

# Mariana Yampolsky, the singing camera

**M**ariana Yampolsky —with eyes as green as prickly-pear pulp and shiny white hair— emerges from between the rain-drenched trees and plants. She is followed by one of her dogs; a cat which she has had for sixteen years, and which doesn't like to be photographed, prowls around her. At the back of this garden, which smells like the countryside, is a house with large windows.

“Words of praise last only a moment —says Mariana. Five minutes later they are forgotten. At least that's what happens in my case. But what endures is work. A work which is seen, enjoyed, discussed... which serves the people. Homages don't impress me much. Not even those that are made during a person's life, because in any case posthumous praise has no meaning. Sometimes I get a lump in my throat when I learn that colleagues have died, who worked so hard to please their people while no one paid attention to them when they were still alive. The posthumous testimonials, although they are a form of recognition, seem to me like a kind of worship. For me, the best testimonial is for someone to buy one of my photographs.”

● *Gabriela Rábago*: You've just returned from Iceland. How do you feel about your work having taken you to the North Pole?

■ *Mariana Yampolsky*: I imagine it was the first time there was an exhibition of Mexican photography in Iceland. I was surprised to find similarities between Iceland and



Elsa Escamilla.

*For me, the best testimonial is for someone to buy one of my photographs.*

Elsa Escamilla.



Mexico is a country of colors.

Mexico. The exposition site was surrounded by lava. There are large fields of lava very similar to ours, which made me feel at home. The people were nice, very generous. They invited us to stay in their homes.

Iceland is a very strange, sort of moon-like country. The people keep much longer hours during the summer because there is no night. I saw children riding bicycles at 11 at night. The light is extraordinarily beautiful. What I liked most of all was the water. I drank it all the time. They say the water has been distilled in the lava rocks for 400,000 years, since the glacier period. It is the purest water in the world.

In Iceland, people are anxious to see cultural exhibitions from other places. Sebastian's sculptures have been well received and people speak warmly of him. This year there were many Latinos: there was Cuban dance and painting, and I think we were able to bring some of the warmth of our land to that country, which is so cold.

I would like to tell you that while the island has only 250,000 inhabitants, 800 new books in Icelandic are published every year, which places them among the top publishers in the world. I gave an

exhibition about architecture and was interested to find out that in Iceland in the past century, peasants' houses were built underground to escape the cold. Now hot water is the basis of the island's heating systems. Also in their warm way of relating to others, the Icelanders reminded me of Mexicans, which made me feel very happy.

● GR: What was the size of the photographic display that you took?

■ MY: There were sixty photographs, with the theme of houses of the people. This display was not related to the "Caressing Houses" exhibition shown in the Museum of Anthropology. I made sure that all of the material for the Iceland exhibition was different. As you know, I have always been interested in everything that human beings do, everything their hands have touched. Architecture is an important aspect of humanity. Over the years I've taken pictures of country houses, former haciendas and architecture in general. I would dare say that I have the largest archive of popular architecture in Mexico. I know of no others who have dedicated themselves to this for so long.

I'm often asked for these photos now because people want to see and learn about the vernacular architecture. In the famous book *Arquitectura sin arquitectos* (Architecture without Architects), there are houses and buildings from all parts of the world, except Mexico. I liked that theme so much that I decided to correct the error. Then the SEP published my book *La casa que canta* (The Singing House), about this subject.



Mariana Yampolsky, Mazahua Mother.



Mariana Yampolsky, Otomí Woman.

At the end of 1993 the English publishers Thames and Hudson came out with a book of mine on traditional Mexican architecture. They also asked me to do an exhibition about this architecture. I was glad about this, but at the same time there are other aspects of life to enjoy, and I wish the galleries would take that into account.

The Mexican people have an astonishing vitality. It's not for me to analyze why. However, I'm going to say something outrageous: I believe the thread of continuity was never completely broken. It is a country whose anonymous pre-Hispanic art is so unquestionably powerful. This continues into the Colonial period, it mixes with European art. It's very interesting to visit Baroque Europe and to compare it to what has arisen in Mexico, because it's different. This thread continues through the entire history of the country.

Today, if we look at what has been produced by countries with great

cultures —Egypt and Greece, for example— there is no comparison to what they did in the past. In Mexico, there is. I believe I am not wrong when I say that in the history of art, Mexico is a country *sui generis* in that sense.

At the same time I'm against comparing one person's product to another's. I believe we're falling into the pattern of yearning to be the first and most outstanding. I am surprised to hear that Picasso is the most notable painter of this century. How can different kinds of expressions be judged in this way? I can't say that pre-Hispanic Mexican work was superior to that of ancient China, Egypt or Greece. I believe that life is not about finding the best or the first.

In Mexico we have photographers who work a lot, who start to define themselves and stand out, and each has his or her own distinct value. Why do we have to find the best? There's room for plenty in this world, and that's a good thing. During this *fin de siècle*, the U.S. way of looking at

things is characterized by such oddities as saying that the largest state of the Union is Texas and the most beautiful woman in the world is the so-called Miss Universe.

I can't understand how you can think of having that kind of contest. The physical make-up and features of one racial group are different from those of others. What is important is that they function in accordance with their geographical placement. Based on what principles can you say that a Mexican woman is more beautiful than a Chinese woman? I really don't understand, it doesn't make sense. In the Mexican art world they are applying schemas of that kind. They waste a lot of energy trying to be the best, the most famous, in order to serve the art market.

● *GR*: Would you say that market is a recent invention?

■ *MY*: In the epoch of muralism that market did exist, but it lacked the power it has now. Now the work of many artists is oriented towards the market, not their country or people. I see a difference between people and country, and that leads me to a



Elsa Escamilla.

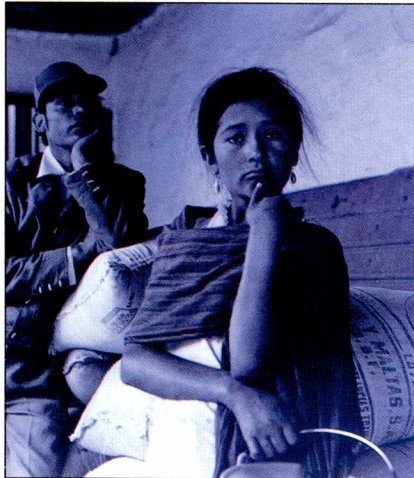
Photographers capture the image of others all our lives.

delicate subject: how many members of the common people have the opportunity to see what their compatriots are doing in the field of culture? Culture doesn't reach television, or it's shown so superficially that there's no time for the person who sees it to assimilate it. There is no doubt that people know more about what's happening in other countries than their own. Art is concentrated in the large cities.

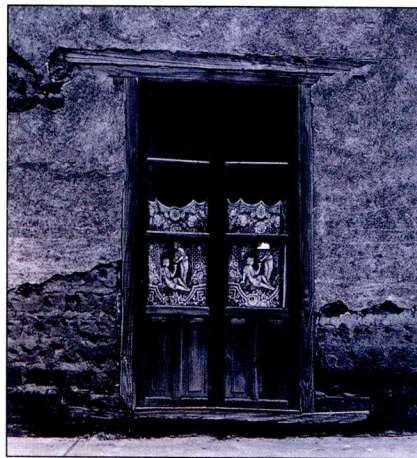
For photographers, who capture the image of others all our lives—the only way to photograph is to steal people's image—how to return those images to the photographed subject is a problem. One way is through exhibitions and books, but books are very expensive and the majority of people can't afford them. Exhibitions are limited to big-city museums. So there isn't the sort of give and take that I would like.

I'd love it if the people whose photographs appear in my new book about the Mazahuas could see themselves there. What these people think about their portraits is something we haven't heard. At first, many are afraid of the camera or angry, and I think I speak for most photographers when I say that we face situations where people challenge us, saying we'll make a lot of money from the pictures we take of them. Sometimes I feel the need to find out whether the subject of the photograph really thinks the image has turned out to be so good or so awful.

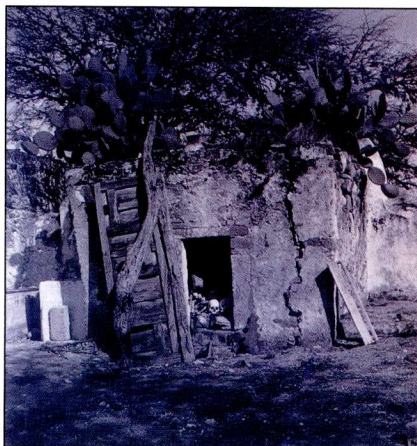
When I've had the opportunity for such a confrontation, I've seen many reactions: silence—perhaps out of respect, perhaps because of a breakdown in communication; the pleasure that comes from showing the picture on the wall; or disenchantment because the image is in black and white, not color. This is very understandable: since Mexico is a country of colors, the people see in color. I wish someone would investigate what is behind this "leap"



Mariana Yampolsky, *The Store*.



Mariana Yampolsky, *Lace curtains*.



Mariana Yampolsky, *House of bones*.

from color to black and white. It's interesting. I sometimes take pictures in color because reality demands it. It says "I am," and I can't ignore it. Perhaps in other parts of the world they see photographers from Latin America as an unusual phenomenon because "we're still in black and white," which signifies the past to many people.

I'm going to say something else outrageous: when a black-and-white photograph is well done, the viewer adds the color. There's no such thing as "without color." The range of black and white, with all the intermediate greys, suggests, gives form and volume. I read a phrase from an anonymous author which I liked very much: "To describe is to kill; suggestion is life."

● *GR*: Would you agree that at the present time, artists—including photographers—are characterized by individualism?

■ *MY*: Yes, it's an individualism provoked by an unbridled search to be different. Not long ago I saw some photography magazines, and I noticed something interesting but not very successful: a series of experiments which gave me the feeling that the artist wanted to justify his profession. This happens in other artistic fields: a singer that seeks a huge audience.

In fact, I believe the period we're living through is the time of singers. That photography, sculpture, painting, have taken second place in terms of public response. Throughout the West, the first place is held by popular singers. When I see photographs of Madonna, I feel she has her hands on the pulse of what her society needs, but I also find an extraordinary desire to shock, to be remembered. I figure Madonna can't sleep for thinking of what she can do tomorrow to outdo the shock she caused yesterday. There's not much further she can go.

That also happens with photographers. I'll mention the case of an American artist who, from the

Elsa Escamilla.



Mariana Yampolsky, The Kitchen.



Mariana Yampolsky, The Barber.



Mariana Yampolsky, Angels.



Mariana Yampolsky, Wall of Thorns.



*To describe is to kill; suggestion is life. I'm concerned with how much I'm able to interpret what's going around me.*

technical point of view, does impeccable photography, but presents such images as a woman giving birth to a pig; the breasts of a woman symbolically profaned, tied up with black string so she is unable to breastfeed. That brings us to the phenomenon of wanting to make your mark on the world. I found those photos disagreeable because I couldn't stop seeing in them the denigration of woman, to such a degree that I find it hard to view that artist's work objectively.

The photographer certainly has the freedom to express whatever he wants. I'm not in favor of clipping anyone's wings. It's just that if I talk about my photos, I locate myself as the spectator, not as the creator of new symbols. I am a discoverer of what exists around me. I'm not that concerned about my ego. I'm concerned with how much I'm able to interpret what's going on around me. Nothing else.

In counterposition to extreme individualism, I miss the collective

work which was my training in the People's Graphic Workshop. When I look back, I realize it was part of a movement when Mexican art was in its golden era. A very special moment. Diego and Siqueiros had a public debate in which they exchanged harsh words and, even at that time, there was a lot of favoritism, feuding and vendettas.

Nonetheless, all that had a different dimension. It wasn't personal. It had to do with issues of social interest and went beyond the world of the artists themselves, really becoming important for society in general. I'm very grateful for that training. If there is something which bothers me now, it's the lack of cooperation between artists. All that counts is the quest for fame and fortune. And I believe that quest makes one lose the work's human dimension. ❧

*Gabriela Rábago Palafox*  
Staff writer.