Manuel Alvarez Bravo

Author
Álvarez Bravo, Manuel, 1902-2002

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1971

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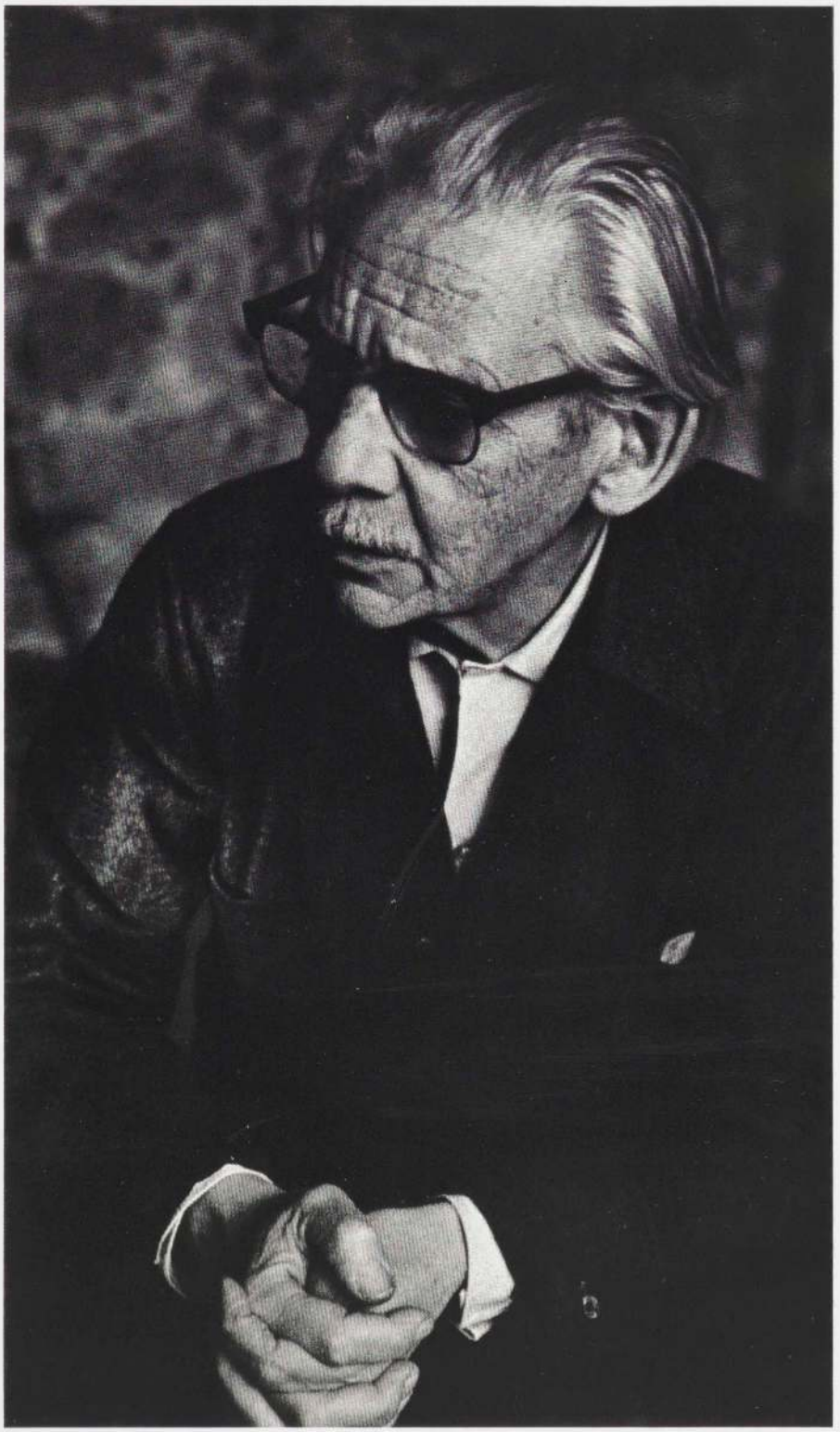
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ALVAREZ BRAVO,
MANUEL

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MANUEL ALVAREZ BRAVO

"Alvarez Bravo has preferred photography to painting. It is possible that he may be right. In his work he arrives at conclusions which before him nobody in Mexico dared to imagine."

Diego Rivera, 1930



MANUEL ALVAREZ BRAVO

FRED R. PARKER

PASADENA ART MUSEUM

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The unique importance of Manuel Alvarez Bravo's work was recognized in the late Twenties soon after he began his photographic career by his artistic peers, Tina Modotti, Diego Rivera and Edward Weston. His remoteness from the established art centers of the world and his personal humility, however, have prevented the recognition his work deserves. Today it still remains, after forty years, localized and obscure. The primary intent of this exhibition, his first major show in the United States, and the accompanying book, is to bring Alvarez Bravo's work to the attention of the wide public it deserves.

I first discovered Alvarez Bravo's photography while working on a fellowship at the George Eastman House in the summer of 1968. Since that initial encounter, the world of Manuel Alvarez Bravo has progressively become a part of my own. My involvement with his world magnifies the deep gratitude I wish to express to those who have assisted in this project:

To Mr. Nathan Lyons and Mr. Todd Walker for pointing the way and providing the initial encouragement.

To Señora Kathleen Sobrado, Todd Walker's daughter, for her immense assistance as interpreter and hostess during my visits with Alvarez Bravo in Mexico City.

To Mr. Shirley C. Burden and the Florence V. Burden Foundation for their encouragement and generosity in providing funds to purchase the photographs for the Permanent Collection of the Pasadena Art Museum.

For her extremely efficient assistance with research and her intelligent translations from Spanish and French, special thanks must be made to Yolanda Hershey, Research Curator of the Pasadena Art Museum.

I wish to express additional thanks for their encouragement and assistance to: Mr. John Szarkowski, Mr. Peter Bunnell and Anne Tucker Cohn of The Museum of Modern Art; Mr. Tom Barrow of the George Eastman House; Miss Marie Czach of the Chicago Art Institute; Monsieur Jean-Claude Lemagny of the Bibliothèque Nationale, Paris; Monsieur Jean Keim, Paris, and Mr. Paul Strand.

And finally, my deepest gratitude must go to Señor Manuel Alvarez Bravo. The opportunity to work with him on this exhibition has been an experience I will long remember. His uncommon patience and good nature in the face of my endless search for details were particularly appreciated.

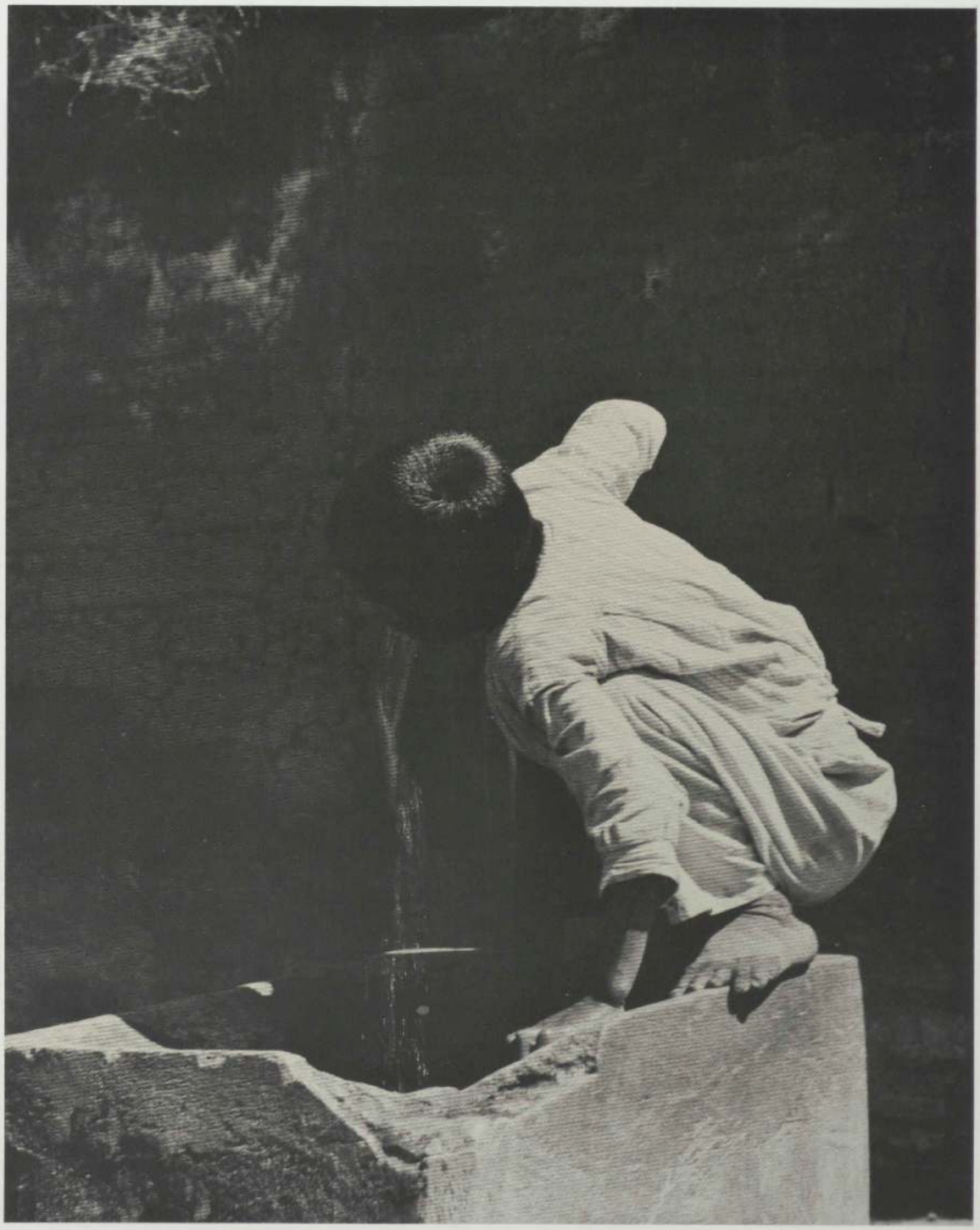
Fred R. Parker
Curator of Photography

Pasadena Art Museum ..... May 4 - June 20, 1971

The Museum of Modern Art ..... July 7 - August 25, 1971

George Eastman House ..... September 6 - October 15, 1971

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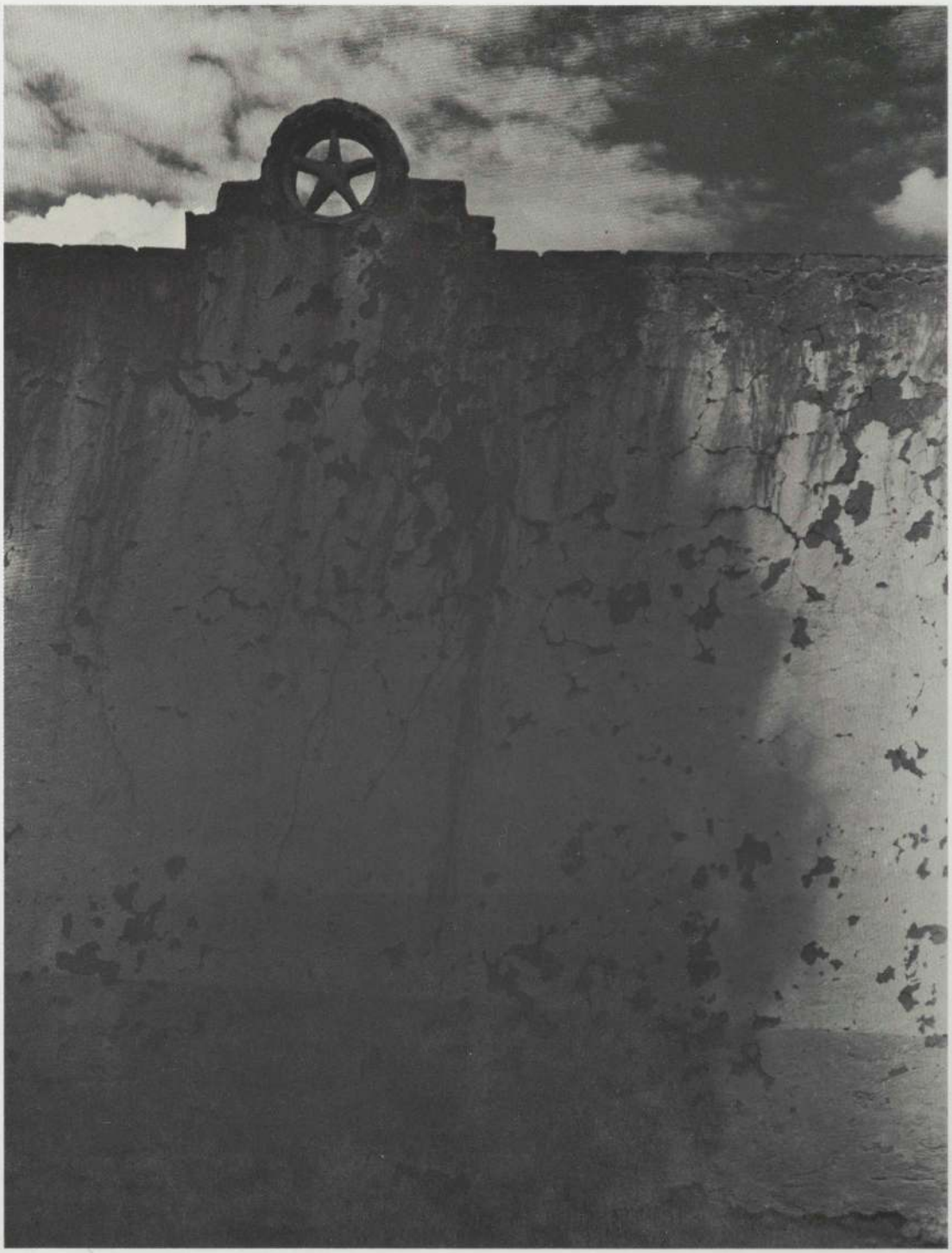
"MEXICO, poorly awakened from its mythological past, continues to evolve under the protection of Xochipilli, god of the flowers and of lyrical poetry, and of Couatlicue, goddess of the earth and of violent death, . . ." wrote Andrè Breton in his *Souvenir du Mexique* in 1939. Today, as then, to understand Mexico and its arts one must sense the undercurrent Breton describes as "The great message of the graves . . . (which) charges the air with electricity."

The mythology of Mexico — its collective dream — has always rested upon an acute awareness of death. For the modern Mexican, as for his ancestral Indian counterpart, death is a constant companion that sits next to each man, woman and child.

In such a culture, life is at best a means to an end, a form of barbarism where all men are uniformly subject to the whims of death. At any moment in the unfolding of this collective drama, death has the power to negate any action, any dream, or any "truth" men might choose to cherish. Death is the ultimate unity of the self with the universe which requires the complete release of everything personal and precious.

The desire for conciliation between life and death is the essence of Mexico. It belongs to everyone. It resides even in the inanimate earth. It is, however, only one of several aspects of Mexico's culture which are subjected to this basic desire for conciliation. Time and eternity, the individual and humanity, the animate and inanimate — all find conciliatory interpretations in one unified wholistic philosophy of life: the mythology of Mexico.

It requires an unusually sensitive artist to undertake the analysis of something as intimate as the mythology of his own culture. However, even with genius, such analysis is of little value unless it finds a means of expression. The photographs in this volume are such expressions. Manuel Alvarez Bravo is such an artist.





In presenting a retrospective of his photography in 1945, La Sociedad de Arte Moderno said, "The photography of Manuel Alvarez Bravo is neither a spontaneous nor an exotic phenomenon in the Mexican environment; it is, on the contrary, the culmination of all the antecedents of work done in this field, . . ." Alvarez Bravo's photography, however, is not solely a culmination of the previous discoveries in the field of photography. More importantly, it is in fact a culmination and distillation of the antecedents of his entire Mexican heritage, the mythology of his culture.

The imagery of Alvarez Bravo is consistently preoccupied with the unification or conciliation of the apparent opposites of existence.

Formed as he is by his culture, there is in his work an obvious absence of fear in daily existence. He courageously encounters the presence of death, be it direct or implied, at every opportunity. Life and death approach equality and are almost interchangeable.

He joins the temporal with the timeless. Time softens and becomes irrelevant. You are, and have always been, part of eternity.

Like the European artist of the Middle Ages and the contemporary Mexican muralist, Alvarez Bravo attempts to communicate his discoveries about the human condition. He forces you to face humanity where only anonymous individuals are reflected. The individual is humanity.

The individual, with life and temporality, is also an anonymous part of the inanimate and eternal.

With a camera designed for machine-like precision and objectivity, he extracts a great deal more than mere reproduction. His photographs are reflections of the collective dream of Mexico in which inanimate earth is made animate and invisible relationships of visible things emerge.

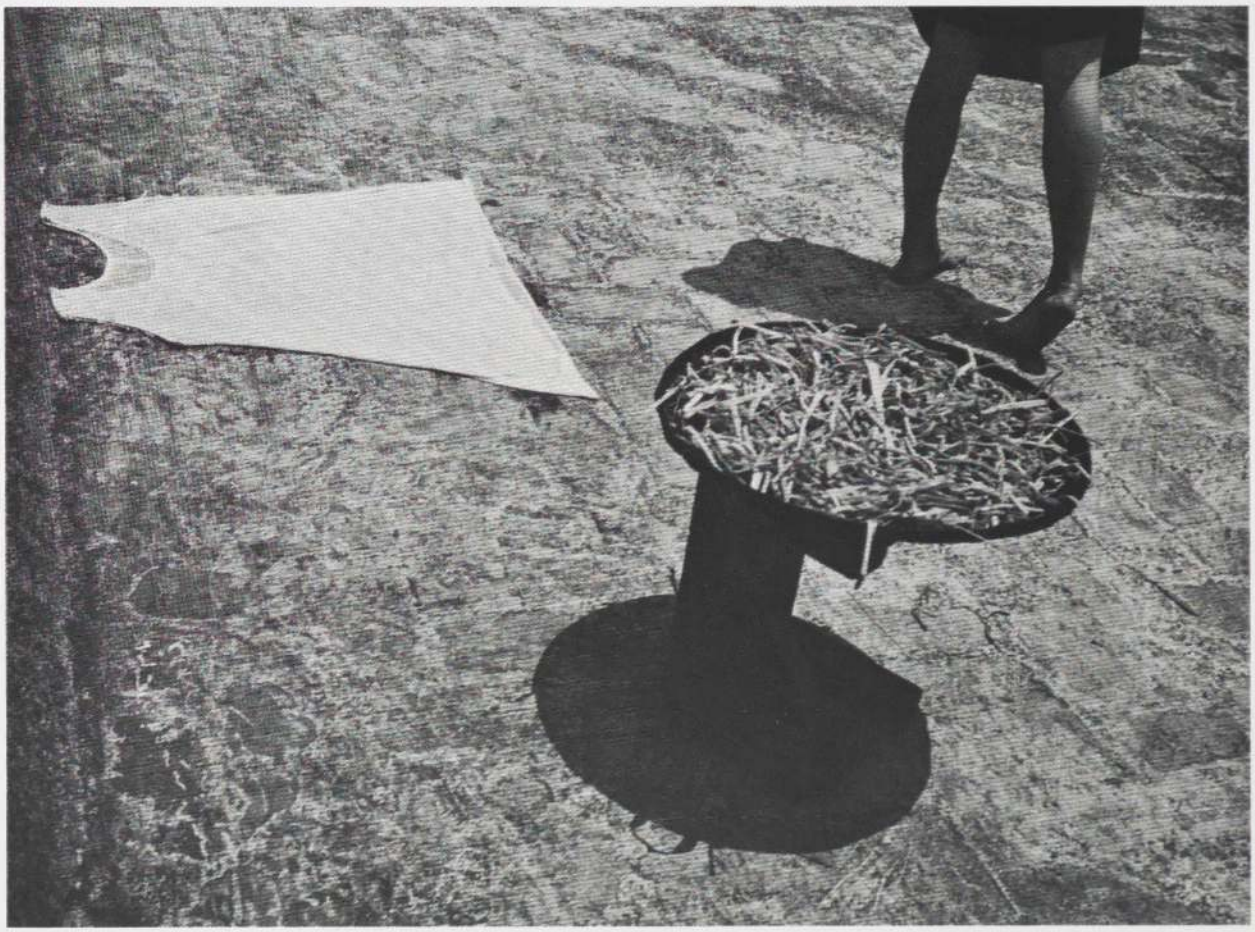

GRAN FABR
DE L
Y ANT
OPTICA MODERNA
E. SPIRITO
SPIRITO

For Alvarez Bravo there exist two distinct standards of value for photography; two related methods of evaluating a photographer's success or failure. First, the photographer must create a working relationship between visual discovery and expression, the two fundamental aspects of his media, and second, he must be able to maintain that relationship throughout his entire photographic lifetime.

Photography for Alvarez Bravo is not only a method of expressing his personal point of view, it is also a way whereby he can sharpen his ability to see and to discover the phenomena which surround him. Accordingly, the quality of a photographer's work depends to a great extent upon the balanced interchange between seeing and expressing. In his own work, for example, he has not allowed his obvious technical abilities to overpower his ability to remain open to the unexpected. The temptation to create technical perfection has been consciously avoided by "humbly and pleasantly giving into the natural means that industry puts within our reach. . ." and he has thereby "liberated (himself) from all its complexity." For Alvarez Bravo, a photographer who concerns himself with technique beyond the needs of his visual discovery will defeat himself, while the photographer who gives technique no special concern will eventually become at one with his equipment and therefore be freed to see and discover.

To evaluate a photographer by his ability to sustain interchange between expression and discovery reflects Alvarez Bravo's caution against quick judgments. The discovery of one or two pre-Columbian artifacts, for example, could never establish a sufficient standard of value applicable to pre-Columbian art in general. Similarly, the isolated photograph is, no matter how inherently valuable, only one aspect of a larger, and hopefully cohesive expression. Consideration of the photographer's extended productivity is particularly important because the essence of an isolated photograph is not easily recognized through the "objective" or mechanical nature of the media.

F. R. P.



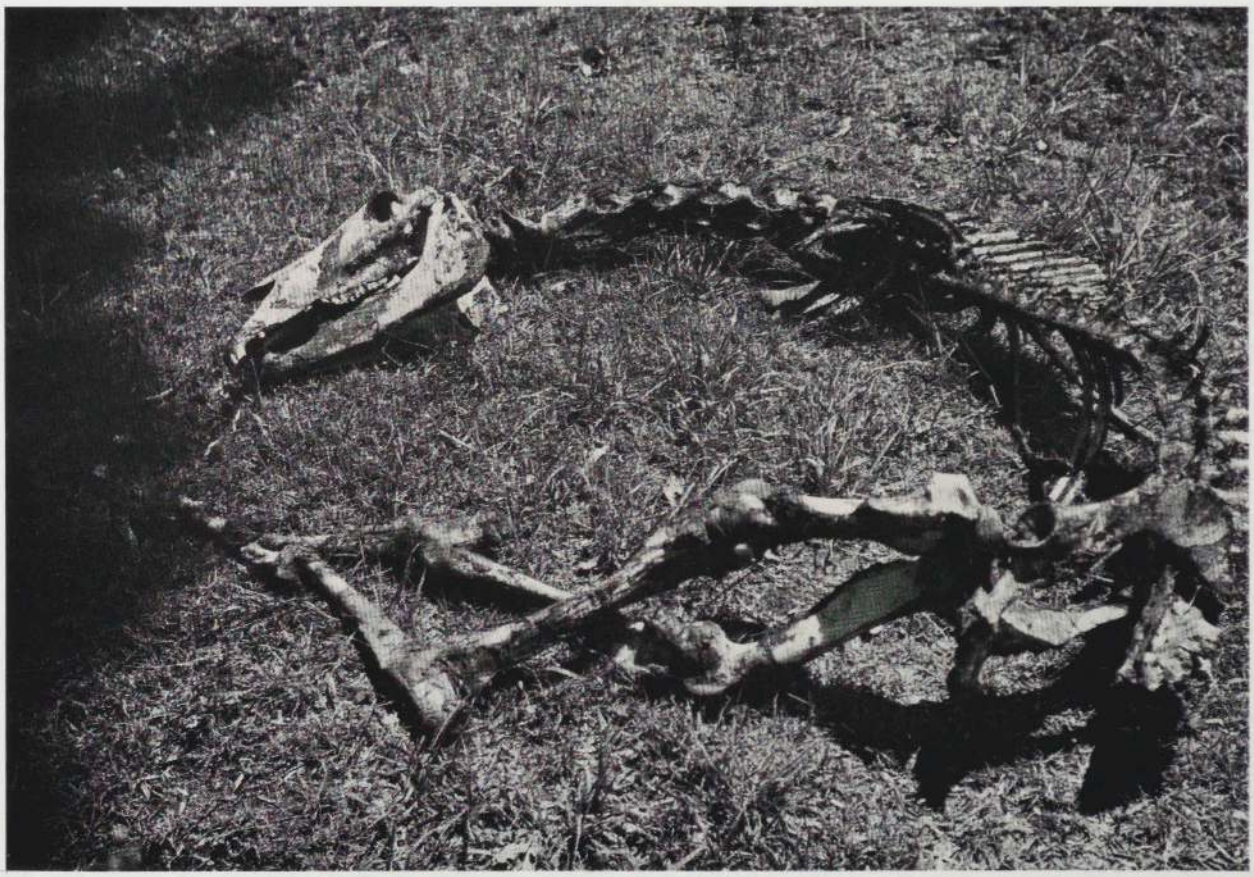




"What is life? An illusion, a shadow, a story. And the greatest good is little enough: for all life is a dream, and dreams themselves are only dreams."

"At the touch of death — oh dread misfortune — it turns to ashes. Can there be any who would want to reign, seeing that each king must wake in the dream of death?"

Pedro Calderón de la Barca,
La Vida Es Sueña, ca. 1650





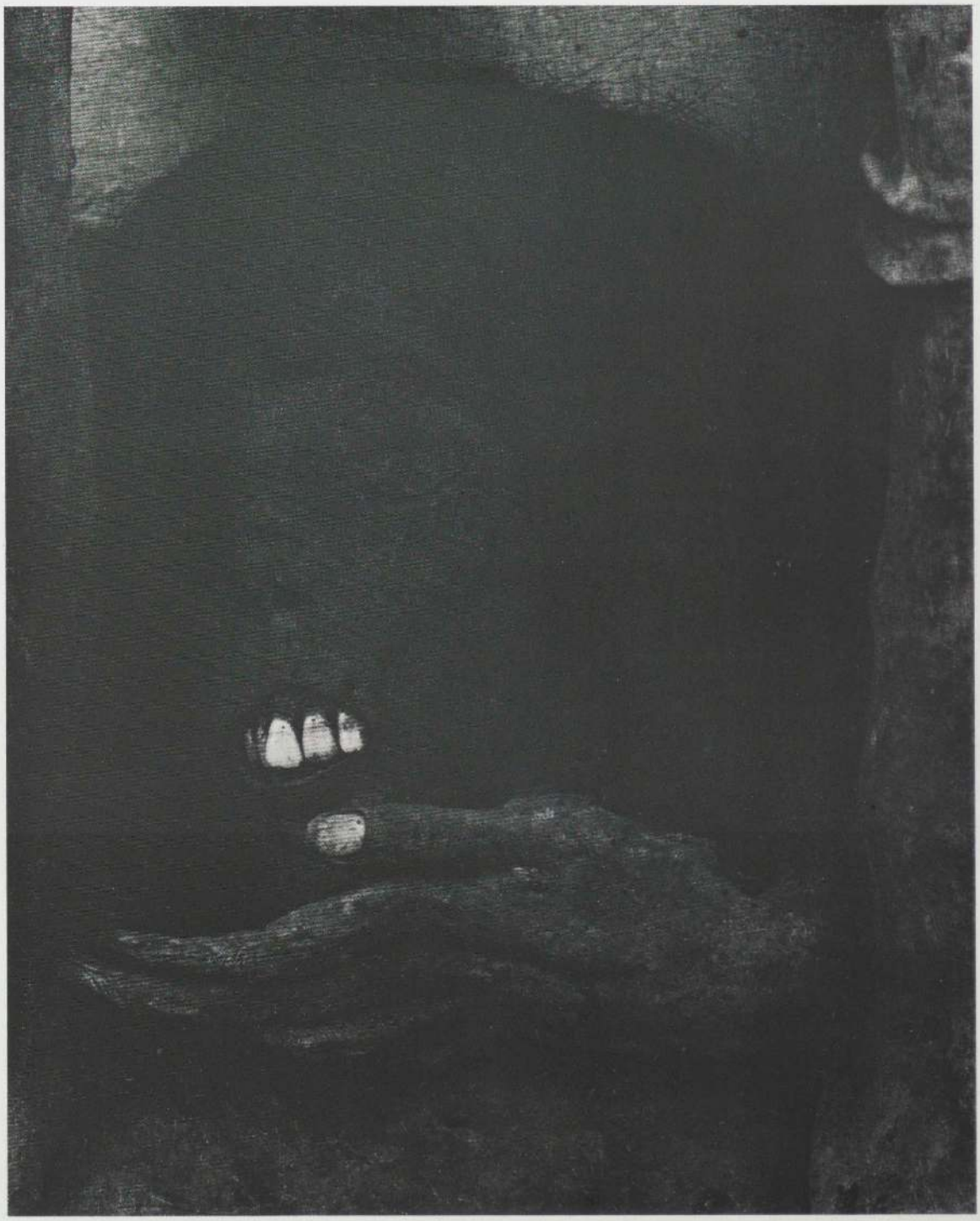




"And he registers with precision the degree of humidity that the removed earth and the ever-flowing drops of saltwater lend to the atmosphere of cemeteries."

Diego Rivera, 1945







"Just at this moment they caught sight of our horsemen. . . . we fell on the enemy so vigorously that, caught between the horsemen and ourselves, they soon turned tail. The Indians thought at that time that the horse and rider were one creature, for they had never seen a horse before."

(Later we learned that they were) "convinced . . . our horses were used to catch Indians when we wanted to kill them, and other nonsense of that sort."

Bernal Díaz, *The Conquest of New Spain,* 1519



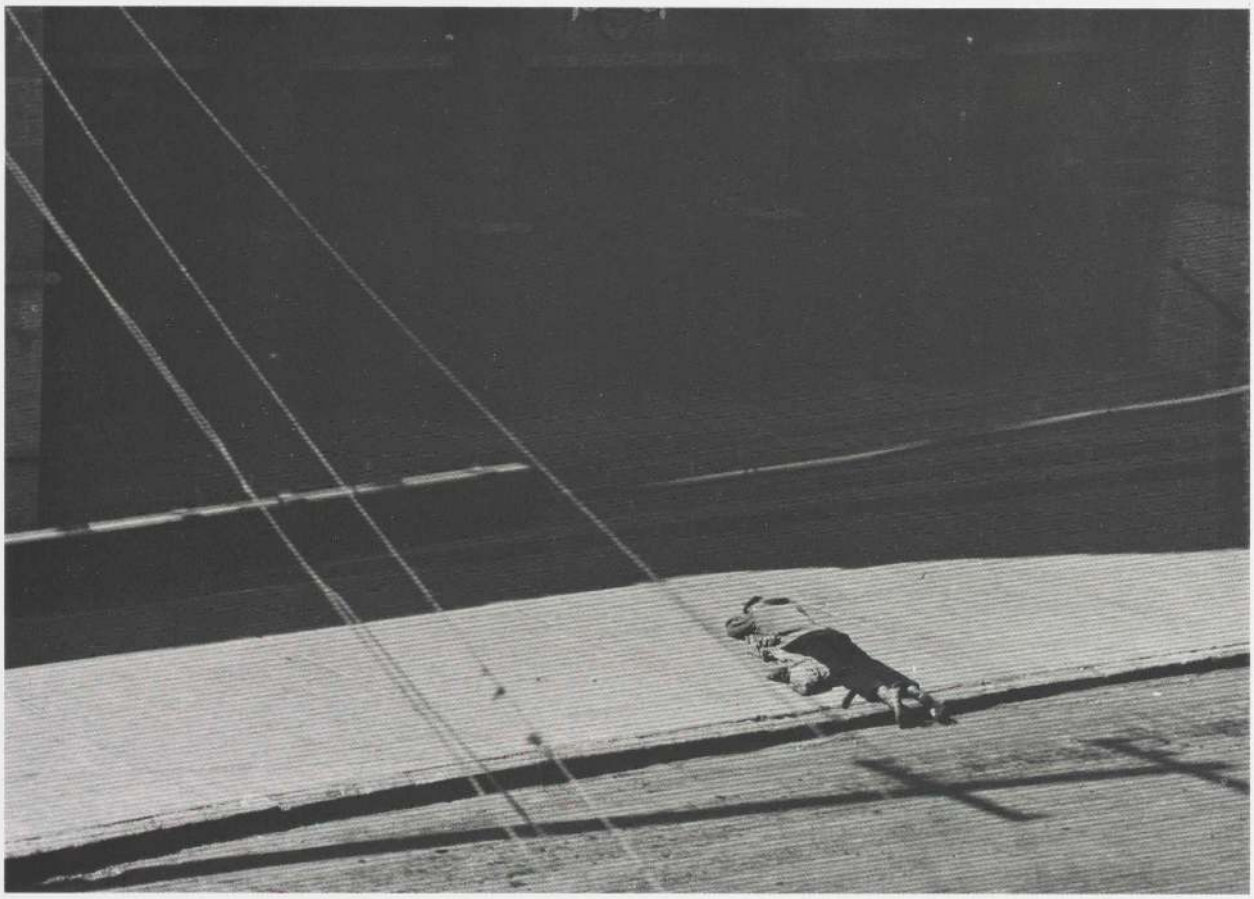






"And he knows the precise sorrows formed by the shadows and the penumbra over the land, daily sidewalks, between doors and windows, and the little trees that never finish drying out lining the irremediable streets."

Diego Rivera, 1945





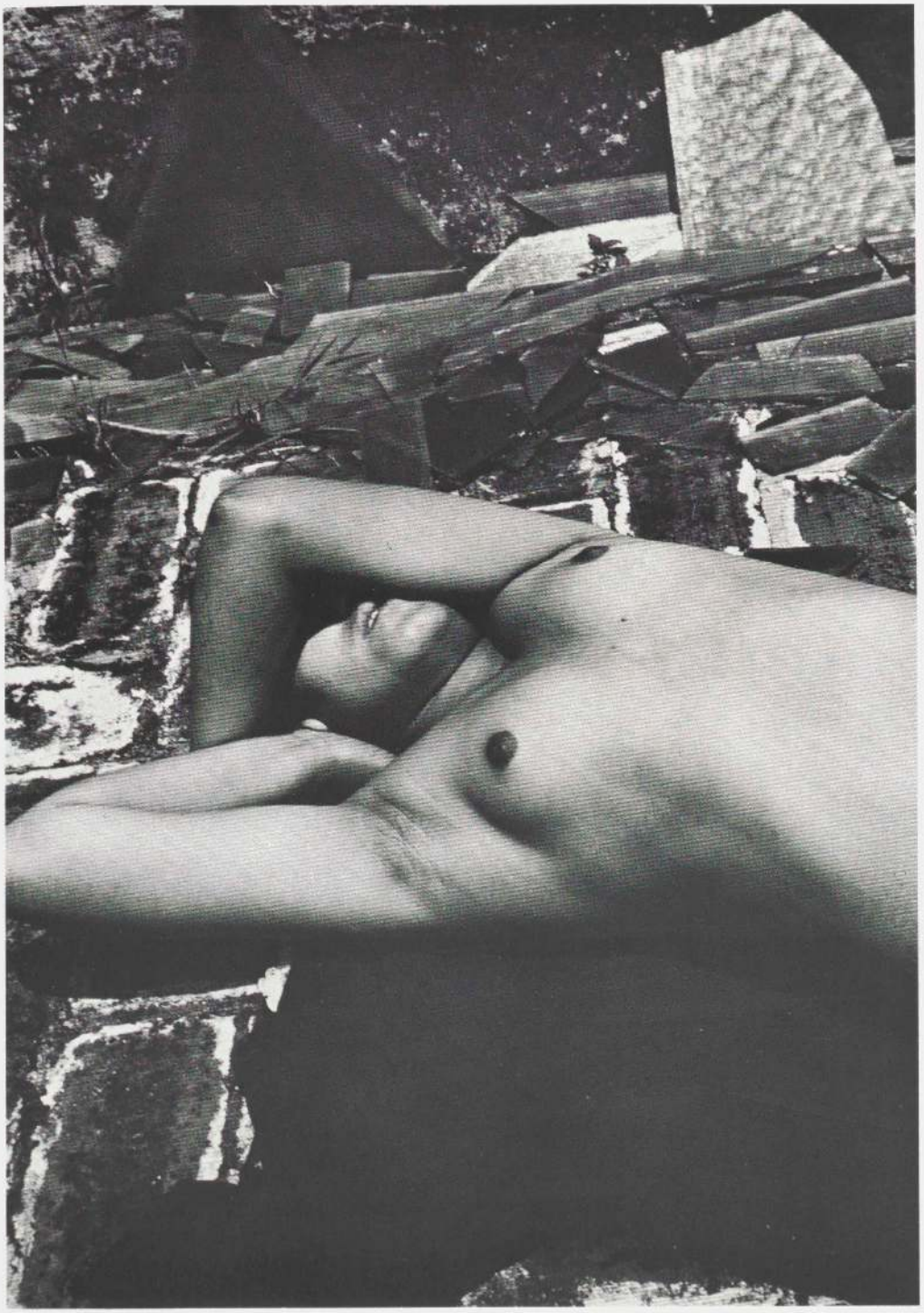




"His work is rooted firmly in his love and compassionate understanding of his own country, its people, their problems and their needs. These he has never ceased to explore and to know intimately. He is a man who has mastered a medium which he respects meticulously and which he uses to speak with warmth about Mexico as Atget spoke about Paris."

Paul Strand, 1968, Courtesy of *Aperture*.







Carmel, California

4-30-1929

To M. Alvarez Bravo-

Greetings-

Pardon me but I am not sure whether I am addressing - ¿Señor, Señora or Señorita?

I am wondering why I have been the recipient of a very fine series of photographs from you? Were they sent for the exhibit in Germany which I collected for the West Coast? If so, they are too late. Were they sent for my inspection, and other interested photographers? If so, I certainly appreciate the gesture!

But 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. It is not often I am stimulated to enthusiasm over a group of photographs.

Perhaps the finest, for me, is the child urinating: finely seen and executed. Others I especially like are: the pineapple, the cactus, the lichen covered rock, the construction, the skull.

I will not write more, until I hear from you, - some explanation, and word about yourself.

The photographs were delayed in reaching me, because of some correspondence with the "U.S. Custom House." Awaiting your answer, I am.

Cordially,

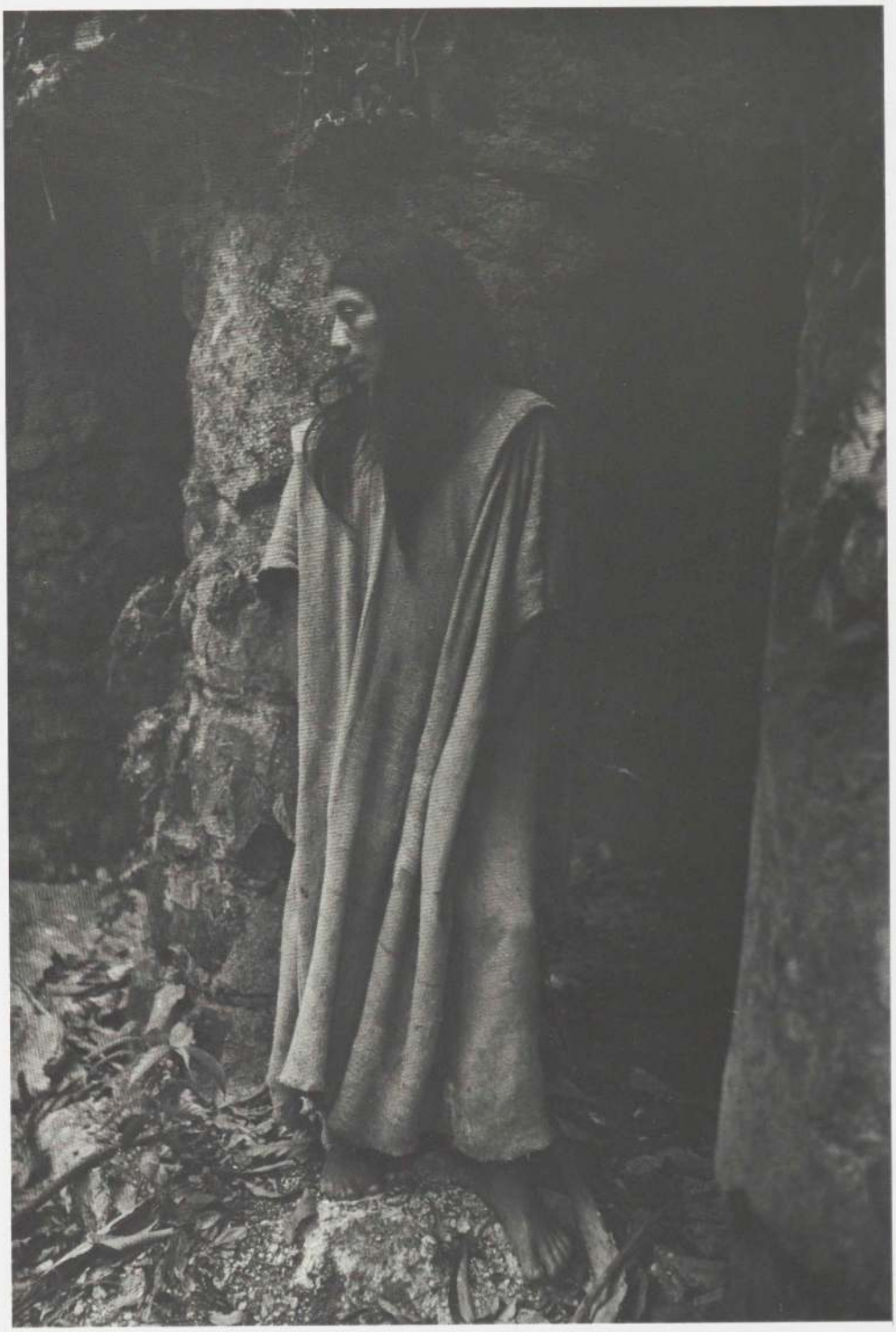
Edward Weston



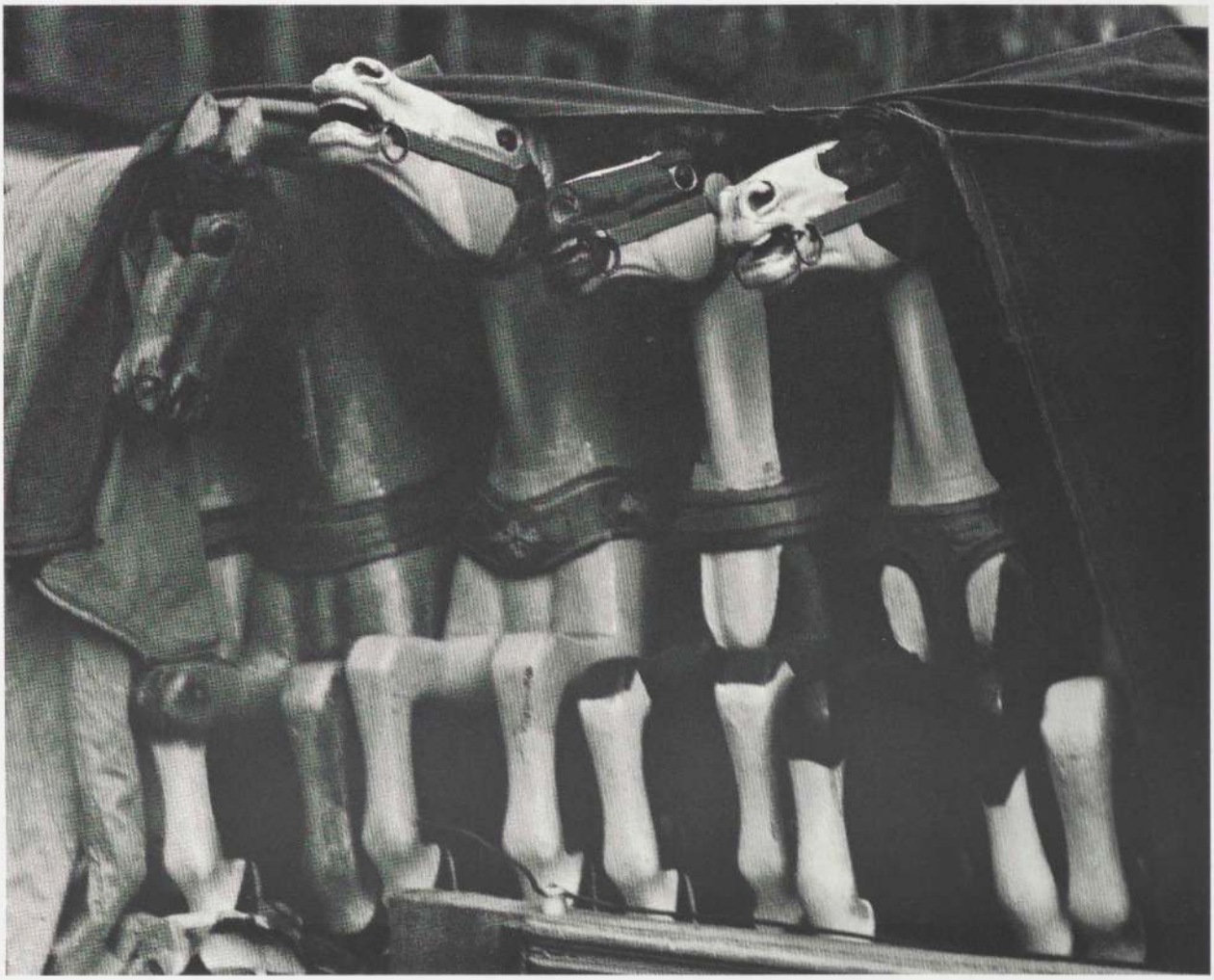


I do not know if you have been absent:
I lie down with you, I rise up with you,
In my dreams you are with me.
If my teardrops tremble within my eyes,
I know it is you moving my heart.

Aztec







"He is not a narrator. Not always documentary. His photographs are loaded with intention and vitality. Detained time. When he offers us a series, each image is a stanza."

Luis Cardoza y Aragón, 1968

"Profound and discreet poetry, desperate and refined irony emanate from the photographs of Manuel Alvarez Bravo, like those particles suspended in the air which render visible a ray of light as it penetrates a dark room. The emotive particles reach us by a slow and continuous flight; little by little they saturate us."

Diego Rivera, 1945



"I was born in the city of Mexico, behind the Cathedral, in the place where the temples of the ancient Mexican gods must have been built, February fourth, 1902. I went through my primary education, beyond that I have been self-taught. I served the government of my country many years in accountancy work, handling much abstract money. Always interested in art, I committed the common error of believing that photography would be the easiest; the memory of intents in other fields makes me understand now that I found my road on time."

Manuel Alvarez Bravo, *Excerpt from a letter to Nancy Newhall,* July 5, 1943

CATALOGUE OF THE EXHIBITION

All works are from the Permanent Collection of the Pasadena Art Museum.

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38 MARGARITA DE BONAMPAK (Margarita of Bonampak), 1949.
32 39 EL GRAN PENITENTE (The Great Penitent), 1954.
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42 41 LA TERCERA CAÍDA (The Third Fall), 1934.
5 42 SED PÚBLICA (Public Fountain), 1934.
43 DÍA DE MATANZA (Massacre Day), 1945.
44 LA SEÑAL (The Sign), 1967.
45 PEZ SUSPENSO (Suspended Fish), 1931.
22 46 BARDA DE PANTEÓN (Cemetery Wall), 1967.
23 47 VISITACIÓN (Visitation), 1967.
33 48 LA PENA NEGRA (The Black Grief), 1939.
49 EMPIEZA LA PRIMAVERA (Spring Begins), 1960.
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26 51 PAISAJE Y GALOPE (Landscape and Gallop), 1932.
52 TUMBA NEGRA CON CORONA (Black Tomb with Crown), 1964.
17 53 RECUERDO DE ATZOMPAN (Remembrance of Atzompan), 1943.
9 54 DONDE ESTÁ LA ESTRELLA (Where is the star), 1952.
16 55 HORAS DE PINTO O EL NIÑO DE LA BANCARROTA (Blemished Hours or the Child of Failure), 1936.
56 LÍMITES EN EL PAISAJE (Boundaries in the Landscape), 1970.
6 57 PLÁTICA JUNTO A LA ESTATUA (Discourse Near the Statue), 1933.
24 58 LA SEÑORITA JUARE (Miss Juare), 1934.
59 EL ESPÍRITU DE LAS PERSONAS (The Spirit of the People), 1936.
15 60 UN POCO ALEGRE Y GRACIOSA (Somewhat Gay and Graceful), 1942.
61 GORRIÓN, CLARO! (Sparrow, Obviously!), 1938.
38 62 DESPUÉS DE LOS VIDRIOS ROTOS, TAPEN LA VENTANA (After the Broken Glass, Cover the Window), 1938.
63 PARED ROJA CON CALACA (Red Wall with Skull) (Color), 1966.
64 CAÑAS CON LAS QUE ARMAN REDES PARA ATRAPAR MOSCOS — DEL LAGO, QUE COMEN LOS TZENTZONTLES (Reeds Used for Mounting Nets to Catch Lake Flies Eaten by Tzentzontles) (Color), 1965.
65 ENSAYOS PARA CÁMARA BIEN ENFOCADA (Exercises for the Well Focused Camera), 1952.
41 66 NIÑO ORINANDO (Boy Urinating), 1927.

CHRONOLOGY

1902	Born February 4, Mexico City. Because of his grandfather, Manuel Alvarez Rivas, painter and photographer and his father, Manuel Alvarez García, painter, writer and amateur photographer, Manuel Alvarez Bravo lived in an "atmosphere in which art was breathed . . ." and, from his childhood on, he has felt affection for all the branches of art "which are manifestations for the pleasure and elevation of man: literature, music, painting."
1908 - 1914	Attended Catholic Brothers' school in Tlalpan, near Mexico City. Learned to read, write and count, but very little else. Street battles of the 1910 Revolution often interrupted class activities. Sight of cadavers and sound of cannons remain strongest remembrances of this period.
1915	Undertook studies in accounting at night while working as a copy-clerk during the day in a French company in Mexico City.
1916	Began working for the Mexican Treasury Department.
1917	Dropped study of accounting and began attending literature classes at night.
1918	Attended, at night, the Academia Nacional de Bellas Artes (Academia de San Carlos) for one year and studied painting and music.
1922	Began developing interest in photography and indigenous Mexican art while working for the Power and Transportation Department. Because of his employer Hugo Conway, subscribed to the English publication *Amateur Photographer and Photography.*
1923	Met the German photographer Hugo Brehme.
1924	Purchased his first camera - Century Master 25. With initial advice from Brehme and with additional subscriptions to *Camera, Camera Craft* and *American Photography,* began his photographic career.
1925	Married Dolores (Lola) Martínez Vianda. Accepted a post with the Treasury Dearptment in Oaxaca and left Mexico City.
1927	Returned to Mexico City.
1927 - 1931	Worked as a typist for the Department of Agriculture and the Treasury Department in Mexico City during this period.
1927	Introduced to Tina Modotti by muralist Paul O'Higgins.
1929	At Tina's suggestion Alvarez Bravo sent a portfolio of prints to Edward Weston, who responded favorably. Tina introduced him to Diego Rivera and to Frances Toor, writer and editor of *Mexican Folkways.*
1929 - 1930	Taught photography for one year at the Escuela Central de Artes Plásticas (Academia de San Carlos) while Diego Rivera was director and left with Rivera's staff when the latter resigned over a curriculum dispute.
1930	Tina Modotti deported from Mexico. Alvarez Bravo helped her pack and was only person to see her to her train. Because of her departure, Frances Toor introduced Alvarez Bravo to most of Mexico's muralists and artists (Rufino Tamayo, Dr. Atl, David Alfaro Siqueiros, José Clemente Orozco, Frida Kahlo de Rivera, Jean Charlot, Fernando Gamboa, Xavier Villarrutia, Francisco Miguel) and commissioned photography of their work for publication. Met Emily Edwards and began assisting her (with Paul O'Higgins) in gathering material for *Painted Walls of Mexico,* published in 1966.

1931 First photographic sale to The Museum of Modern Art, New York.
On the verge of advancement in the Treasury Department, decided to leave business to become a free lance photographer, specializing in the reproduction of painting and other art work.

1932 - 1933 Taught photography a second time at the Escuela Central de Artes Plásticas (Academia de San Carlos). Also worked for the Education Department as photographer of art.

1933 Introduced to Paul Strand in Mexico.

1934 Introduced to Henri Cartier-Bresson in Mexico. Separated from his first wife.

1936 Traveled to Chicago to teach for two or three months at Hull-House Art School, directed by Emily Edwards.

1938 Introduced to André Breton in Mexico.

1939 - 1942 Maintained commercial photographic shop on Ayuntamiento Street, Mexico City.

1941 Tina Modotti returned to Mexico but was no longer photographing.

1942 Married second wife, Doris Heydn (writer, archeologist and later, photographer).

1943 - 1959 Regularly employed as photographer and cameraman at the Sindicato de Trabajadores de la Producción Cinematográfica de México.

1947 - 1950 Taught photography at the Instituto Cinematográfico Mexicano.

1959 Left the cinematographic industry to begin (with Leopoldo Méndez, Gabriel Figueroa [a cousin of former president López Mateos] and Carlos Pellicer and others) El Fondo Editorial de la Plástica Mexicana (editorial fund or foundation of Mexican plastic arts) which publishes very fine books on Mexican art. Manuel Alvarez Bravo presently continues to serve as the chief photographer and as one of the directors of this organization.
Books published by this organization:

1. *Mural Painting of the Mexican Revolution,* 1960.
2. *Los Maestros Europeos en las Galerías de San Carlos, de México,* 1962.
3. *José Guadalupe Posada, Ilustrador de la Vida Mexicana,* 1963.
4. *Flor y Canto del Arte Prehispánico de México,* 1964.
5. *José Maria Velasco,* 1970.
6. *Lo Efímero y Eterno en el Arte Popular Mexicano,* 1971.

1960 Traveled to Europe, visited many museums while working for El Fondo Editorial de la Plástica Mexicana. Remained in Europe for entire year.

1961 Returned to Europe for three month period.

1962 Divorced Doris Heydn.
Returned to Europe for three week period.
Married third wife Colette Urbajtel.

1966 Met with Paul Strand a second time in Mexico.

1969 - 1970 Taught photography for one year at the Centro Universitario de Estudios Cinematográficos.

1971 Currently living and working in Mexico City.

EXHIBITIONS AND AWARDS

1926 Regional Exhibition, Oaxaca. Received first prize for photography.

1929 Galería de Arte Moderno del Teatro Nacional (now Palacio de Bellas Artes), Mexico City. Group exhibition. Review of Alvarez Bravo's photographs in newspaper, *El Universal,* January 5, 1930.

1931 La Tolteca, Mexico City. Received first prize for photography in national painting and photography competition.

1932 Galería Posada, Mexico City. One man exhibition. (July 28 - August 10) Invitational catalogue with statement by Xavier Villarrutia.

1935 Galería de Exposiciones del Palacio de Bellas Artes, Mexico City. Two man exhibition with Cartier-Bresson. (March 11 - 20) Invitational catalogue with statements by Luis Cardoza y Aragón and Langston Hughes.

Julien Levy Gallery, New York, New York. Three man exhibition with Walker Evans and Cartier-Bresson. (May)

1936 Hull-House Art School, Chicago, Illinois. One man exhibition. (March 22 - 31)

Almer Coe Optical Company, Chicago, Illinois. One man exhibition. (April)

1939 Galerie Renou et Colle (now Renou et Poyet), Paris. Survey exhibition of Mexican art organized by André Breton. (March) Catalogue with essay by Breton, cover photograph and several interior photographs by Alvarez Bravo.

Universidad Nacional de México, Gallery of Art, Mexico City. One man exhibition. (November 10 - 25)

1940 Galería de Arte Mexicano (Galería de Inés Amor), Mexico City. "Exposición Internacional del Surrealismo," group exhibition. (January - February) Catalogue cover and one interior reproduction by Alvarez Bravo.

The Museum of Modern Art, New York, New York. "Twenty Centuries of Mexican Art," group exhibition. (May) Manuel Alvarez Bravo and Lola Alvarez Bravo, only photographers included in exhibition. Book, *Twenty Centuries of Mexican Art,* with one reproduction by Manuel Alvarez Bravo. Additional publication, *Mexican Music,* accompanied exhibition, with nine reproductions credited to Manuel Alvarez Bravo.

1942 Photo League Gallery, New York, New York. One man exhibition. (January 10 - February 1)

1943 Philadelphia Museum of Art, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. "Mexican Art Today," group exhibition with eleven photographs by Manuel Alvarez Bravo. (March 27 - May 9) Catalogue with essay by Luis Cardoza y Aragón and one reproduction by Manuel Alvarez Bravo. Among the other four photographers included in the exhibition were Alvarez Bravo's first and second wives, Dolores Alvarez Bravo and Doris Heydn. The two remaining photographers were both, at one time or another, students of Alvarez Bravo.

Art Institute of Chicago, Chicago, Illinois. One man exhibition. (December 10, 1943 - January 16, 1944)

1945 The Museum of Modern Art, Moscow, Russia. Group exhibition for cultural exchange program.

Sociedad de Arte Moderno, Mexico City. "Manuel Alvarez Bravo — Fotografías," one man exhibition. (July) Large catalogue with ninety-five pages and thirty reproductions; edition of one thousand copies of which one hundred and fifteen were signed and numbered and contained three original photographs. Essays by Manuel Alvarez Bravo, Diego Rivera, Xavier Villarrutia and Gabriel Figueroa, and reproduction of a photograph of Manuel Alvarez Bravo by Doris Heydn.

1947 Israel: Group exhibition for cultural exchange program tour.

1954 Sindicato de Trabajadores de la Producción Cinematográfica de México, Mexico City. Received first prize and honorable mention in photography competition sponsored by this organization.

Centro de Relaciones Culturales Anglo-Mexicano, Mexico City. Two man exhibition. (Other photographer unknown) (October 3 - 13)

1955 The Museum of Modern Art, New York, New York. "The Family of Man," group exhibition. (January 24 - May 8, 1955 and circulated through 1959) Catalogue with two reproductions by Manuel Alvarez Bravo.

1956 The Museum of Modern Art, New York, New York. "Diogenes with a Camera III," four man exhibition with Paul Strand, August Sander and Walker Evans. (January 17 - March 18) News release #5, The Museum of Modern Art (January, 1956) with statements by Edward Steichen and Alvarez Bravo.

1957 Salón de la Plástica Mexicana, Instituto Nacional de Bellas Artes, Mexico City. One man exhibition. (March 7 - 26) Brochure with statement by Diego Rivera and two reproductions by Alvarez Bravo.

1959 George Eastman House, Rochester, New York. "Photography at Mid-Century," group exhibition. (November - December, 1959 and circulated through 1961) Catalogue with one reproduction by Alvarez Bravo.

1961 Bibliothèque Nationale, Paris. "Salon International du Portrait Photographique," group exhibition with seven photographs by Alvarez Bravo.

1962 L'OEil Galerie d'Art, Paris. "Minotaure," group exhibition with photographs by Alvarez Bravo brought back from Mexico in 1939 by André Breton. (May - June)

1964 The Museum of Modern Art, New York, New York. "The Photographer's Eye," group exhibition. (May 27 - September and circulated through 1971) Book with one reproduction published in 1966.

1966 Galería de Arte Mexicano (Galería de Inés de Inés Amor), Mexico City. One man exhibition. (May 9 - 28) Catalogue with one reproduction by Alvarez Bravo.

1967 National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa. "Photography in the Twentieth Century," group exhibition organized by George Eastman House, Rochester, New York. (February 16 - April 12, 1967 and circulated through 1971) Catalogue with one reproduction by Alvarez Bravo.

1968 Palacio de Bellas Artes, Mexico City. "Manuel Alvarez Bravo — Fotografías 1928 - 1968," one man exhibition. (June 25 - August 10) Part of cultural program of the XIX Olympics. Two catalogues: large book in Spanish, English and French with eighty-six reproductions (three color) and small catalogue in Spanish only containing twelve reproductions.

Alvarez Bravo's works are represented in the following collections: Pasadena Art Museum (66); The Museum of Modern Art, New York (47); George Eastman House, Rochester (48); Museum of Modern Art, Moscow (8); Bibliothèque National, Paris (37).

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