

A Resounding Bravo! for Veteran Lensman

VISUAL ARTS

Revelaciones: The Art of Manuel Alvarez Bravo

At Presentation House until May 5

• BY ALEX WATERHOUSE-HAYWARD

Eighty-nine-year-old Manuel Alvarez Bravo was to have attended the opening of his local show *Revelaciones*, but his doctor advised against it. So Don Manuel never got to enjoy the greys, the occasional blue, or our myriad varieties of green. He didn't see the cold cyan of Vancouver light in winter.

However, in his show's 113 black-and-white photographs, I saw the warm, rich ochres and browns of the Sierra Madre in dry season. I saw the after-the-rains blue and green. Colours in Mexico aren't bothered by complexity of tones. They are green, or blue, or red. They are.

So, too, are the shadows. Stepping back a few paces, the shades of grey in the photographs disappear into the blacks. The blacks and pure whites reveal and hide. The searing Mexican sun reveals texture in the bleached cotton skirt of Bravo's well-known *Daughter of the Dancers* (1933). Could the young girl (her bare feet are flirting, as unlikely as that might seem) be kissing her lover hidden within the dark round window? The same light makes a pair of guardian angel statues riding in a truck shimmer. Are they a mirage? The abrupt shadow cutting the upper bodies of the patrons of the small restaurant in *The Crouched Ones* (1934) does not conceal the lingering aroma of birria and *carne en chile pasilla con arroz* they may be eating.

Bravo's journey into absolutes may have begun in 1910 when as an eight-year-old he heard the cannon of the Mexican Revolution and saw his first dead man at the foot of the Ajusco volcano. The dead man reappears in Bravo's *Striking Worker, Assassinated* (1934). Blood gushing out of his wounds, staining the parched dust like a shadow, could almost nourish the thirsty flowers of the nearby photograph *Blooming Gravesite* (1937).

Although Bravo never met American photographer Edward Weston, who lived on Veracruz Street in Mexico City in the early '20s, Weston was a pivotal inspiration. Bravo was befriended by Weston's favourite model, friend, and photographer, Tina Modotti, before she was expelled from Mexico in 1930 because of her leftist ideas, and she urged Bravo to send his portfolio to Weston, who was then living in California. Weston's very favourable written reply made Bravo drop his government accounting job to become a photographer. Bravo inherited Modotti's 8x10 Graflex and her job at *Mexican Folkways* magazine.

In the '30s he photographed all the great Mexican muralists—Diego Rivera, José Clemente Orozco, David Alfaro Siqueiros, Rufino Tamayo. In most of these portraits, as in the more recent ones of Mexican writers Carlos Fuentes and Octavio Paz, their eyes glance away from the camera. "I don't want to intrude. I photograph them where they are," Bravo says, evoking his photograph of Trotsky in his garden in the old neighbourhood of Coyoacan. "I photograph them as they are." By contrast, it is strange how Frida Kahlo—protofeminist, painter, and wife of Diego



Mexican photographer Manuel Alvarez Bravo conveys the essence of flirtation in his 1933 *Daughter of the Dancers*. But not all of his images are as light-hearted.

Rivera—stares into the camera and dares us not to notice her moustache.

Much has been written on how Bravo photographed the French surrealist André Breton in 1938 and was influenced by the surrealist movement. Yet Bravo had taken his bizarre but funny flopped image *Optic Parabola* (1931) years before the razor sliced through the eye in Luis Bunuel's and Salvador Dali's seminal *Un Chien Andalou*.

While Bravo's friend Henri Cartier Bresson has abandoned his photographic search for the "decisive moment" in order to paint, Bravo still takes photographs with undiminished passion. Many of his latest are nudes, like the 1970 *Temptations at Antonio's House*. The nude woman hiding her frank gaze under a clothesline is confrontational, where Bravo's famous *Good Reputation Sleeping* (1938) is not. She is casually resting her back on a blanket, her thighs wrapped in gauze while surrounded by prickly cacti. (In Mexico City, *Good Reputation*, or *La Buena Fama*, is often the name of a hardware store.)

Bravo says, in his clear and deceptively simple Spanish, "*No se puede dar nada que no se tenga*." Roughly translated, he means that the photographer must constantly learn in order to give. That Bravo has so much more yet to give is devastatingly obvious in his elegant and erotic faceless nude *The Black Cloth* (1986). By the way the woman holds her hand there is no doubt that she is striking, proud, and confident. The odd puffy cloud on the top left is askew with the rigorously formal black cloth. There is texture in the black. Bravo is still searching in the shadows. ■

Now!

ARTS

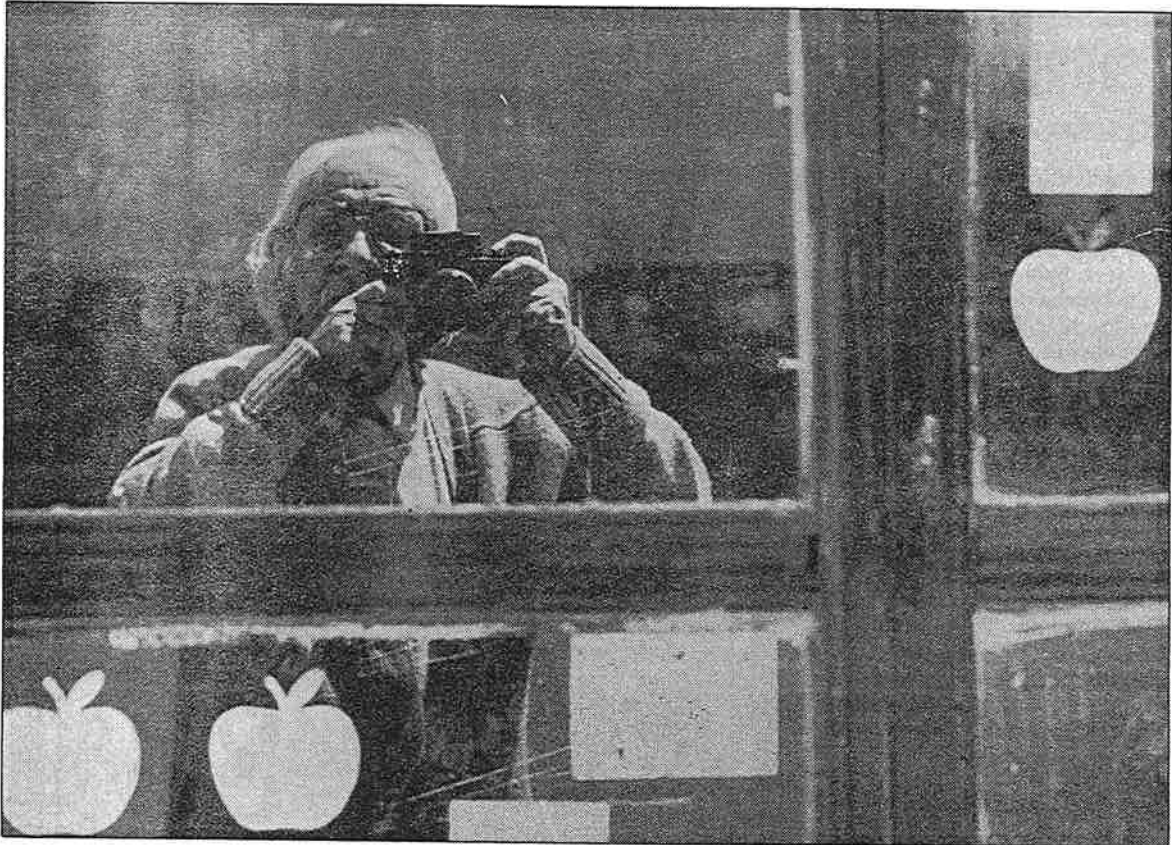


Photo Manuel Alvarez Bravo

OVER SIXTY YEARS of work is included in the Alvarez Bravo exhibit at the Presentation House Gallery. This self-portrait (*autorretrato*) was taken in 1984.

Que viva Bravo!

A Review: *Revelaciones* by Manuel Alvarez Bravo at Presentation House, 333 Chesterfield Ave., March 22-May 5. Wed-Sun: 12-5, Thurs: 12-9.

RAW MEAT molded into the form of a woman's dress on a mannequin, currently on show at the National Gallery in Ottawa, has upset a couple of unimaginative local aldermen who have called the piece disgusting.

Nudity in works of art is more often the offending feature, violence the other. Serious art, however, is frequently disturbing. The photography of Manuel Alvarez Bravo is no exception.

Although the black-and-white pictures of this celebrated 89-year-old Mexican photographer sometimes involve nudity and violence, they are much more than just troubling documentary images.

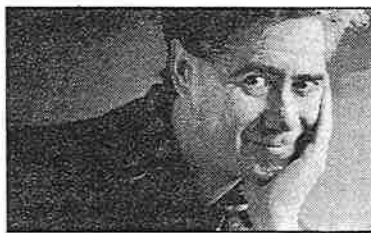
His motifs all tend to arise from a central mythical intent, poetically rather than didactically evoked.

Whether photographing the nude, a brutal killing, a stray dog, a sleeping boy, or a broken gate, Bravo manages to suggest, in the subtlest of ways, a metaphysical dimension within which the pictured figure is unmistakably set.

He achieves this effect principally by unhooking his subject matter from its strictly human context.

In *Good Reputation Sleeping*, for example, he photographs a beautiful, young, naked woman asleep on hand-woven fabric.

Bandages are wrapped around



Archie Graham

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her hips and ankles. The sense of the vulnerability of her exposed breasts and genitals, however, is heightened to a pitch by the threatening proximity of small thorny cacti that look like hand-grenades fashioned by nature.

The erotic quality of this photo is undeniable.

But the young woman is oblivious to the intense sexual power she evokes, the cacti functioning as a viable illustration of its menacing presence.

She looks as if she has been sleeping peacefully for centuries and as if she is completely impervious to the effects of the passion

she arouses. This is a photo of two divergent life-forces, one purely human, the other a strange, trans-personal power.

Likewise in *Striking Worker Assassinated*, Bravo strips immediate history from the image of a bloodied young man who was shot in the back of the head in 1934.

In death, he expresses neither pain nor pleasure. His eyes are open and he has an ethereally serene look on his face.

The blood smeared across his cheeks is like the painted mask of an ancient warrior or a victim of tribal sacrifice. But there is no human tragedy here. The event has been transposed to a meta-physical plane in which such tragedy is transcended.

In a sense, Bravo is not of this world. He is not moved by sentimentality, anger or disgust. Neither is he moved by compassion. His works situate human history in a context that lies beyond the power of the human will to control.

Here is an art exhibition, then, that clearly demonstrates why it is so important to try to look beyond what appears to be merely offensive or shocking imagery.

Presentation House staff have mounted a very fine show by one of the world's leading photographers, a show that makes us think about our place in the scheme of things we call life.