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Wings of Change: A Visual and Cultural Analysis of *Mujer Ángel*

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In the middle of the twentieth century, Mexico sought to reestablish its national identity. Following on the heels of the Mexican Revolution, an extended period of social upheaval and regional conflicts that transformed the country, artists and visionaries alike struggled to determine how the reborn nation would distinguish itself. While many movements in this period looked towards the future and sought utopia, there was one which concentrated instead on exploring the precolonial past and distilling the essence of "Mexicanity" from there. This movement was known as the *Mexicanidad* in Spanish; or, in the precolonial Nahuatl language, the *Mexicayotl*. In particular, the *Mexicanidad* believed that surviving indigenous civilizations had maintained a cultural identity which was independent of and reclaimed from the aggressive industrialization and *de facto* despotism that preceded the revolution, and thus ought to serve as a template for Mexico's modern identity.



Figure 1: Graciela Iturbide, *Mujer Ángel*, 1979

This template was created through the documentation of populations, specifically through the medium of photography. There were two primary

perspectives that informed the creation of these photographs: the anthropological approach, which sought to understand and evaluate indigenous cultures, and the artistic perspective, which elevated a more romantic interpretation of the culture. One such image that reflects this conflict is *Mujer Ángel* (1979), by Graciela Iturbide, which depicts a woman from the Seri community crossing the Sonoran Desert in a mimicry of flight (fig. 1). In *Mujer Ángel*, Iturbide relies on the dynamic interplay of foreground and landscape, a contrast of the traditional and the modern, and a timeless atmosphere to capture the paradox of the Seri people in the contemporary era. Just as her photograph demonstrates juxtaposition, so does its dueling function as both a piece of anthropological documentation and artistic expression.

Predominant interpretations of *Mujer Ángel* align to either the anthropological or artistic category, and thus assign either a documentarian or expressive interpretation to the image. There is rarely a synthesis between the two, which makes it an anomaly in the larger scholarship of Iturbide. The prevailing consensus is that Iturbide's works focus upon intellectual and spiritual life, instead of cultural life; thus, Iturbide's works are inclined towards artistic, rather than anthropological, expression.¹ Any incongruencies between the artistic majority and *Mujer Ángel's* themes are attributed to the fact that it is an earlier work, and Iturbide had only just begun to explore whether she wanted to practice magical realism—an artistic genre popular in Latin culture that combines naturalism with surrealism, or engages in a more socially oriented photographic style.² *Mujer Ángel*, however, suggests that there was no intent to create diametric opposition between these two approaches. For this reason, an intervention within the scholarship is necessary to demonstrate how respective interpretations work together to convey the theme of the photograph.

In order to understand the intent behind the image, it is crucial to first examine the image itself. *Mu-*

1. Ratik Asokan, "Charting the Inner Landscape," *Art in America* 107, no. 6 (June 2019): 37.

2. Nathaniel Gardner, "Visual Witness: A Critical Reading of Graciela Iturbide's Photography," *Studies in Latin American Popular Culture* 35 (January 2017): 174-75.

jer *Ángel* is oriented along a landscape, with the far-off mountain range serving as a lowered horizon line. The lowered horizon aggrandizes the female figure as she struggles across the rocky outcropping; the title of the photograph plays into this mythologizing by declaring her the “Angel Woman.” Such dramatization plays into the happenstance of the image’s creation. Iturbide reports that she was entranced by the woman and captured the image in an instant, rather than through preparation and positioning, thereby making the image “like a gift life gave.”³ The effortless serendipity enhances the idea that the image is miraculous and that its subject matter exceeds mundane ken.

Furthering this sensation that *Mujer Ángel* is not confined to reality is its apparent timelessness. The central figure is wearing a traditional Seri dress, but she bears a cassette player that Iturbide recalls as playing contemporary music. To the uninitiated, this appears to be incongruous: the Seri were lauded as a society independent of colonial influence. To imply that they were solely mired in the past deprives them of the very autonomy represented in *Mujer Ángel*. Some modernization was practical and necessary to survive, although it had been hastened by the intervention of the Mexican government in the immediate aftermath of the Mexican Revolution. Iturbide’s image, therefore, “endeavors to transcend the image of the worthy *pelado*.”⁴ The *pelado*, or pauper, narrative was a pre-*Mexicanidad* belief that indigenous populations lacked the ability to develop or flourish on their own. In depicting the falsity of this belief with the reality of the Seri woman, Iturbide indirectly challenges the condescension towards indigenous peoples.

The atmospheric timelessness of the image further enhances its credibility and juxtaposition. *Mujer Ángel* is monochrome, thus making it more difficult to identify at which point in Mexican history the image was taken. This is a deliberate choice by many of the photographers of the *Mexicanidad*, who took inspira-

tion from Dorothea Lange’s rhetorical reportage of the Great Depression and imbued their own images with a similar narrative.⁵ As with rhetorical reportage, the monochrome appearance of *Mujer Ángel* emphasizes the solemnity of the image, while also crafting an illusion of impartiality.⁶ The solemn implications of the atmosphere state that the Seri way of existence is a reality but whose reality that is, and the point at which it occurs, is left for the audience to discern.

The way in which Iturbide allows the audience to determine the Seri’s ambiguous reality speaks to the historical context of the time. As aforementioned, there was a revived interest in documenting indigenous cultures. The intellectuals of the *Mexicanidad* were often upper middle class, with connections to the government, and were thus far removed from the plight of the Seri. Documentarian efforts sought to establish a commonality between the average Mexican citizen and the indigenous populations. One of the most frequently used mediums to accomplish this goal was photography, specifically of women. It is fitting, then, that Iturbide’s first solo project was part of the *Mexicanidad*, as her areas of interest included the intersection of womanhood and national identity. *Mujer Ángel* embodies this as part of the study *Los que Viven en la Arena (Those Who Live in the Sand)*, which was a photographic series Iturbide completed alongside anthropologist Luis Barjau.⁷ *Los que Viven en la Arena* would go on to be one of the primary constructions of local Seri identity in the global culture (the anthropological intent), as well as the start of a recurring motif in Iturbide’s work, which is that reality is relational to the individual viewer (the artistic intent).

Viewing *Mujer Ángel* through the former, anthropological lens means synthesizing its artistic elements with the broader cultural mores of the time. While the image itself is enigmatic and creative in its appearance, the narrative that surrounds it is inextricable from sociological curiosity.⁸ The aforementioned

3. Ramón Reverté, “Graciela Iturbide: Dreams and Visions,” *Aperture*, no. 236 (Fall 2019): 30.

4. Marina Pérez de Mendiola, “Mexican Contemporary Photography: Staging Ethnicity and Citizenship,” *Boundary* 231, no. 3 (Fall 2004): 140.

5. Mary David MacNaughton et al., *Revolution and Ritual: The Photographs of Sarah Castrejón, Graciela Iturbide, and Tatiana Parceró* (Los Angeles: Getty Publications, 2017), 15.

6. Asokan, 39.

7. Deborah Dorotinsky, “It is Written in Their Faces: Seri Women and Facial Painting in Photography,” in *Visual Typologies from the Early Modern to the Contemporary: Local Contexts and Global Practices*, ed. Tara Zanardi and Lynda Klich (New York City: Routledge, 2019), 166-82.

8. Stanley Brandes, “Graciela Iturbide as Anthropological Photographer,” *Visual Anthropology Review* 24, no. 2 (November 2008): 96.

indigenous tribes of Mexico were considered to be paragons of Pre-Colombian culture, and the exaltation of their livelihoods functioned to codify national identity. Such beliefs drew upon the avant-garde tradition of *indigenismo*, an ideology that arose in the waning days of the Mexican Revolution, and which placed its emphasis on the balance of power between indigenous populations and the state. Notably, however, the anthropology of the *Mexicanidad* did not reject the tensions of *mestiza* (mixed) identity, unlike *indigenismo*. Instead, the *Mexicanidad* revealed an interest in how pure indigeneity can survive modernity. Civilizations that maintained precontact traditions were “by no means a common occurrence in Mexico, nor in any other Latin American countries that had significant indigenous populations.”⁹ Both the rarity of their traditionality and their position as the last remnants of precontact civilization led the Seri to be placed on a pedestal. By exalting the Seri to such a degree, a stringent anthropological or artistic understanding of the culture risks an erroneous presentation of the people; a synthetic approach, such as Iturbide’s, minimizes such reductivity.

This reduction of the Seri to a traditional culture is not entirely accurate. In the companion text for *Los que Viven en la Arena*, the Seri are depicted as familiar with modernization. During their time enmeshed with the Seri, Iturbide and Barjau observed that “far from constituting a remote, isolated tribe, [the Seri] evidently lived, in part, from tourism.”¹⁰ As such, the presence of the radio cassette player in the hands of *Mujer Ángel*’s subject helps to dispel the mystique that surrounds the Seri. The paradox between the public perception of the Seri and their cultural reality is further emphasized when the origin of the seemingly traditional clothing is explored. It was born out of late nineteenth-century suppositions on what the indigenous Seri would have worn and thus serves to emphasize both the myth of tradition and the reality of modernization.¹¹ *Mujer Ángel*, therefore, ful-

fills an ethnographic purpose through its characterization of cultural customs in the midst of rapid change. It is a reality of acculturation and progress, albeit not the sole reality.

Figure 2: Graciela Iturbide, *Nuestra Señora de las Iguanas*, 1979

Interwoven between anthropology and Iturbide’s artistic intent is the concept that reality is relative. Her stated ethos is that “photography is not truth. The photographer interprets reality, and, above



all, constructs his own reality according to his own awareness or his own emotions.”¹² Judging by this statement, the concept of *Mujer Ángel* as an anthropological image alone is made suspect. The timeless unreality of the image, with its monochromatic juxtaposition of the traditional and the modern, is a characteristic that would come to define many of Iturbide’s later works. Although Iturbide argues that “time is of secondary importance” to her, in comparison to motion, the majority of her images highlight chronological uncertainty in indigenous angels.¹³ A compa-

9. “De ninguna manera está una ocurrencia común en México o en ninguno de los demás países Latinoamericanos que cuentan con poblaciones indígenas considerable.” David Foster, “Género y Fotografía en *Juchitán de las Mujeres* de Graciela Iturbide,” *Ámbitos: Revista de Estudios Sociales y Humanidades* 11 (2004): 63. All English translations are the author’s own unless otherwise stated.

10. Luis Barjau and Graciela Iturbide, *Los que Viven en la Arena* (México: INI-Fonapas, 1981): 54.

11. Brandes, 97.

12. Graciela Iturbide, “Interpreting Reality,” *World Literature Today* 87, no. 2 (March/April 2013): 121.

13. Fabienne Bradu, “Graciela Iturbide habla con Fabienne Bradu,” in *Conversaciones con Fotógrafos* (Madrid: La Fábrica y Fundación Telefónica, 2003), 55-56.

able work to *Mujer Ángel* would be *Nuestra Señora de las Iguanas* (1979) (fig. 2), taken within the same timeframe as *Mujer Ángel* and addressing a related topic: the indigenous Zapotec culture of Juchitán. A comparison of the two images reveals similar thematic approaches in different contexts. *Mujer Ángel* plays on the folkloric motif of a lone, melancholic woman wandering the desert as either a portent of the future or a stark reminder of the past, while *Nuestra Señora de las Iguanas* draws upon the iconography of the semi-legendary Iguana King to convey a sense of nobility upon its female subject.¹⁴ In both instances, Iturbide employs an artistic approach, such as visual motifs, to explore the nature of the indigenous culture that she has studied.

Iturbide's employment of folklore and temporal ambiguity would, at first glance, appear to be simply artistic. They work, however, to fulfill an anthropological purpose by representing the uncertain position that the Seri experienced in society. Folklore is brought into the modern age, just as the images appear to be suspended in time, and therefore the audience is forced to realize that the Seri, perhaps reflecting Mexico as a whole, cannot exist when torn between tradition and modernization, but must synthesize them in order to survive. The integration of art and self-examination would recur throughout Iturbide's catalogue, but it owes its origins to *Mujer Ángel*.

Furthering this integration is how Iturbide's artistic approach to *Mujer Ángel* is almost ritualistic in its ephemerality. Iturbide once stated that she was inspired by her dreams to seek out birds; notably, birds have a symbolic nature in Latin American culture as both couriers of dreams and harbingers of death.¹⁵ Although there are no birds evident in *Mujer Ángel*, the figure herself is poised on the edge of the desert, her

arms extended as if in preparation for flight. Through her usage of monochrome colors, Iturbide overlays the woman with a cool tone and thus adds to the work's ominous nature. Despite its divine name, the flighty *Mujer Ángel* becomes as equally evocative of trepidation as it does freedom. It is an artistic decision, yet is also representative of where the Seri were at that moment in history: balanced on the edge of assimilation into modernity, while also embodying a rich cultural legacy. Whether that balance is angelic or inauspicious is a reality that Iturbide leaves for the viewer to interpret.

The various and versatile meanings of *Mujer Ángel* illuminate the inherent plurality of the photographic medium, and illustrate how one interpretation is no less accurate than the other. Due to both the documentarian conditions of its creation and the almost spiritual intent behind it, *Mujer Ángel* encapsulates the fluidity and uncertainty of national, local, and personal identity during the *Mexicanidad* movement. In doing so, Iturbide's artistic endeavors fulfill an anthropological examination of cultural dominance and "the schism which [is produced by] living between two antagonistic reference systems," with the antagonism arising from a desire to return to the past while needing to establish a unified future.¹⁶ By addressing, however indirectly, this cultural dissidence, Iturbide has opened avenues for artistic and anthropological truths to coexist alongside one another, rather than in opposition. Therefore, *Mujer Ángel* serves the *Mexicanidad* as part of the "civil contract of photography," where viewers, or "visual citizens," all hold some degree of interpretive control over the image, insofar as the individual interpretation reflects back upon the culture.¹⁷ The reflexivity and multiplicity is further emphasized by Iturbide herself. Iturbide often characterized her approach as creating useful art that captures an existing

14. Graciela Iturbide and Judith Keller, *Iturbide: Juchitán* (Los Angeles: J. Paul Getty Museum, 2007): 8. Published to accompany the exhibition *The Goat's Dance: Photographs by Graciela Iturbide*, held at the J. Paul Getty Museum, December 18, 2007-April 13, 2008.

15. Sharon Kennedy, "Seasonal Celebrations, Daily Life: Photographs by Graciela Iturbide," *Sheldon Museum of Art Catalogues and Publications* 64 (2007): 2.

16. "Graciela Iturbide suscita una reflexión que rebasaría las circunstancias específicas de esa comunidad: trata de las subsistencia de unos sistemas culturales dentro de otros que ejercen una posición dominante y de la escisión que produce vivir inmersos entre dos sistemas de referencias casi antagónicos." Lucas Esteban Lorduy Osés, "Fotógrafas Mexicanas: Imágenes de Disidencia y Empoderamiento," *Espacio, Tiempo, y Forma* 5 (2017): 347.

17. Gardner, 175.

spirit, rather than making any overt efforts to change the world.¹⁸ Similarly, the intent of an ethnography, even a visual one, is to capture a culture at a moment in time, such as the transitory period between tradition and modernity, rather than to force a culture to change. The separation between art and anthropology, or intent and condition, is not as distinct as would initially appear.

Contrast is the defining characteristic of *Mujer Ángel*, but contrast does not necessarily require conflict. Just as the various juxtaposed elements of the image enhance the viewing experience to draw the audience in, the diametrically opposed dialogue that surrounds *Mujer Ángel*'s purpose provokes a consideration all its own. The Seri woman appears caught between the flow of time, just as Mexico was, and yet she seeks her freedom without compromising her identity—the same could be said of the *Mexicanidad*. What occurs within the photograph can be considered a microcosm of what occurs without it, especially when the artist's intent is accounted for alongside the visual elements. Indeed, Iturbide adopts visual and contextual disjunction, before harmonizing this disjunction into self-expression and cultural critique, all without adhering to a singular meaning. It is therefore not only possible, but preferable, to view *Mujer Ángel* as both a representation of Iturbide's intent and the Seri spirit, as well as a commentary on the greater cultural condition of Mexico. Synthesis, not disparity, is the cornerstone to understanding and appreciating such a complex image.

18. Graciela Iturbide, *Eyes to Fly With: Portraits, Self-Portraits, and Other Photographs* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2006), 34.

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