong compositional elements, crisp details, and the play of light and shadow on surfaces.

Most often Alvarez Bravo eschewed posing subjects or staging situations. Instead, she moved amongst the people along cluttered streets, observing them at work, in the marketplace, and at leisure, waiting for opportunities to capture informal moments in carefully composed scenes. Her keen eye produced stirring and expressive images of Mexican life with a contemporary sensibility that places her among the renowned photographic interpreters of that country in the modern period: Edward Weston [#1, Oct. 2012], Paul Strand [#13, April 2014], Tina Modotti [#63, Jul/Aug 2021], and Manuel Alvarez Bravo.

Bravo was the first prominent woman Mexican photographer. (I surmise that Graciela Iturbide (#59, March 2021), 39 years younger, stood on her shoulders.) Furthermore, Bravo was in the inner circle of fine arts in Mexico, not just photography. As noted above, she and Freida Kahlo were lifelong close friends (and even wore their hair similarly).

Now here are several of her images that strike my interest:

Entierro en Yalalag [Burial in Yalalag], 1946.



This image appeared in The Family of Man exhibition at the NYC Museum of Modern Art in 1955.

El baño, 1930s.



This translates as “bathroom,” but I think it is a public bath or swimming center.

De generación en generación [From generation to generation], ca. 1950.



Careful composition, but a candid shot.

El ruego [Prayer], 1946.



This also translates as entreaty or begging.

Mujeres de Papantla [Women of Papantla], 1940s.



Attention to regional people.

Untitled, no date.



Evidently a traditional drama.

Unos suben y otros bajan [Some go up and some go down], ca. 1940.



I wonder if this was posed—no way to tell.

Freida Kahlo, ca. 1945.



Diego Rivera, 1950s.



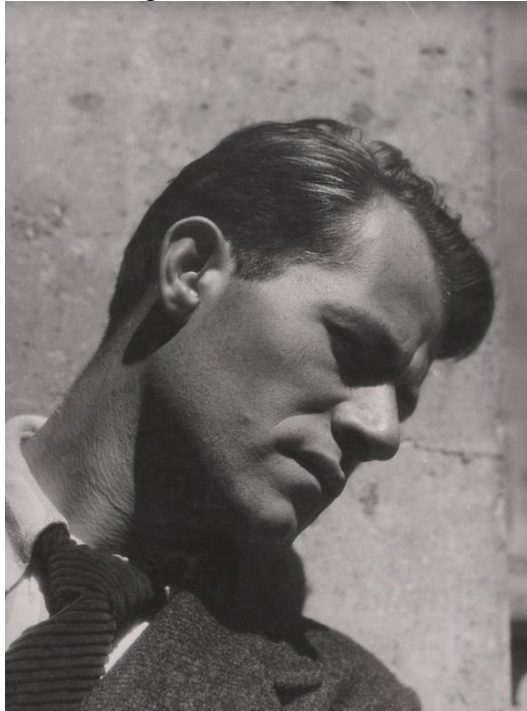
Bravo shot portraits of the notables of Mexico, many her friends.

David Alfaro Siqueiros, ca. 1965.



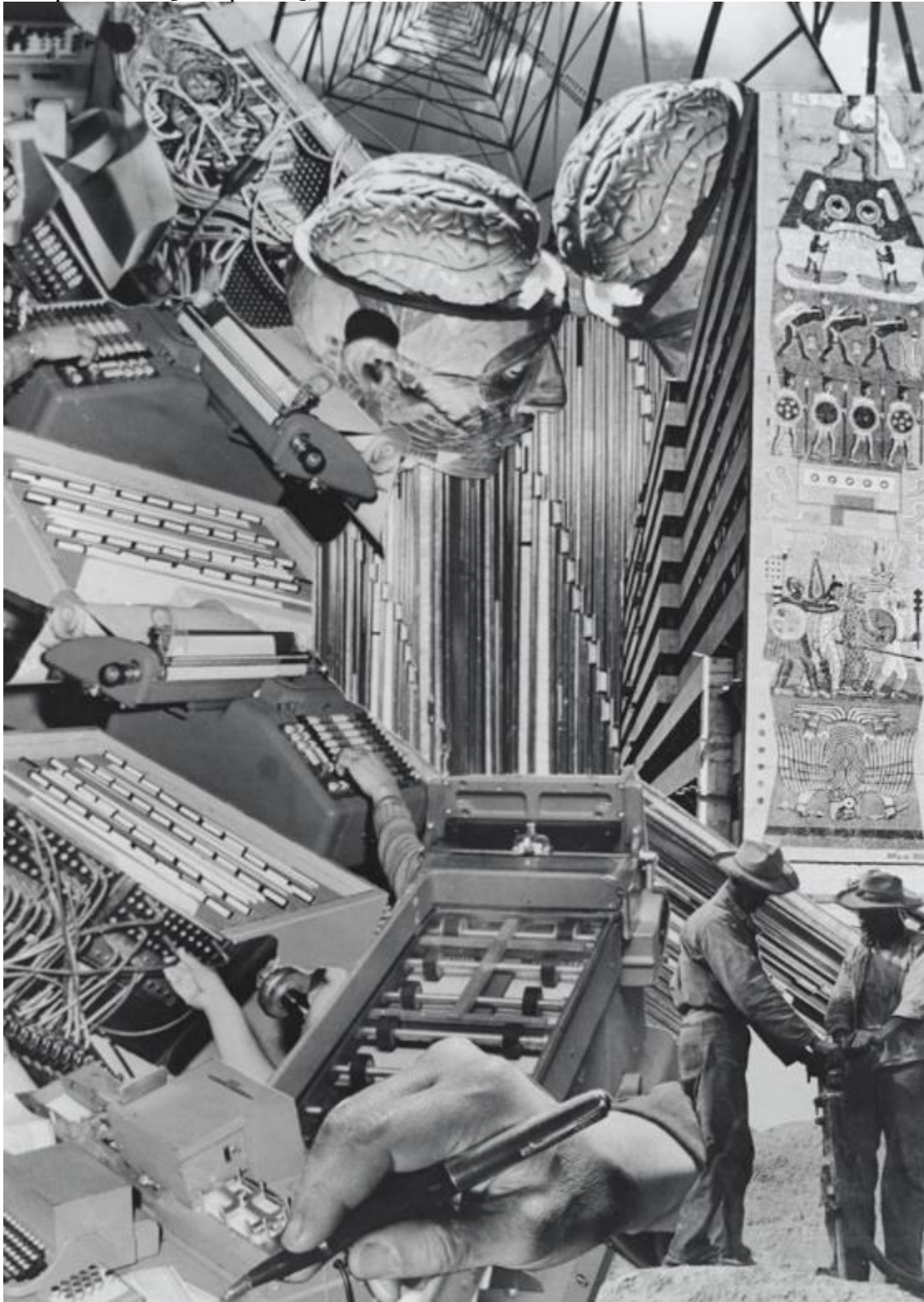
Along with Diego Rivera and José Clemente Orozco, he was one of The three most famous of the “Mexican muralists.”

Pierre Verger, ca. 1950.



Photographer and self-taught African diaspora ethnographer.

Computadora I [Computer I], ca. 1954.



Bravo made a number of photomontages, generally commenting on contemporary social issues. These are, I think, in the same genre as the great Mexican murals of her time.