

# Olga Costa and Lola Alvarez Bravo

## The bittersweet painting of Olga Costa

Olga Costa (1913-1993) used to say that painting had a bittersweet taste, since it was both pleasure and suffering. Her favorite subjects were flowers, fruit and landscapes; her paintings are filled with color.

Costa's still life *Mexican fruits* (1951, approx. 6 1/2' x 8') is one of the best to have been painted in this country. Renamed *Fruit vendor*, it is much admired abroad and is rightly considered a classic of 20th-century Mexican painting.

Olga was born in Leipzig, the first child of Anna and Jakof Kostakowsky, who had moved to Germany from Odessa. When World War I broke out the family moved to



*I went to the field and picked them, 1986, oil on masonite.*



*Girl of Janitzio, 1951, oil.*

Berlin, emigrating in 1925 to Mexico, where Olga became a Mexican citizen.

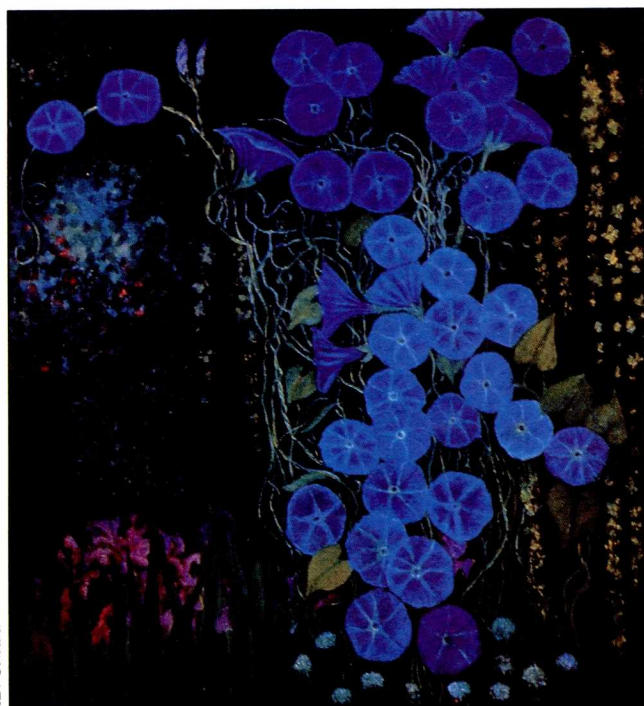
The Kostakowskys were an artistic family. Olga's father was a violinist and composer of symphonic music. Olga participated in the chorus at the Colegio Alemán (German School) until she decided to take up painting. Her sister Lya was a writer and the wife of Luis Cardoza y Aragón, who died recently (see *Voices of Mexico* 22).

Olga's contact with the foremost artists of her time, such as Diego Rivera, Frida Kahlo and Rufino Tamayo, was key to her decision to dedicate her life to painting. As an artist she was self-taught, having attended classes at the San Carlos National School of Fine Arts for only four months. It

was at San Carlos, in 1933, that she met the man she would marry two years later: José Chávez Morado, a fellow student of hers in the lithography workshop who was to become an important muralist (see *Voices of Mexico* 22).

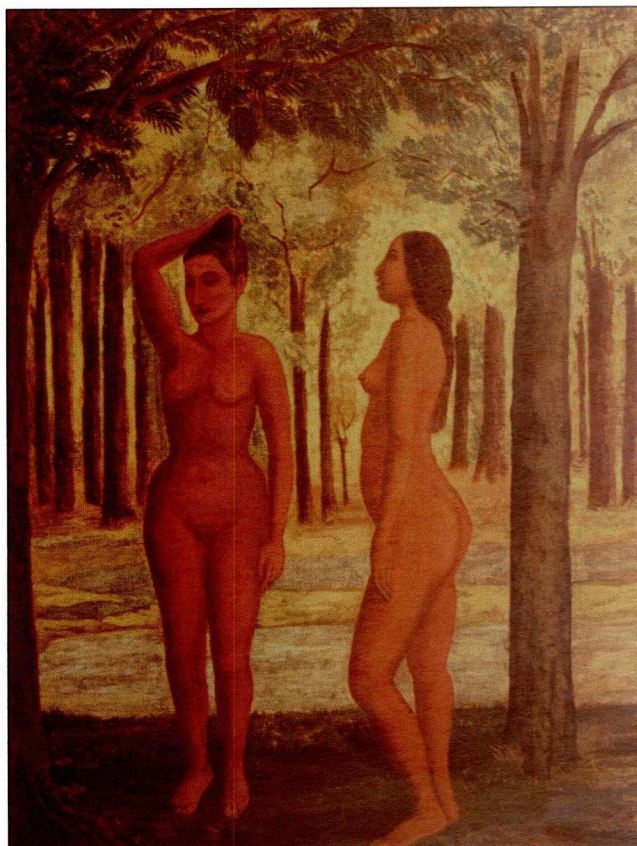
“With her teacher at home” she went through several phases, according to Sergio Pitol: scenes infused with humor, what she called “the irony of affectation,” still lifes and portraits, scenes of Mexican customs, an immersion in open spaces, up to the phantom gardens she painted during her last years.

In 1943 she founded the Society for Modern Art, the first Mexican gallery to show significant foreign exhibitions. Olga presented her first one-woman exhibit in



IIE / UNAM.

*Blue flowers, 1987, oil on canvas.*



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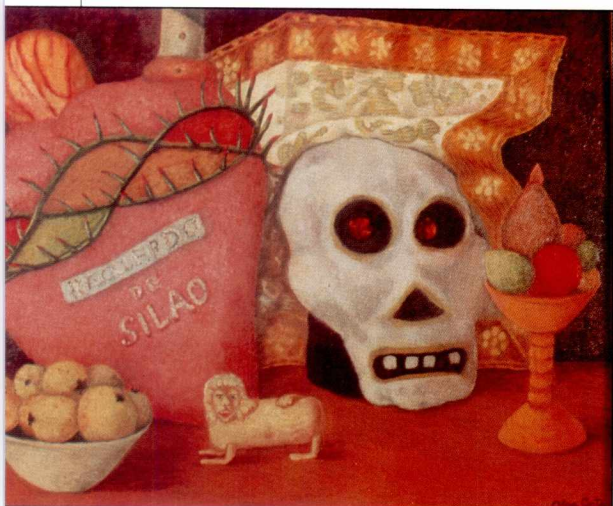
*Two women in the forest, 1945, mixed media on paper.*

1945; in 1952 she did her only mural, a mosaic which decorates the Agua Hedionda spa in Cuautla, Morelos.

At the beginning of her career she was attracted by the human figure, but later abandoned it almost completely: “I used to really like painting people, but now, this over-production —masses who overwhelm you— horrifies me. I am truly terrified by crowds and public transport; places filled with people just kill me.

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*Two distinguished Mexican women artists died earlier this year. Both lived long lives (Olga died at the age of 80 and Lola at 86) devoted to the fine arts, and married men involved in the same artistic disciplines as they were. While Olga, the painter, used her maiden name (albeit in Hispanicized form) and considered her husband to be her teacher, Lola, the photographer, used her married name and never felt herself to be a disciple of her husband. The ashes of one were scattered on land and those of the other at sea.*



IIE / UNAM.

*Souvenirs of Silao, 1954, oil on masonite.*



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*Dead child, 1944, oil on canvas.*



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*Tropics, 1990, mixed media on paper.*

*Girl with cat.*



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*The duel, 1942, oil on canvas.*



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*The Valenciana mine, 1955.*

IIE / UNAM.



*Selfish heart, 1951, oil.*

*Pilgrims, 1957.*

IIE / UNAM.



*Still life with lollipops, 1983, oil on canvas.*

IIE / UNAM.



*Garden with poinsettias, 1985, oil on linen.*

IIE / UNAM.



"It's the brute force of the mass which invades everyplace and goes around destroying nature, like ants. And their noise, their radios. I have often thought about why I stopped painting people, and the truth is there is a sort of rejection there."

Olga Costa had other passions in addition to painting. She cultivated exotic and delicate plants —the sort that gardeners usually want nothing to do with; and she collected idols and art books, "well-made books," even at the cost of going broke sometimes.

In 1966 Costa and Chávez moved to Guanajuato, where they participated in setting up the Alhóndiga de Granaditas Museum. In 1975 they donated their rich collection of pre-Hispanic, Colonial and folk art to this museum, and in 1979 they founded the Museum of the People of Guanajuato, to which they also donated pieces from their collection.

Recognition for Olga Costa's art was late in coming. Only in the 1980s were there significant retrospective exhibitions of her painting, as her pictures began to fetch high prices at New York auctions.

A tribute to her work was presented at the 1989 International Cervantine Festival, and the following year she was awarded the National Prize for Science and Art in the field of fine arts, becoming the second woman to receive this honor (the first was Guillermina Bravo, in 1979).

The jury considered that she deserved this distinction "since for five decades she has carried out work of high artistic quality..., in recognition of her special calling as a collector, devoted to gathering objects of historical, cultural and artistic value for public enjoyment..., and because Mexico unambiguously wishes to claim as its own those personalities who, although born abroad, have carried out work in this country which is of significance to the life of our nation."

Olga Costa died on April 28.

Her body was cremated and the ashes were placed in the garden she cultivated in her home, which today houses the Museum of the House of Olga Costa and José Chávez Morado. The museum, inaugurated two months before her death, exhibits the 293-piece collection gathered by the couple over the course of their life together. Visitors will find it at the former Hacienda de Guadalupe de Pastita in Guanajuato.

### **The photographic heritage of Lola Alvarez Bravo**

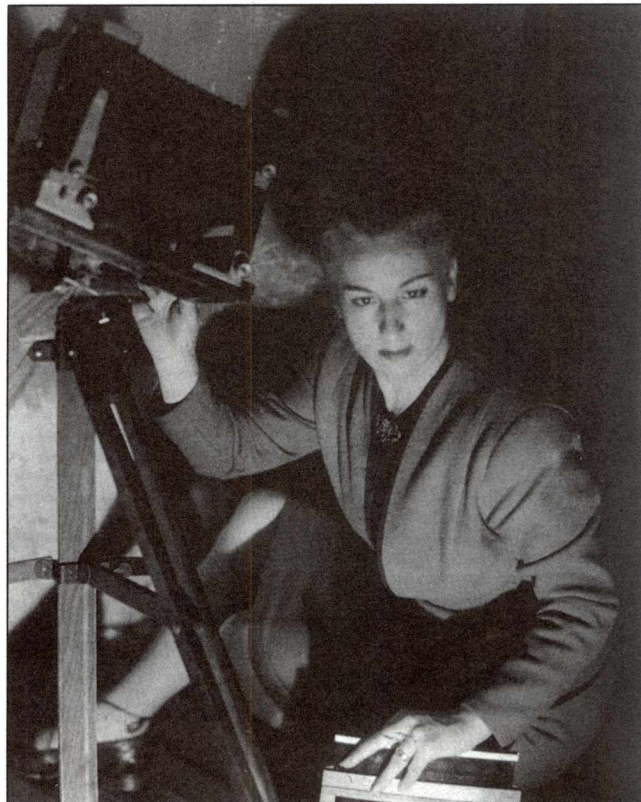
Dolores Martínez de Anda was born on April 3, 1907, in Lagos de Moreno, Jalisco. At the age of 18 she married the photographer Manuel Alvarez Bravo, from whom she separated in 1934 (the divorce was formalized 15 years later). Speaking of her former husband, she said: "He is the best photographer there is, yet he was not my teacher but my companion in developing intuition." The two were the only photographers included in the exhibit of "20 centuries of Mexican art" shown in 1940 at New York's Museum of Modern Art. Since she was known as Lola Alvarez Bravo, she decided to continue using her married name after her separation.



*The drowned man's dream.*



Olga Costa. Portrait by Lola Alvarez Bravo.



The photographer teaching a class, 1947.

Raúl Abarca.

For a woman in 1930, working meant standing up to all of society. Woman as a shotgun, loaded and standing in a corner. Lola, whose separation was supposed to destroy her completely, threw herself into the streets to take photographs. Only Tina Modotti had dared to do this and that's how things went for her; they landed on her like a ton of bricks. God save us from deciding about our own lives; that idea was the devil's work. Damn communists. All the women who dared to break taboos -Lupe Marín, Nahui Olin, María Izquierdo, Antonieta Rivas Mercado, Concha Michel, Aurora Reyes, Frida Kahlo and the wayfaring Benita Galeana, who went to meetings carrying her bedroll- they would all wind up very badly indeed. Keep at it, keep at it, daughters of Eve, and you'll just see where you end up, in hell, getting your behinds burned in a bonfire, in the ground. Her heaven among her friends who couldn't live without her, her hell in the daily challenge to go out in the streets to see. Lola took on all the dangers, all the difficulties, the suffering and solitude; she accepted the challenges, the "what will everybody say," she jumped over all the puddles, captured the textures of misery, and above all knocked down obstacles. She saw herself just as she was -a young, beautiful and free woman. She decided that nobody would tie that young woman's hands or shut her eyes.

Elena Poniatowska  
La Jornada, August 1, 1993.



*Lya Kostakowsky de Cardoza y Aragón.*

*Ruth Rivera Marin.*

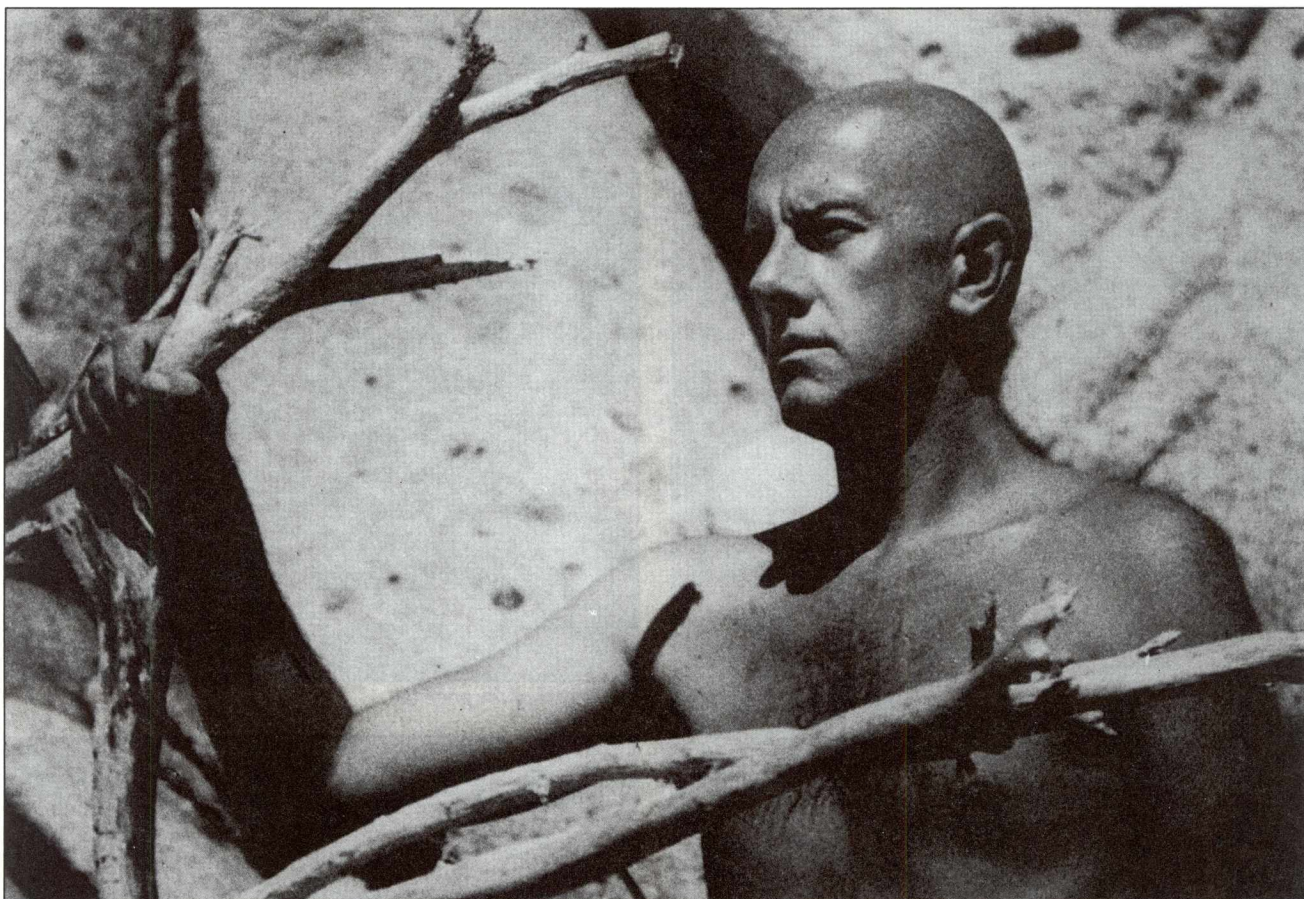


She admired couples such as Luis and Lya Cardoza y Aragón, whose life together was based on mutual trust and security. The break-up of her marriage was caused by Manuel's predilection for women. There was an attempt at reconciliation. He proposed that she stop working and stop seeing her friends. Yet when she asked what he would do in return for her agreeing to such foolishness, "nothing" was his response. He would keep on doing whatever he wanted, since after all he was a man.

A free woman, called a "libertine" by some of her contemporaries, friend to the great writers and artists of her day, tireless traveler, gifted with the sight of her photographer's third eye, Lola's life was filled with vivid experiences. Those who had the opportunity to listen to her anecdotes describe her as a great conversationalist. When she died she left us the legacy of approximately seven thousand negatives.

The main tools of her trade were two cameras: an "8 by 10" and a Graflex which was extremely valuable since its previous owners were Edward Weston and then Tina Modotti. When Modotti was deported from Mexico in 1930 she sold the camera to Lola.

Lola said that when she took her first photo as an employee of the Publications and Press Office of the



Francisco Tarío.

Secretariat of Public Education, soon after her separation from Manuel, she was so nervous and her arms were shaking so violently that two of her friends had to hold her up to keep her from falling.

After renting a room in the painter María Izquierdo's house in Tacuba, in the mid-1930s she introduced photomontage to Mexico. Among her outstanding works in this medium are *The dream of the poor II*, *Making a path*, *Women's university*, *Northern threads I*, *Computer I*, *Architectural anarchy of Mexico City*, *Railways*, *Mermaids of the air* and *The drowned man's dream*.

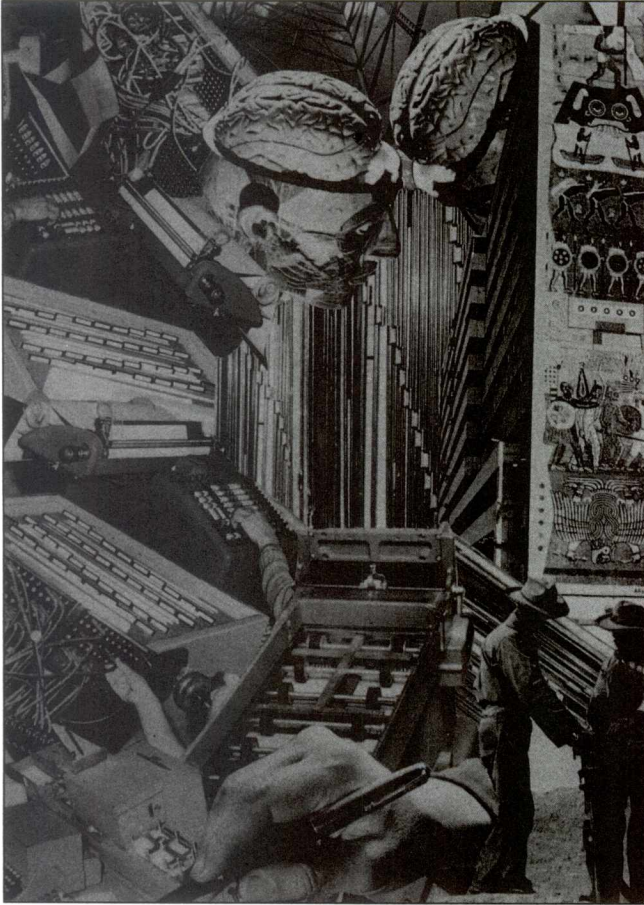
She also specialized in portraits. Her exhibit of Indian portraits, "The family of man," was shown in several countries, and some of her portraits are on exhibit at the Museum of Modern Art in New York. The best photos of Frida Kahlo are considered to be those taken by Lola.

In 1950, with the support of Juan Soriano and Diego de Mesa, she opened the Gallery of Contemporary Art, better known as "the gallery of Lola Alvarez Bravo," presenting 50 exhibitions by more than 150 artists. In fact, the only individual exhibition of Frida Kahlo's paintings shown during Kahlo's life was presented at this museum, in 1953, a few months before the painter's death.

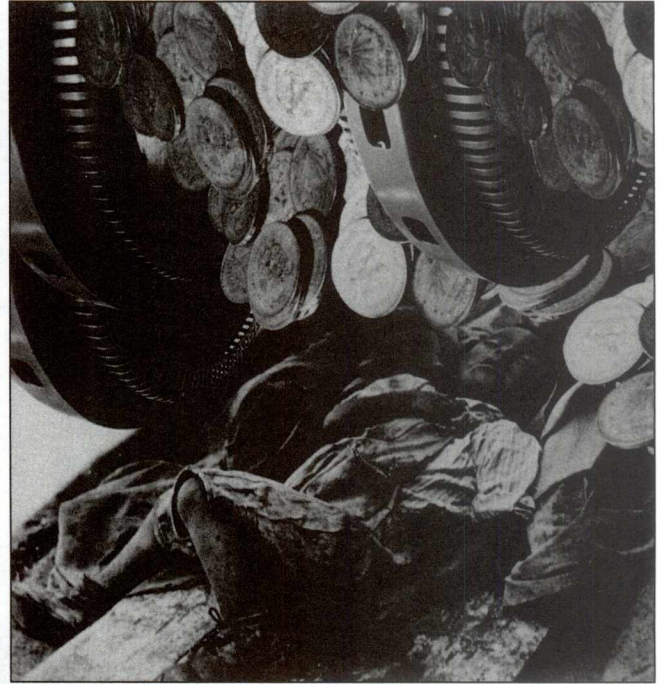
Manuel Alvarez Bravo.







Computer I.



The dream of the poor II.



Manuel Alvarez Bravo.



Some go up, some go down.



Lola's son Manuel at the age of two.

In 1945 she succeeded Manuel Alvarez Bravo as senior professor of photography at the San Carlos art school. She was considered an excellent teacher because of the enthusiasm she inspired in her students. During the same year she moved to an apartment on Juárez Avenue in downtown Mexico City, where she was to live for more than 40 years. One of her last visitors there was pop music star Madonna, who came seeking information on Frida for the movie she wanted to make on the celebrated Mexican painter's life. Lola said she did not think Madonna would be able to portray Frida well, since she lacked the latter's intensity.

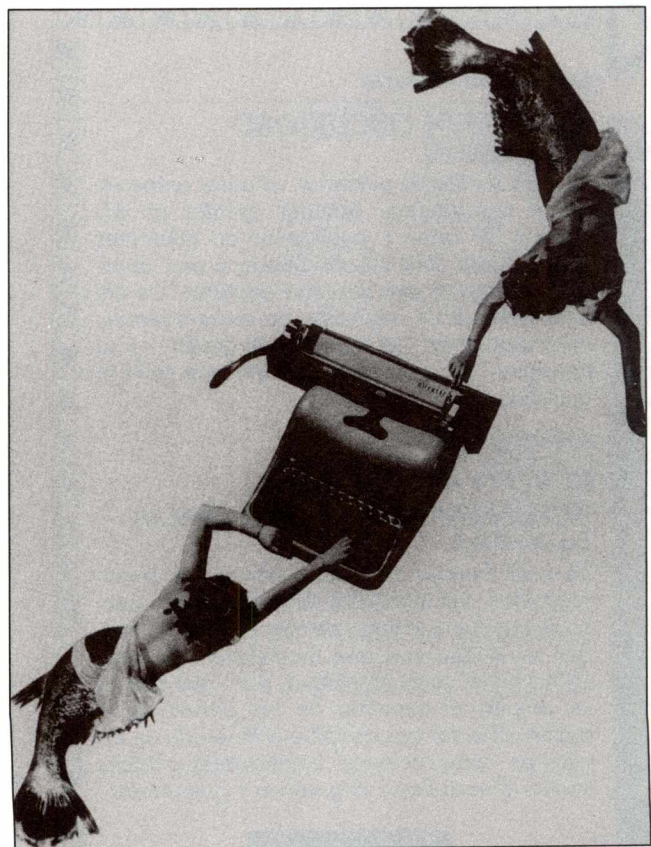
Lola was the first photographer in Mexico to publish a book of her own photos (*Acapulco en el sueño* [Acapulco in dreams], 1951). Despite her role as a pioneer in her field, responsible for professionalizing photography in this country, her first one-woman show was held only in 1965, in the Palace of Fine Arts.

During this period Lola made a brief foray into the movies. The subject of her one short feature was Diego Rivera's murals in the chapel of Chapingo. Other projects did not materialize; the one she planned to carry out on Frida, with the artist's personal participation, did not come to fruition because of Frida's illness and death.

Speaking of her fellowship with the great intellectuals and proximity to their work, she said: "If I had not

*Mermaids of the air.*

*The daydream. Portrait of Isabel Villaseñor.*





Rogelio Cuéllar.

*Lola decided that nobody would tie her hands or shut her eyes.*

followed the painters' work so closely and put so much into studying how to reproduce their paintings and murals, the sense of composition and balance, perhaps it would have taken me longer to make the photos that I do. This helped me to educate myself, to have the ideas I have and to be what I am, if indeed I am something."

Old age and illness robbed her of her love of life. She spent her last years in virtual seclusion in her last home, on Sinaloa street, where she moved so as to be close to her son (Manuel Alvarez Bravo, also a photographer), who was her only child. A bad fall, in which she broke her legs and ribs, left her in a wheelchair. Interviewed in October of 1992, she said she no longer loved life "because I am tired now; I am just bearing life, I see it and no longer love it since, with so much illness, I can no longer work as a photographer."

On July 31 death brought this extraordinary woman the rest she desired, and her ashes were spread on the beach at Chachalacas, Veracruz, which she had often visited with many of her celebrated and beloved friends ✕

*Marybel Toro Gayol*

**Managing Editor.**