

**MANUEL ÁLVAREZ BRAVO:  
PHOTOPOETRY**

**12 JUL - 8 SEP 2019**

**THE  
PHOTOGRAPHERS'  
GALLERY**



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Con su hijo | With her son, 1950s

Print Sales presents a selection of rare platinum and silver gelatin prints by the great modernist Mexican photographer, **Manuel Álvarez Bravo** (b. Mexico City, 1902-2002).

Initially self-taught, Álvarez Bravo first picked up a camera as a teenager while working at a government job. His early style was influenced by studying international photographic journals particularly looking at the work of European artists such as Edward Weston and Tina Modotti both of whom he later met. Through them, he was introduced to Mexico's avant-garde scene, including Diego Rivera and Frida Kahlo. His work increasingly began to reflect the influence of homegrown movements such as the Mexican Muralists as well as an interest in identity politics. By the mid 1930s, Álvarez Bravo was being exhibited alongside contemporaries Henri-Cartier Bresson and Walker Evans and shown in such seminal group exhibitions as **Twenty Centuries of Mexican Art** (Museum of Modern Art, New York, 1940), and the worldwide tour of Edward Steichen's *Family of Man* in 1955.

Álvarez Bravo's sublimely lyrical, yet unsentimentalised images of his beloved Mexico and its people, and his exceptional ability to transform the rituals of everyday life into something fantastical and monumental, have established him as one of the most important figures in 20th century Latin American Photography. *Photopoetry* draws on images from the comprehensive book of the same title (Thames and Hudson, 2008) which celebrate the acuity of his eye and his talent for capturing the world around him with evident tenderness and respect for his homeland.

# BIOGRAPHY

## Selected Solo Exhibitions In Mexico & the US:

- Sociedad de Arte Moderno, Mexico (1945)
- Salón de la Plástica Mexicana, Mexico (1957)
- Palacio de Bellas Artes, Mexico (1968 and 1972)
- Museo de Arte Moderno (retrospective), Mexico (1978)
- Centro Cultural Arte Contemporáneo, Mexico (1989)
- Museo Nacional de Arte (centennial exhibition), Mexico (2002)
- Pasadena Art Museum and Museum of Modern Art, New York (1971)
- The Corcoran Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C (1978)
- Institute for Contemporary Photography, New York (1987))
- Museum of Photographic Arts, San Diego California, travelling in the United States (1990)
- Museum of Modern Art (retrospective), New York (1997)
- J. Paul Getty Museum (retrospective), Los Angeles (2001)
- Biblioteca Nacional, Madrid (1985)
- Musée d'Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris (1986)
- Musée de l'Élysée, Lausanne (1992)
- Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía, Madrid (1996)
- Israel Museum, Jerusalem (1983)
- Imperial Palace, Beijing (1994)
- Museum of Photographic Arts (MoPA), Kiyosato, Japan (1997)
- Art Museum, Macao (2002) and several european countries.

## Selected Group Exhibitions:

- Museo del Palacio de Bellas Artes, Mexico, with Henri Cartier-Bresson (1935)
- Julien Levy Gallery, New York, with Henri Cartier-Bresson and Walker Evans (Documentary and Anti-Graphic, 1935)
- Galerie Renou et Colle, París: exhibition organized by André Breton (Mexique, 1939)
- Museum of Modern Art, New York: Twenty Centuries of Mexican Art (1940), The Family of Man(1955), plus 16 group exhibitions at the same Museum
- Philadelphia Museum of Art: Mexican Art Today (1943)
- Bibliothèque Nationale de Paris: Salon International du Portrait Photographique (1961)
- National Gallery of Canada, Photography in the Twentieth Century (1967)
- Rencontres Internationales de la Photographie, Arles, France avec Aaron Siskind, Henri Cartier-Bresson and André Kertész (1979 and 1981)
- Photography in the Twentieth Century; Seibu Museum of Art, Tokyo, 1982
- Espíritus arbóreos: Manuel Álvarez Bravo y Octavio Paz, Festival Internacional Cervantino, Museo del Pueblo, Guanajuato (1998) and Fundación Octavio Paz, Mexico City (1999)
- Fondation Henri Cartier-Bresson, Paris, with Henri Cartier-Bresson and Walker Evans (Documentary and Anti-Graphic, 2004)

## Selected Monographs:

- *Manuel Álvarez Bravo: Photopoetry* (Thames & Hudson, London, 2008)
- Urbajtel, Colette; *Manuel Álvarez Bravo* (Tianguis, Céros/Librairie Serge Plantureux, Paris, 2006)
- Fuentes, Carlos, *Nudes: the Blue House, the photographs of Manuel Álvarez Bravo*, ed. Ariadne Kimberly Huque ed. (Distributed Art Publishers, Inc., 2002)
- Hopkinson, Amanda, *Manuel Álvarez Bravo* (Phaidon, New York, 2002)
- *Manuel Álvarez Bravo: Cien años, cien días* (Turner Publicaciones, SL, Mexico, 2002)

## FURTHER READING

THE GUARDIAN, 22 OCT 2002

# The Guardian

Culture

## Manuel Alvarez Bravo

**Pioneering Mexican photographer and friend of the surrealists**

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Amanda Hopkinson

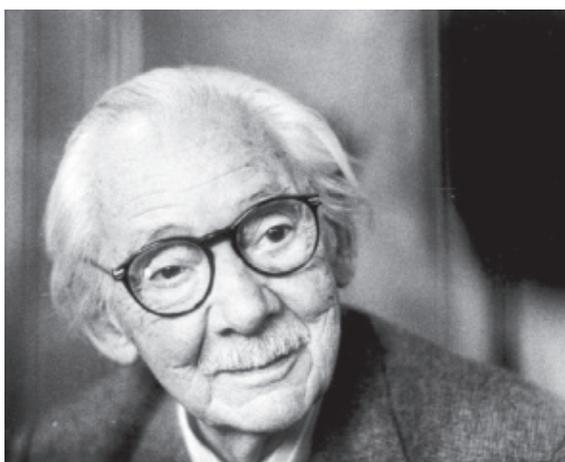
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Known as the “father of Mexican photography”, Manuel Alvarez Bravo, who has died aged 100, retained a powerful unity of subject and style in the work he generated over the major part of a century. Born in Mexico City, he briefly studied fine arts at the Academia de Bellas Artes, but then spent 16 years as an accountant in the civil service in the wake of the Mexican Revolution. While he later claimed economic necessity as the reason for this work, he was undoubtedly also formed by the ideas of the revolution and *mejicanismo*. Then, too, there was the mutually productive influence of revolutionary artists such as Diego Rivera, Frida Kahlo, Pablo O’Higgins and Tina Modotti, his first photographic mentor.

He attended evening classes in painting, literature and music, extending his circle of acquaintances and his fascination with pre-Columbian art and sculpture. In 1929, at Modotti’s suggestion, he sent a portfolio of images, without explanation, to the North American photographer Edward Weston. Weston replied: “I am wondering why I have been the recipient of a very fine series of photographs from you? ... no matter why I have them, I must tell you how much I am enjoying them. Sincerely they are important - and if you are a new worker, photography is fortunate in having someone with your viewpoint.” The viewpoint was described by another famous North American, Paul Strand, as “rooted firmly in his love and compassionate understanding of his own country, its people, their problems and their needs.”

The first pictures to gain a wider currency were, indicatively enough, Weston’s own favourite of a boy urinating into a basin and that of a striking worker shot on a demonstration (taken with a borrowed camera). These explored the polarities of what Alvarez Bravo described as “essence over accident”. Such concepts were seminal in his early experiments of the 1920s, photographing the rural and industrial sites he visited for his job, often focusing on the spark from a blowtorch or a pile of chippings shadowed on a wall.

This combination of intellectual rigour with fresh subject matter inevitably appealed to French surrealists busily “discovering” Mexico in the 1930s. Following his first one-man show at the Galeria Posada in 1932, Alvarez Bravo was shown alongside Cartier Bresson in the Bellas Artes. In 1938, André Breton followed, declaring Alvarez Bravo a “natural surrealist”. Images such as the reversed-out *Parabola Optica* (1931), with its succession of reflected eyes in an optician’s shopfront, and *Instrumental* (1931), a geometric composition of what turns out to be nuts and spanners, were enthusiastically hailed.



More than 40 solo and international group showings followed. There were also books produced with authors such as Luis Cardoza y Aragon, Octavio Paz, Yves Bonnefoy, and with Diego Rivera, who called his work “profound and discreet poetry”.

Alvarez Bravo claimed that he paid as much attention to his captions as to his images. Many of his captions are tinged with sadness as well as humour: a ragged boy tugging along a few bundles of papers on a palette is *The Boy Of Stories* (1964); *The Ladder Of Ladders* (1932) is a flight of children’s coffins in a carpentry workshop; *Landscape And Gallop* returns to a favourite subject, a fairground horse against the backdrop of an imaginary countryside.

## FURTHER READING CONT.

**THE GUARDIAN, 22 OCT 2002**

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In his later years, he elaborated on his preoccupation with eternity. To him this meant the dual images of pre-Columbian gods surfacing as Sticks And Stones and The Guest For Venus, the archetype of another duality, as mother and lover. His own favoured image, which he kept on his desk, was the classic Portrait Of Eternity, taken in 1935. It shows a young woman gazing into a mirror, partly shrouded by her swooping hair, her Mexican shawl and an engulfing shadow, pierced only by a triangle of light. For all the many, many women, clothed and unclothed, he was to photograph, this for him remained the summary, possibly because it recalled the first memory of his sister, called Luz ("light"), "who sung as she spent hours getting ready before the mirror," and the symbol of waiting woman.

In 1938, Alvarez Bravo met Breton, who included one of his images in his Paris exhibition called Mexique. Other images also appeared in the Surrealist journal *Minotaure*, although his cover image (the nude *Good Reputation Lies Sleeping*) was dropped as being too risqué.

The internationalisation of his work continued in the 1940s and 50s, both through exhibitions (such as the massive *Twenty Centuries Of Mexican Art* at the New York Museum of Modern Art in 1940, and the world-wide tour of Steichen's *Family Of Man* in 1955), and through the films he made with John Ford and Luis Buñuel.

In 1962, he married the French photographer Colette Urbachtel, and a lifelong collaboration ensued. In 1973, he offered his photographic collection to the Instituto Nacional de Bellas Artes, which acquired 400 works. He returned there this year to celebrate his 100th birthday, in the presence of the Mexican president and fellow artists and dignitaries.

Alvarez Bravo won every relevant artistic award and was made an *Officier de l'Ordre des Arts et des Lettres* by the French government in 1981. He continued working well into the 1990s, including book collaborations with Octavio Paz in *Instante Y Revelacion*, and numerous catalogues to accompany retrospectives in Mexico City, New York, Rotterdam and Paris. The most recent publications, this year, were *100 Images For 100 Years* (published in Mexico) and *Manuel Alvarez Bravo* (published here in the Phaidon 55 series).

When we first met in 1990, he at first denied any definition of either reality or eternity, but then admitted: "What matters is the instant of impact between the two. Our relationship with reality is based on the shock of our encounter with it, the shock of ideas against facts. What's curious is the lack of vocation most human beings have for reality." Through his photographs, Alvarez Bravo succeeded in somehow making that impact explicit.

He was married three times and is survived by Colette and five children.

• Manuel Alvarez Bravo, photographer, born February 4 1902; died October 19 2002 •

## ***Alvarez Bravo's 'Lens of Revelations'***

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By **BERNARD WEINRAUB** DEC. 13, 2001

Manuel Alvarez Bravo, one of the masters of modern photography and perhaps the most significant artist in Mexico today, looked around inside the J. Paul Getty Museum, where more than 100 of his photographs, spanning eight decades, are on display through Feb. 17.

"This is the first time I've left Mexico City without a camera," he said softly in Spanish, as he sat in a wheelchair.

At 99, Mr. Alvarez Bravo is one of the last of a generation of artists who directly experienced the creative ferment of post-revolutionary Mexico that drew artists and intellectuals from all over the world: Edward Weston, Sergei Eisenstein, Henri Cartier-Bresson. The Getty has mounted this exhibition, "Manuel Alvarez Bravo: Optical Parables," to celebrate his 100th birthday on Feb. 4.

"When I was a youth and picked up a camera, I had great admiration for this amazing invention," Mr. Alvarez Bravo said through a translator. "There was an incredible means of expression that this incredible technology provided."

Asked what he sought before taking a photograph, he said simply: "I don't look for anything. I discover things."

Weston Naef, the Getty's curator of photographs, said Mr. Alvarez Bravo's work was characterized by contradictions and contrasts. "On the one hand, he absorbs the influences of high modernism," he said. "On the other hand, he has an instinctive interest in the commonplace occurrences unique to Mexico." Mr. Naef also called Mr. Alvarez Bravo highly unusual "because he stayed in his homeland and became one of the first photographers to be completely committed to a body of work that had its grounding in the soil from which he came."

He added: "Photography is an art that often leads you to travel in order to take pictures. For Alvarez Bravo, almost all of his greatest pictures were made within 100 miles of his home."

The works on display range from the mysteriously dreamy to cool documentaries. They are strikingly different: some capture the contradictions between urban life and personal solitude; others explore surrealist themes of death and the erotic; still others explore perceptions of reality and the blurring of the line between photographer and subject. Octavio Paz, the Mexican poet, once described Mr. Alvarez Bravo's camera as a "lens of revelations."

One of the most famous works in the show is "Striking Worker Murdered" (1934). While making a film with Eisenstein in Tihuanatepec, Mr. Alvarez Bravo heard what he thought were fireworks at a nearby train station. Walking over, he discovered that the noises were gunshots during a demonstration at the station by striking sugar mill workers. The workers' leader had just been killed. With two frames left in his camera, Mr. Alvarez Bravo created a close-up of the dead man -- for this artist, a rare photojournalistic image.

But for art scholars, the photograph resonates with complexity. The dignified and noble-looking young man lies on the ground, his eyes open as if he were still alive and thinking. The triangular shape of a flag in the background is echoed by the triangle formed by the man's bent arm. And the arm itself reaches toward the viewer as if it were about to form a plea or perhaps a fist, like those painted by David Alfaro Siqueiros and other Mexican muralists of the period.

## FURTHER READING

NEW YORK TIMES, 13 DEC 2001

# The New York Times

Other well-known works in the show include "Daydreaming" (1931), in which Mr. Alvarez Bravo, on a visit to the courtyard of the house in which he grew up in Mexico, chanced upon a beautiful young girl immersed in a reverie. The dark grays of the photograph, the sunlight lingering on the girl's shoulder, the serpentine lines of her body, the weathered state of the building and the listlessness of the scene have been characterized by art scholars as reflecting everything from the social conditions of women at the time to the holy images of a church painting to the contrast between the harshness of the architecture -- and the surrounding life -- and the yearning of the girl.



*El ensueno | The daydream, 1931*

subject is Mexico, but he is also coming out of an international cosmopolitan tradition of modernist photography and modernism in general."

"Although the pictures are beautiful," she added, "he's not setting out to make things that look good."

At the Getty, Mr. Alvarez Bravo said he was deeply influenced by Eugène Atget, the idiosyncratic French photographer whose work reflected the changing architectural, social and political mood of Paris in the early 1900's. As a result, Mr. Alvarez Bravo became fascinated, especially in the 1930's and 40's, by street scenes, storefronts, signs and vendors. He photographed those subjects against a backdrop of a rapidly changing Mexico City, caught between modernity and the reminders of indigenous civilizations. A striking example is "Kiln Number Three," made from a 1957 negative. In this photograph, Mr. Tejada said, the kilns used for the production of bricks in the Mexican countryside suggest the same violent destruction that took place in the New World encounter between Spanish colonizers and the native civilizations of Mexico.

Mr. Alvarez Bravo's work, Mr. Tejada said, cannot be isolated from that of others who helped stir Mexico City's creative ferment in the 1920's and 30's: Weston and his lover and protégé, Tina Modotti, as well as the photographers Paul Strand and Cartier-Bresson and filmmakers like Eisenstein and artists like Diego Rivera.

Also on display is "The Crouched Ones" (1834), in which five seated men, their backs toward the photographer and their heads obliterated in darkness, are seated in a comedor, a modest storefront cafe. The title is ambiguous. The men are sitting, not crouching. There are two shoeshine boxes at their feet. Scholarly interpretations of the photograph have ranged from a commentary about workers who appear almost chained to their seats to an exploration of visual playfulness, as the viewer cannot see the men's faces or what they are eating.

Although there have been previous exhibitions of Mr. Alvarez Bravo's work, notably one at the Museum of Modern Art in 1997, this show is different. "The theme we wanted to focus on, which has not been addressed sufficiently in previous exhibitions and publications, was the way he draws the act of viewing into his photographs," said Mikka Gee Conway, co-curator of the show with Roberto Tejada, who teaches art theory at the State University of New York at Buffalo and is a specialist in the works of Mr. Alvarez Bravo.

"Alvarez Bravo is very canny about the way he looks at the world," Ms. Conway said. "His pictures are often very much about how photographs, how the eye works, how you perceive things visually. His

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NEW YORK TIMES, 13 DEC 2001

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But unlike Rivera or Modotti, Mr. Alvarez Bravo was never a Marxist or overtly political. Instead, he took to the streets to photograph everyday objects and ordinary situations in a way that allowed unexpected moods and stories to unfold. Mr. Tejada said the Alvarez Bravo photographs represented a concise vision of Mexico as an actual and symbolic landscape. He added that the photographer's subjects -- mostly working-class and middle-class Mexicans -- were locked in a dream world of "longing, solitude, candor and foreboding."

The Getty show comprises photographs from the museum's holdings, as well as from the collection of Daniel Greenberg, a Los Angeles businessman, and his wife, Susan Steinhauser, a lawyer.

Mr. Alvarez Bravo himself has never offered interpretations of his work. He has suggested that viewers ask his photographs, not him, what they mean. Over the years, he has told students: "Shoot what you see, not what you think. A photographer's philosophy should be not to have one."



*La Beuna Fama Durmiendo | The Good Reputation Sleeping, 1938-39*

One of his most puzzling and most analyzed photographs was created in 1939 when the writer André Breton asked Mr. Alvarez Bravo to take part in a surrealist exhibition at a Mexico City gallery. The photographer obliged him with "The Good Reputation Sleeping," a portrait of a nude woman partially wrapped in bandages and lying on a blanket surrounded by cactus buds. The triptych print, which is in the Getty show, has been called confounding and mysterious by curators and art historians.

Mr. Alvarez Bravo has said that he is not sure what inspired the photograph. "You bring your accumulated life to the moment that something sparks you to make an image," he said in an interview years ago. "Everything influences you. And it's all good."

Now he barely lifts a camera anymore. When asked at the Getty if he still took photographs, he replied, "Very little, very little." Mr. Alvarez Bravo was asked his opinion of digital photographs. "It's not a bad thing," he said, "as long as it's a means to an end." •

## ***IN THE STUDIO WITH: Manuel Alvarez Bravo; Mexican Myth, Master of Images***

By **TIM GOLDEN** DEC. 16, 1993

IN the span of a long block, the narrow little street where the celebrated Mexican photographer Manuel Alvarez Bravo works darts away and cuts back, opens and nearly closes half a dozen times.

And wherever there is enough space, people are busy at something: two stubby legs stick out from beneath a parked pickup truck; a housekeeper and her daughter shift their grocery bags on the paving stones preparing for the next lurch forward; a beer-delivery van squirms out of a tight spot, waved on in various directions by an assortment of neighborhood volunteers.

Then one comes to an aquarelle blue wall and an unmarked metal door that opens onto a patio where at first there seems to be no noise or movement at all. It takes a moment to hear the strains of Bach seeping from one of the studio's rooms; another to catch the soft voice of Mr. Alvarez Bravo chatting with one of his disciples. The maestro, as they call him, is working today, too, though it is not always possible to tell where the work ends and other things begin.

"What am I supposed to do?" he asks, chewing on the notion that the day might offer him something other than just what he does. "I could sit around here and take the sun. That would be terrible! I mean, I couldn't. In the mornings, I read the newspaper headlines -- not the articles -- and then to work. But not exactly to 'work,' as you put it, but to do things. Because I cannot say that I work, exactly. It is part of my life to take photographs, to develop. It is like eating. It is a spontaneous thing."

As Mr. Alvarez Bravo approaches his 92d birthday, in February, he has begun to move more slowly around the dusty studio that everyone calls the Blue House. He still dresses stylishly in cardigans and corduroys and matching wingtips, his longish white hair combed back, but those touches hint at the attentions of his wife, Colette Urbajtel de Alvarez.

Words slip from his sentences, and he has to rummage for a good while when he decides he must find a favorite record of classical music or excavate an etching from the piles of Goya and Durer and the work of other masters he keeps around. And yet, one gets the feeling that the world began to hold still for Mr. Alvarez Bravo a long time ago.

He remains, without any particular rivals, the most renowned of Mexico's photographers, arguably the greatest that Latin America has produced. In a country that loves to mythicize its best artists, he is one of the few still alive with a place in the Modernist pantheon, which includes men like the late painter Rufino Tamayo, the late architect Luis Barragan and the poet Octavio Paz. Among photographers, perhaps only his old friend Henri Cartier-Bresson, living in Paris at the age of 85, enjoys the same sort of acclaim in his homeland.

After decades in which Mr. Alvarez Bravo was relatively unknown beyond Mexico and the world of photography, recent years have brought a flurry of retrospective exhibitions and higher prices for his vintage prints (one sold at auction this fall for \$10,000). But there are still more obvious measures of his importance.

Photography may have exploded in a thousand directions elsewhere in the world, but there are echoes of

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NEW YORK TIMES, 16 DEC 1993

# The New York Times

Mr. Alvarez Bravo's penetrating, sometimes surrealistic lens in the Mexico City newspapers almost every morning. It is as though a search party of Mexican photographers had stopped at the frontiers of post-modernism, jettisoned its Kodachrome, and decided to turn back to the place that Mr. Alvarez Bravo began to document in the late 1920's.

That place has changed physically, though, and it is changing now more abruptly than it ever has. Mr. Alvarez Bravo's photographs have always concentrated on his poorest and most ordinary countrymen, fathoming an indigenous core to things colonial or modern. The crumbling frame of an abandoned home evokes ruins far more ancient; a boy drinking at a fountain recalls first the political thirsts of the poor, then the Mayan god of rain; the peaceful image of a striking worker's bloodied corpse lifts the death from its political context and sets it in another, more timeless one.



*Sed publica* | *Public Thirst*, 1934-35

Now, the country with which Mr. Alvarez Bravo came of age in the decades after the 1910 Revolution seems at times to be disappearing under splashy billboards and Pizza Huts and Bart Simpson T-shirts. The colonial neighborhoods around his home in Coyoacan section of the Mexican capital have been forgiven some of the upheaval. But with so much smog, Mr. Alvarez Bravo suspects, even the city's light may have changed.

"It is a thing that has no remedy," he says of the changes, declining one of the several opportunities that a visitor offers him one morning to indulge in a bit of nostalgia. "Why should you resist that force, which comes not only from the United States but from the entire artistic past?"

Like his photographs, Mr. Alvarez Bravo seems to invite and resist interpretation at the same time; for someone who does not know him well, it is often difficult to tell which response he means to suggest. In an earlier conversation, he grumbled something about things always changing yet staying the same. Today, though, the idea excites him and behind the very clean lenses of his spectacles, the look in his eyes sharpens.

"The art that is made in Mexico is not some sort of pre-Hispanic art, it is an art of the present," he says, rubbing the thought softly in one of his elegant, almost translucent hands. "What do you read? You read Cervantes, Dostoevsky, so many different things. The important thing is not one influence or another, but having the capacity to channel those influences into an individuality. If one is sincere in one's work, that individuality comes.

"A painter can say he is doing a Mexican work. How can something be only Mexican? How? When? The good thing that has happened in Mexico, I think, is that the acquired influences have been absorbed in more interesting ways than in other places."

That Mr. Alvarez Bravo's own early influences have contributed to his mythicization seems to bother him, though he doesn't quite say so. He speaks fondly of playing at revolution as a boy in the village Tlalpan, now a suburb of the capital, of seeing the dead bodies and the peasant soldiers of Emiliano Zapata who would bring their horses by his school. But when he is asked about the friends he made in the 1920's and 30's, men like the muralist painters Diego Rivera and Jose Clemente Orozco, the surrealist Andre Breton

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**NEW YORK TIMES, 16 DEC 1993**

**The New York Times**

and the film director Sergei Eisenstein, he says: "Friendship is something very special, very delicate. They were my teachers."

In 1927, Mr. Alvarez Bravo was newly married to his childhood love, the first of his three wives, a woman who would herself become famous as the photographer Lola Alvarez Bravo, and earning his living as a Treasury Department clerk in the poor southern state of Oaxaca, when he met the Italian-born actress Tina Modotti. Miss Modotti, who was then working as a photographer for the magazine *Mexican Folkways*, sent some of his early photographs to her lover, the American photographer Edward Weston. His praise of the work was vital encouragement, Mr. Alvarez Bravo has said.

When Miss Modotti was deported from Mexico in 1930 because of her Communist political activities, Mr. Alvarez Bravo bought some of her cameras (one of which had belonged to Mr. Weston) and inherited her job. He was later commissioned to take portraits of the muralist painters, hired by Eisenstein as a cameraman on his film "Que Viva Mexico!" and invited to show his photographs at the Julien Levy Gallery in New York with Cartier-Bresson and Walker Evans.

Other Mexicans may remain endlessly obsessed with those moments of renaissance and reflected avant-garde; Mr. Alvarez Bravo seems to have grown tired of talking about it. He misses more the countryside he explored as a younger man, the Indian villages where he could borrow a horse from one farmer and drop it off with another, the large-format view cameras with which he would spend hours, looking and waiting, before shooting a single frame.

"When you work with 35 millimeter, of course you have to finish the roll," he complains. "There are 36 exposures. As much as you convince yourself when you go to the countryside -- 'I'm going to take very little' -- what you shoot is not the same. It is not something that brings you closer, but a mechanicalness. You can move yourself aside; there is not that same relationship with the model."

Mr. Alvarez Bravo works almost entirely in his studio now, photographing nudes. He smiles at this like a boy: it's not a bad job, he says. But if his latest work at times appears untouched by the world beyond his studio, he is not indifferent to it.

"The countryside, the daily life of the street is so much richer than doing portraits, than doing nudes," he says. "Sometimes I go out and I only take one roll, and when it is finished, you see these precious things. That happens the same with the big cameras and with the little automatic ones."

Before she died on July 31 at the age of 86, Lola Alvarez Bravo told an interviewer, "I have no love for life; I think every day about death." Her former husband and teacher, whose work has delved constantly into the Mexicans' particular relationship with death, speaks as though the end of his life will be nothing more than that.

Was there anything special about turning 90, he was asked after that birthday? "They celebrated it," he answered. "And I was there."

Suddenly addressing his visitor with the formal Spanish term "usted," he said: "From the time I was a boy we have played with death. You see all those little skeleton toys we have; it is a custom we have always had. Maybe because of that, one does not insist much in thinking about it."

For many years, Mr. Alvarez Bravo used to summarize the philosophy of his method on a piece of paper tacked above the developing pans in his darkroom. "Hay tiempo," it read, "There is time."

When asked, he can't remember exactly what happened to the manifesto. He thinks it is back in the house, just up and across the crooked street from the blue wall of his studio. He isn't sure. But he smiles as he says this, and his meaning seems obvious: There is no longer any need for such reminders. •