

# The Possible World Of Álvarez Bravo

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▲ *Mattress*, 1927.

An interior landscape of desire, haunted by images of statues and mirrors as emblems of the body.

▼ *Angels in Truck*, 1930.



In his photography, Manuel Álvarez Bravo has represented all manners of complexities and contradictions by exploring a set of related differences. Urban and rural realities, or the margins where they become confused or confounded, are linked in his work to the rift between natural arrangement and photographic design, or between formal sobriety and intellectual playfulness; or, finally, between what is potentially representable and what is actually recorded and promised by a photograph. Even as he departed from his early abstract experiments to portray the peculiar nature of Mexico City and its outlying regions—where extraordinary encounters often emerge from workaday phenomena—Álvarez Bravo returned repeatedly to the study of spatial relationships and purified form. Resorting often to personal effects, a negative image of a rolled mattress, *Colchón*, 1927 (Mattress), was first exhibited as a set of light boxes with a positive companion piece, a common practice for the photographer in his abstract compositions. But Álvarez Bravo strove to retain the progressive content of abstracted forms, perhaps in keeping with the concerns of his friend and associate Tina Modotti. Over and over he addresses the metropolis as a monument of modern life and industry, in images that pass as purely formal studies.

An implausible architecture and social progress are suggested in a photograph of steel hardware tools, *Instrumental*, 1931 (Tools). Some of Álvarez Bravo's images from the 1930s

are more resolutely symbolic or literary in meaning. There is an uncertainty that intensifies the power of these pictures insofar as it remains unclear to what degree staging or reenactment was involved between photographer and subject. Death, dreams, solitude and the unconscious were among the themes explored also by the group of Mexican writers known as Los Contemporáneos (The Contemporaries). Like the poetry of this movement, Álvarez Bravo's photographs often emanate from an interior landscape of desire, haunted by images of statues and mirrors as emblems of the body (*Ángeles en camión*, 1930 [Angels in Truck]), or from an intellect in which insomnia and longing are suspended in time (*Escala de escalas*, 1931 [Scale of Scales]).

If rarely shown producing either in the domestic or public realm, women are often portrayed as symbols of an idea, feeling or effect. In a visit to the courtyard of the building where he spent his early childhood, Álvarez Bravo chanced upon an adolescent immersed in her reverie, *El ensueño*, 1931 (Reverie). The sunlight caressing her right shoulder intensifies the pause captured by the camera. Here, daydreaming is symbolized as that interval between sleep and memory, be it personal or collective. The picture captures the pace of the everyday and the often invisible but no less dramatic interludes that confound it. In a related image, from the penumbra of a room, a sitter's face is half-illuminated as she gazes into a looking glass while combing her long tresses *Retrato de lo eterno*, 1935 (Portrait of the Eternal). Dreams and the unconscious were explored by many artists and writers in Mexico. But the picture complicates Freud's model for femininity

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as the passive desire to be desired. The eternal portrait of a figure locked into her mirror image is arrested by viewers, male or female, and by the interpretive process of the viewing.

Devoid of metaphor, however, there is another important strain in Álvarez Bravo's photography that is almost documentary in its concern for working conditions in Mexico. In one image, *Obrero en huelga asesinado*, 1934 (Striking Worker, Murdered), the artist renders the viewer mute as the camera captures the harrowing reality of a violent death. Taking film footage (with Sergei Eisenstein) in the Isthmus of Tehuantepec, and in search of what he thought were fireworks from nearby festivities, Álvarez Bravo discovered that the noises were gunshots fired at a sugar-mill strike and that someone had been murdered. Álvarez Bravo took this image very close to the corpse, and low to the ground, rendering the arm of the murdered worker as if in muralist foreshortening.

From the perspective of a passerby looking up from a city sidewalk, another image—a central one in his work *Parábola Óptica*, 1931 (Optical Parable)—shows an optician's shop with an oval hanging sign, but the picture is reversed. It contains inflec-

tions of Eugène Atget's images of Paris storefronts made during the first decade of the twentieth century. With references to the human eye, the "parable" tells about the unreliability of looking, about visual afterthoughts or change in viewpoint and, therefore, about the nature of photography itself. As in *Optical Parable*, where he links scientific optics to photographic practice, Álvarez Bravo also relates pathology to corporeal soundness, and the observable body to the phantom anatomy beneath the skin (*Hospital Juárez*, 1935 [Juárez Hospital]). Another common motif in Álvarez Bravo's photographs, tree trunks and other natural debris become surrogates of the human body, as in this unsettling form discovered by the photographer in a clearing beside a cornfield. Chopped away at the base, side and head, the solitary stump transforms the landscape into a kind of otherworldly place suffused with the "secret terror of foreboding" Diego Rivera claimed the photographer's images inspire.

His work is an extended meditation on the nature of looking and the medium of photographic reproduction itself. Lyric restraint and collective impulses are joined in idiosyncratic documents that engage the difference

*Tools*, 1931 ▶

An implausible architecture  
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in a photograph of steel  
hardware tools.

between Mexico's social realities and the often nameless transit or long duration of the otherwise uncelebrated. His sensibility is surprisingly contemporary in that his pictures allow fatuous and poignant qualities to coexist in an image. His pictures comment, too, on the disjunction between real figures and their renderings. Álvarez Bravo has stated, "I believe everything is portrayable, depending on how you see it. Everything has social content." Even in his more recent work, an image-environment of Coyoacán, *En un pequeño espacio*, 1997 (In a Small Space),

the viewer is asked to choose between at least two possible interpretations. As he stresses the photographer's role in the decision between what an image portrays and what it can mean as per its title, Álvarez Bravo invites the observer to ponder the world as it is—but perhaps more importantly, as it could be. **MM**

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NOTE

\* This article is based on fragments of the book by the same author *In Focus: Manuel Álvarez Bravo*, published by the J. Paul Getty Museum, Los Angeles, 2001.







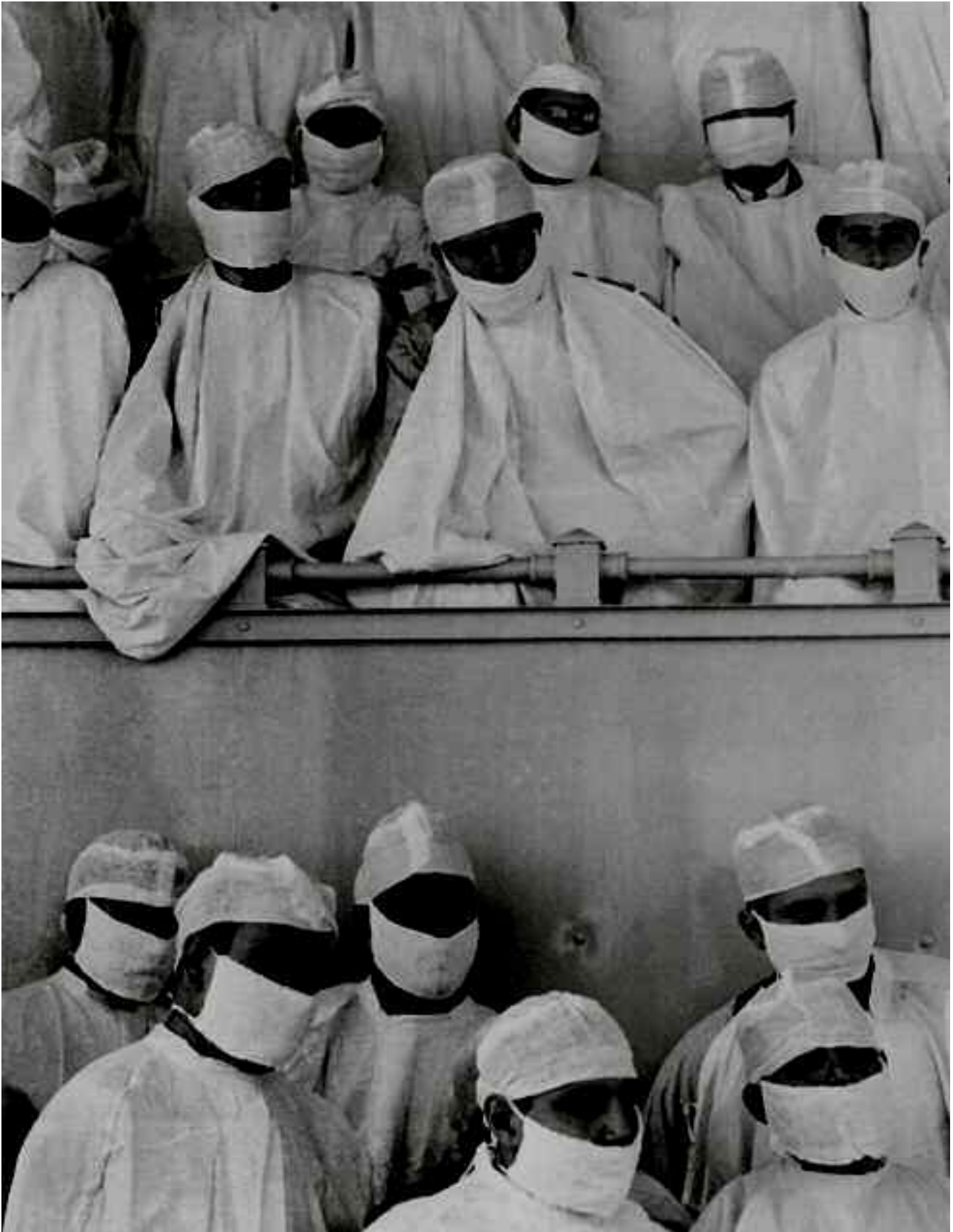
*Mannekins Laughing, 1930. ▲*

Extraordinary encounters  
often emerge from  
workaday phenomena.

The sunlight caressing  
her right shoulder intensifies  
the pause captured  
by the camera.

▼ *Reverie*, 1931.







The artist renders the viewer  
mute as the camera  
captures the harrowing reality  
of a violent death.

◀ *Juárez Hospital, 1935.*

▼ *Striking Worker, Murdered, 1934.*



*Good Name, Sleeping, 1938-1939* ▶

Women are often portrayed as symbols of an idea, feeling or effect.









◀ *In a Small Space*, 1997.

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The eternal portrait  
of a figure locked into  
her mirror image is arrested  
by viewers.

▲ *Portrait of the Eternal*, 1935.

The “parable” tells about the unreliability of looking, about visual afterthoughts.

*Optical Parable, 1931* ▼



Álvarez Bravo invites the observer to ponder the world as it is –but perhaps more importantly, as it could be.



▲ *And It Moaned at Night*, 1945.