

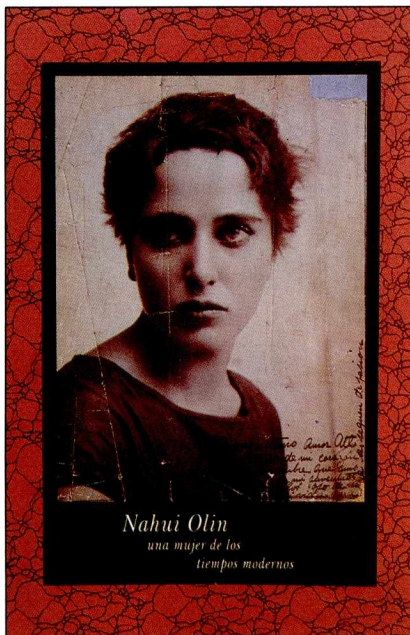
Reviews

Nahui Olin: una mujer de los tiempos modernos (Nahui Olin: a woman of modern times)

Tomás Zurian

Consejo Nacional para la Cultura y las Artes,
Instituto Nacional de Bellas Artes and Museo Estudio Diego Rivera
Mexico City, 1992. 165 pp.

Nahui Olin is the latest of a group of women artists, writers and intellectuals active in Mexico in the 1920s to be spotlighted. The passion for Frida Kahlo and fascination with Tina Modotti have been underway for some time. Meanwhile, an in-depth view of the life of Katherine Anne Porter in Mexico by Thomas Walsh

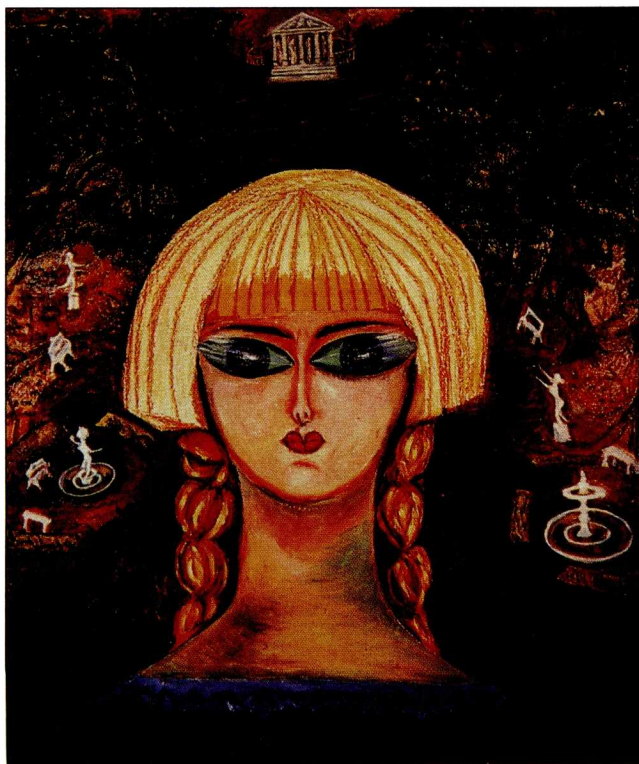


was recently published by the University of Texas Press (see *Voices of Mexico* 23, April-June, 1993).

Last fall, the Diego Rivera Studio Museum honored Olin with a retrospective exhibit which coincided with the publication of a biography-catalogue of her work that included some of her poetry.

Nahui Olin (1893-1978) was born Carmen Mondragón. She was the daughter of a well-known general who invented a rifle during the Porfirio Díaz regime in Mexico (1876-1910) and later became Secretary of Defense for a brief period in 1913. Her family was part of the pre-Revolution Establishment.

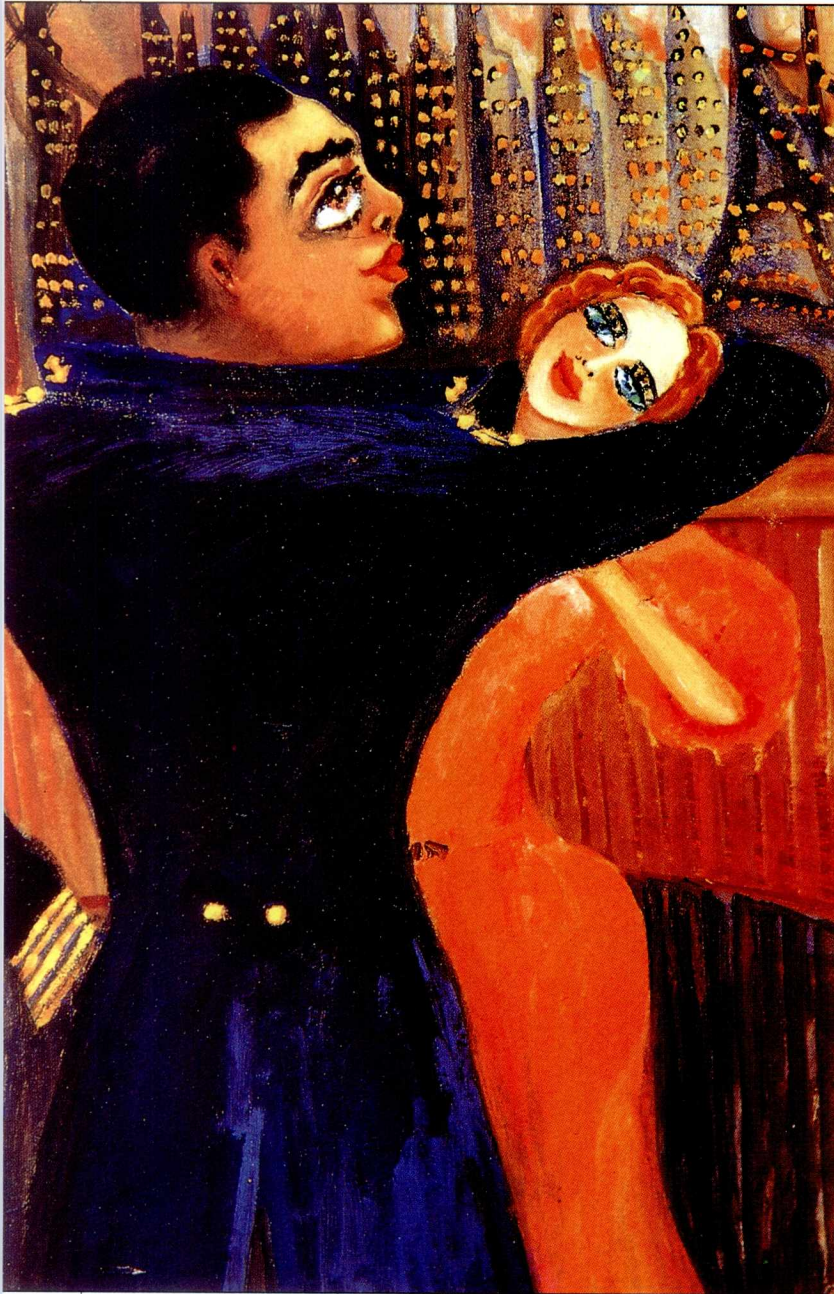
Nahui was an outstanding woman who received the kind of education



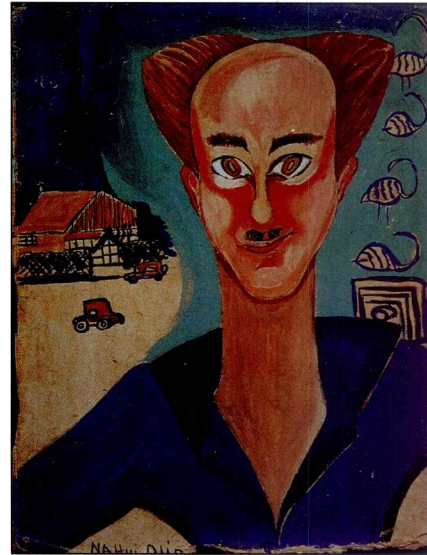
Self-portrait in the gardens of Versailles.



Carmen Mondragón as an adolescent.



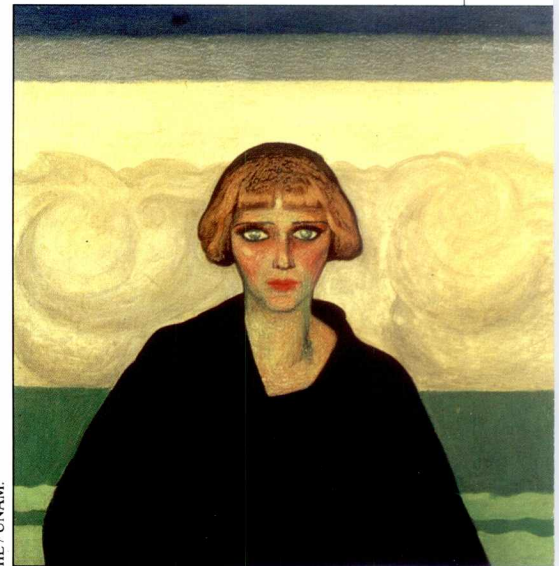
Nahui and Agacino dancing on the bow of the Habana in New York harbor.



Edward Weston.

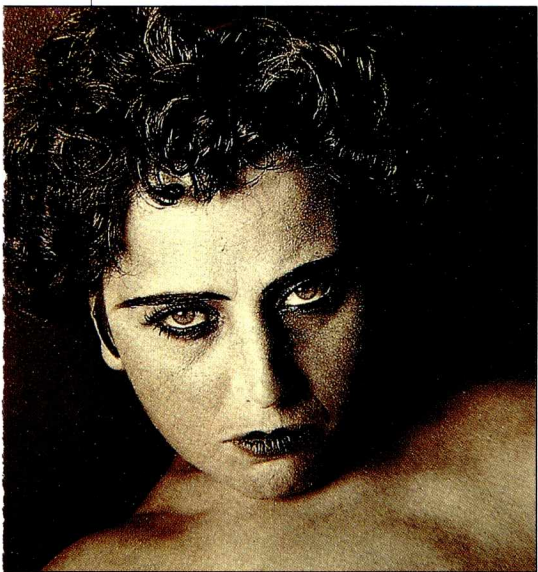


Caricature of Atl and Nahui by Matias Santoyo.



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Dr. Atl, Portrait of Nahui Olin, Atlcolors on cloth.



Nahui Olin. Portrait by Edward Weston.



Caricature of Nahui by Matías Santoyo.



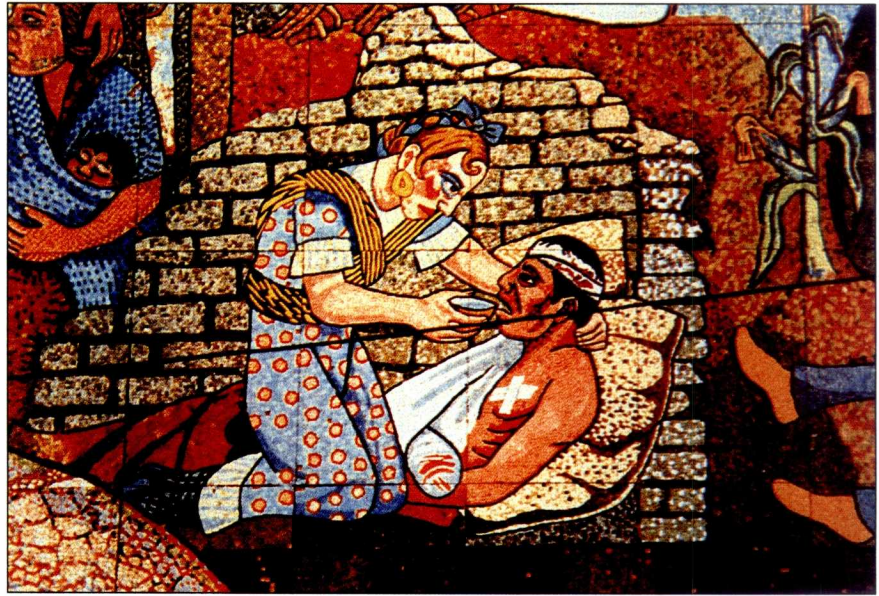
Nahui's invitation to her exhibition of nudes by photographer Antonio Garduño.



Wedding portrait of Carmen Mondragón and Manuel Rodríguez Lozano.

reserved for the elite. She wrote poetry, played the piano and composed music as well as being an accomplished artist. Growing up in Paris, she became familiar with the art world of the turn of the century. When she returned to Mexico in 1905, her teachers were astounded at her talent for writing and her familiarity with French art.

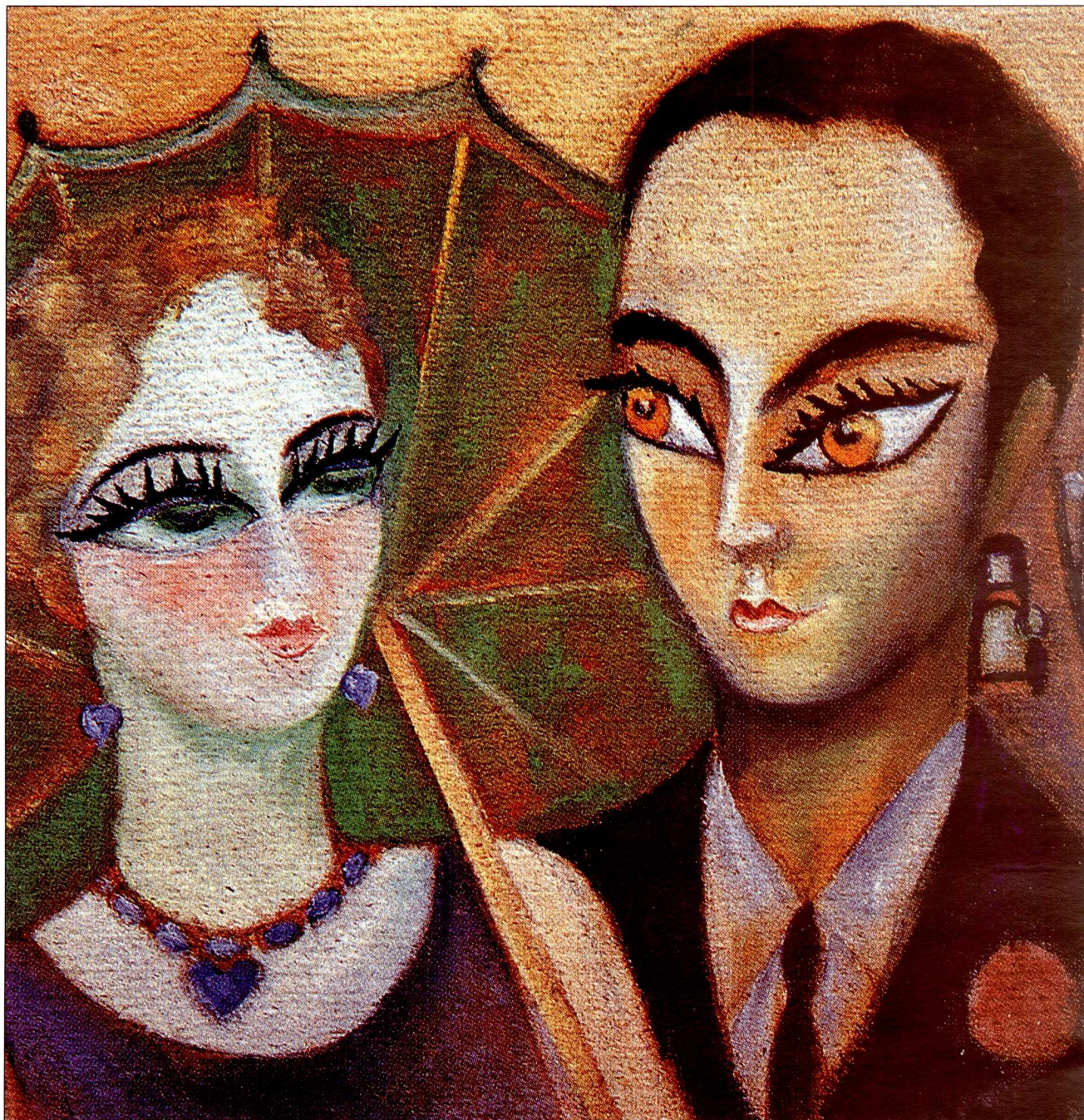
Mystery and legend are woven into the life of Nahui Olin. Her marriage to Manuel Rodríguez Lozano in 1913, which lasted nine years, is part of the enigma. Some say that the couple had a child, who died in infancy; others say there never was a child. Nahui claimed that the child fell off a ladder during a marital



*She was the muse for important artists of her day.
Mural at the Insurgentes Theater (detail) by Diego Rivera.*

Town plaza.





Nahui and man with carnation.

tussle. Rodríguez Lozano has a different version.

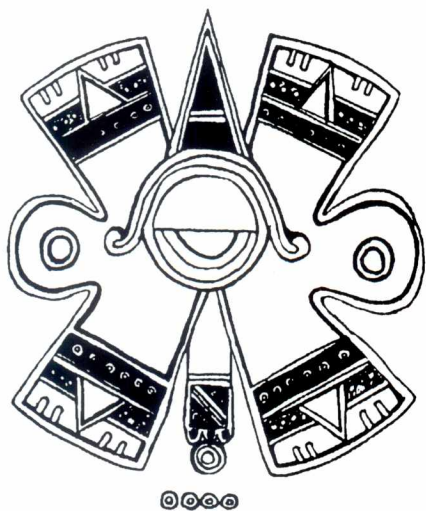
The marriage ended in 1922 when Carmen Mondragón, driven by passion, scandalized Mexico City society by going to live with the painter and volcanologist Gerardo Murillo, who had taken the name Dr. Atl (Nahuatl for “water”) and in turn named her Nahui Olin —“the fourth

sun or fourth movement.” Both artists are best known by their adopted names. The stormy, short-lived relationship with Dr. Atl thrust Nahui into the circle of artists and intellectuals active in what is called the Mexican Renaissance. She painted, published her poetry and lent support to the artistic community. Nahui joined the Union of Technical

Workers, Painters and Sculptors,¹ but did not actively participate in politics.

Nahui Olin was a spectacular and sensuous beauty. Her main feature, other than her body, was her beautiful, intense green eyes. This is well-documented in the many portraits of

¹ See *The fabulous life of Diego Rivera* by Bertram Wolfe.



NAHUI-OLIN

her made by artists active at that time, as well as her appearance in three of Diego Rivera's murals. Her body became well-known when dramatic nude photographs of her were published by a major daily in 1927, adding fire to the sensational controversy she ignited when she left her husband to live with Dr. Atl.

Intense jealousy and conflict led Nahui to leave Atl late in 1927 to go to Hollywood in pursuit of a film offer which did not materialize. She floated from one relationship to another until she met the sea captain Eugenio Agacino in 1929, with whom she lived until his death in 1934.

Bullfight.

This woman recorded the loves of her life in her painting. In contrast to Frida Kahlo, who documented her life with self-portraits, Nahui painted couples. The brief passages of poetry included in the book provide a glimpse of her search for freedom and exploration of sensuality.

When Agacino, the sea captain, died, Nahui sank into despair. No further important relationships are documented. Although Nahui initially refused to see friends, she did recover sufficiently to paint and exhibit her work. The lively, colorful and charming scenes of nature, circuses, parks and bullfights reflect a cheerful personality, although there are no further scenes of lovers.

Time passes, beauty fades and the sensuous body gives way to sagging middle age, but the striking green eyes remain. The years roll by and Nahui stops painting. She teaches art in a public school and survives by eating at a government soup kitchen—a routine broken only by impulsive splurges of fabulous meals on payday.

Cats were the trademark of her eccentricity. She adopted them, stuffed them when they died, and covered her bed with a bizarre spread made of cat skins, including their heads!

Most of *Nahui Olin, una mujer de tiempos modernos* was written by

*Nahui Olin. Portrait by Antonio Garduño.*

Tomás Zurian. Rafael Tovar y de Teresa, president of the National Council for Culture and the Arts, contributed an interesting forward. Gerardo Estrada Rodríguez and Blanca Garduño, the directors of the National Institute of Fine Arts and the Diego Rivera Studio Museum respectively, have written short introductions.

The reproductions of Nahui Olin's work greatly enhance the book. They follow Zurian's narrative, treating the reader to the artwork mentioned in the text. Zurian, a well-known expert in art restoration and evaluation, carried out his goal of presenting the information he has gathered, without the pretense of providing a full biography. His style is a real pleasure, making the book a splendid experience—the story and pictures of a beautiful, sensuous woman accompanied by excellent reproductions of her art and appropriate inserts of poetry.

The book is a refreshing glimpse of the life of a woman artist and poet active in the 1920s, in sharp contrast with—and yet parallel to—the lives of Frida Kahlo and Tina Modotti. This is a welcome addition to the literature on women artists active in Mexico.