

Reviews



Lola Alvarez Bravo
In Her Own Light

Lola Alvarez Bravo: In Her Own Light

Oliver Debroise

Center for Creative Photography
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Few Mexican women have been honored by the straightforward presentation that Oliver Debroise gives this distinguished photographer in *Lola Alvarez Bravo: In Her Own Light*. His respect and admiration for her as a person and for her work come through clearly, both in the text and the magnificent images reprinted in this book.

Lola Álvarez Bravo (1907-1993), one of Mexico's best photographers, was born Dolores Martínez de Anda in Lagos de Moreno in the state of Jalisco. After her mother died when she was three years old, Lola left Lagos for Mexico City with her father, who bought and sold objets d'art. He often took her with him on his travels, which is why she was alone with him when he died of a heart attack on a train from Veracruz when she was nine.

Lola then went to live with her half-brother Miguel and his wife in downtown Mexico City. However, since her sister-in-law was not too fond of her, she was sent to a boarding school and came home only on weekends. She

recalled that it was hard to know who was happier—Lola or the nuns—when she came down with typhoid and was sent home permanently.

Lola's life is inextricably woven into Manuel Alvarez Bravo's. They met on the rooftops of downtown Mexico City; they were neighbors, childhood friends and sweethearts. They married in 1925 when he was sent to Oaxaca by the government controller's office to Oaxaca. It was there that Lola learned darkroom techniques, working as Manuel's assistant. She laughingly described the process, saying his orders were to "stir and stir and stir" ("menéale, menéale, menéale").

The couple returned to Mexico City in 1927 and became part of Mexico City's circle of artists and intellectuals. They went to exhibits, and although Lola described being shy at first, they gradually fit in. When Tina Modotti was deported from Mexico, Lola and Manuel bought her cameras and took over her role as Mexico's primary mural photographers.

Lola worked behind the scenes as Manuel's assistant until they separated in 1934. She reported that Manuel had wanted to change their lifestyle: Lola would stay home, leaving the house only to do the shopping. When she asked him how he would change, he scoffed and answered that he would not: he was a man! Encouraged by friends not to put up with his womanizing, Lola and her son went to live with painter Maria Izquierdo for a "few months" which became a few years.

Lola got a job teaching art and was coached by her friends, until she was offered a job as a photographer. She described her terror as she faced the first assignment at the Ministry of Education. One assignment led to another and she became the graphic editor of the Ministry of Education's publication *Maestro rural*. It was here that she began experimenting with photomontage, combin-

ing images, cropping and pasting negatives until she was satisfied with the whole. Lola was among the first women photo journalists in Mexico so when she traveled with a press crew, she put up with a lot of teasing and brow-beating.

Lola's activity as a patron and promoter of the arts and artists began when she and Manuel opened a gallery to show the work of their friends, such as José Clemente Orozco, David Alfaro Siqueiros and Rufino Tamayo, among many others. The first gallery in Tacubaya was not open very long. She opened a second, the Galería de Arte Contemporáneo at Amberes 12, where Frida Kahlo's only solo exhibit was held. This was the famous exhibit that Frida attended "in bed," arriving at the gallery on a stretcher.

From 1937 to 1939 Lola set up and directed the photo lab at the National University. The Ministry of Education hired her to create and manage their photographic archives; that was when she began photography classes. Professional curiosity led her to experiment with film. She never finished the movie she started about Frida Kahlo because she was unwilling to shoot when Frida didn't feel well. She did, however, finish a documentary on the Diego Rivera murals in the former chapel of Chapingo University.

Lola and Manuel were formally divorced 15 years after their separation when Manuel wanted to marry his second wife, Doris Heyden, an American anthropologist. Lola did not return to her maiden name of Martínez, although encouraged to do so by friends, because she felt that she was really born as a person and as a photographer when she married Manuel.

Her talent as a photographer is matched by her flair for story-telling. She knew most of the major figures of the Mexican Renaissance as well as younger artists active in Mexico. She regaled interviewers with stories and two of them noted her way of weaving one anecdote into another and yet another. Her stories reveal a good sense of humor and a great love for her friends.

Lola Alvarez Bravo: In Her Own Light is a beautifully designed presentation of this woman's life and work. Although bilingual editions are often cumbersome, readers will not find it difficult to follow the text in either English or Spanish. Lola's photographic images transmit her love for people. She captures curiosity, thought, concern and poetic moments which give a glimpse of her inner being.

Debroise has presented her work and her story as it was. He did not embroider or project hidden agendas on her story as much of the literature about Frida Kahlo and Tina Modotti does. He combined his research and schol-

arly skills with deep respect for Lola's work and his personal joy in their evolving relationship. The book documents and informs in a very pleasant style.

Susannah Glusker

Free-lance writer and teacher