

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Exhibition of Mexican Photographer Lola Álvarez Bravo Sheds Light on the Pioneering Photojournalist

Lola Álvarez Bravo: Picturing Mexico highlights the photographer's critical role in the country's modernist wave

On view September 14, 2018 – February 16, 2019

PRESS PREVIEW: Friday, September 14, 2018; 10am

ST. LOUIS, MO, JUL 11, 2018— The Pulitzer Arts Foundation explores the career of pioneering Mexican photographer Lola Álvarez Bravo (1903 – 1993) with an exhibition of images that she



Untitled, 1954

considered to be her personal photography. *Lola Álvarez Bravo: Picturing Mexico* presents nearly 50 photographs and photomontages spanning Álvarez Bravo's five-decade career. Together, these illuminate the ways in which her modernist aesthetic, with meticulous attention to pattern, light, and composition, contributed to her depictions of Mexico's diverse inhabitants and landscapes as she traveled the country documenting life in the years following the Mexican Revolution (ca. 1910–1920).

On view from **September 14, 2018, through February 16, 2019**, *Lola Álvarez Bravo: Picturing Mexico* has been curated by Pulitzer Arts Foundation Assistant Curator Stephanie Weissberg. The Pulitzer is the exhibition's only venue.

Pulitzer Director Cara Starke says, "Our fall exhibitions, one devoted to Lola Álvarez Bravo and a simultaneous presentation of the work of Ruth Asawa, highlight women who have been underrecognized. In the case of Lola Álvarez Bravo, we see a brilliant artist and activist who was for many years eclipsed by her better-known husband, photographer Manuel Álvarez Bravo. Yet she made extraordinary, profound photographs, assembling a body of work that played a crucial

role in both the country's cultural renaissance in the years following the Mexican Revolution and in the flourishing of modernism there.”

Weissberg adds, “*Lola Álvarez Bravo: Picturing Mexico* aims to represent the arc of Álvarez Bravo’s career, illuminating her considerable impact on the history of photography and—as a self-directed agent of change—on post-Revolutionary Mexico. In doing this, we hope to provide and provoke new insights into her work, including the ways in which her astutely perceptive portraits of the life and landscape of Mexico were at once documentation and modernist experimentation.”

Background

Born in 1903 in Jalisco, Mexico, Lola Álvarez Bravo began taking photographs in 1925, when she moved from Mexico City to Oaxaca with her husband, Manuel Álvarez Bravo, who would become one of the most prominent photographers of the period. In 1927, the couple moved to Mexico City, where Lola Álvarez Bravo would work as a curator, an educator, and a gallerist, coming into contact with many of the most prominent figures in Mexico’s modernist avant-garde, from painters David Alfaro Siqueiros, Frida Kahlo, and Diego Rivera, to photographers Tina Modotti,

Paul Strand, and Henri Cartier-Bresson, as well as numerous writers and intellectuals.



Unos suben y otros bajan, ca. 1940

Shortly after the Álvarez Bravos separated in 1934, Lola began a professional practice as a photojournalist. As a female photographer, she occupied a rare and often stigmatized position, and she once described herself as “the only woman that ran around the streets with a camera, at sports events and the Independence Day parades, and all the reporters made fun of me.”

Exhibition

Lola Álvarez Bravo: Picturing Mexico comprises work that Álvarez Bravo considered her “personal” photography, what she described as “images that affected me deeply, like

electricity, and made me press the camera shutter.” Highlighting several intersecting themes that informed the photographer’s practice, the exhibition focuses on both her subjects and the impact of modernism on the way she portrayed them.

The presentation begins with a group of portraits of friends, collaborators, and professional contacts—the images for which Álvarez Bravo is best-known outside of Mexico. Included here is a portrait of Frida Kahlo seated on the bed in her home studio, and one of Henri Cartier-Bresson photographing an as-yet unfinished mural by David Alfaro Siqueiros. Other images remove the sitter from the evidence of their daily lives and professions. Artist Isabel Villaseñor, for example, is shown standing in front of a rock formation that occupies the entire background. A raking shadow covers her arm, seeming to merge it with the background and creating an interplay between light and dark, and between landscape and the human figure.

Picturing Mexico continues with images of labor, a recurring theme for Álvarez Bravo, as it was for many during the post-revolutionary years. One of the images here, *Las Lavanderas*, or

Washerwomen, dating from around 1940, shows a group of women on the shore of a body of water, photographed from above as they focus on their work. The shadows that stretch across the sand are clearly those of a human-made structure, perhaps a pier on which the artist is perched. Landscape and architecture thus converge in the waterfront scene where, again, we also see a play of light and dark. Caught mid-motion, the women and children add a note of humanity and a kind of poetry to the scene, as they form a counterpoint to the rectilinearity of the cast shadow. Moreover, their faces are obscured, so that it takes a moment to understand what they are doing in the space of this complex composition. This uncertainty distinguishes Álvarez Bravo's work from the highly ordered and legible depictions typical of most of the contemporaneous art produced in the service of nation-building.

The next group of works shows Álvarez Bravo addressing the rapid changes in the architecture and landscape of post-Revolutionary Mexico, not only with images of modern buildings, such as architect Felix Candela's Church of our Lady of the Miraculous Medal, a modernist icon located in Mexico City, but also with photographs of traditional structures and building methods. In



Sexo vegetal, ca. 1948

Bajareque, of ca. 1938, Álvarez Bravo depicts an example of the eponymous construction method, which dates to the pre-Hispanic period, in keeping with the post-Revolutionary focus of art that addresses Mexico's working class and indigenous communities. Yet she comes in so close that the frame is filled edge-to-edge with tightly bound layers of twine, on the left, and earth, on the right. In doing so she at once highlights the technique's intricate handwork and creates an abstract composition.

Álvarez Bravo's engagement with modernism is addressed directly in a group of four images. In one of these, *Sexo Vegetal* (Plant Sex), of ca. 1948, she points her lens directly into the center of a tightly cropped maguey plant, a species of agave, recalling the images of Edward Weston and Tina Modotti in which calla lilies, peppers, shells, and gourds are transformed into sensual forms resembling the corporeal. Those earlier evocations of the body are manifest in *Sexo Vegetal*, where fleshy splayed leaves open around a central flowering spear, standing in for male and female sex organs. Yet this work contains evidence that Álvarez Bravo chafed against the modernist opposition to photographic alteration, as she transformed the image by rotating it 90 degrees from its original orientation. In doing this, she creates a pattern of shadow that appears to emanate, impossibly, from a source below the plant, endowing the image with a sense of the uncanny that conjures Surrealism.

Álvarez Bravo was one of Mexico's first artists to produce photomontage, shown in the following section. Most of these were more explicitly political than her photography, addressing the changing architectural environment as well as conditions of labor, industrialization, and technology. In *Hilados del Norte II* (Northern Yarns II), of ca. 1948, one of two photomontages on view, she blends images of automobile manufacturing with the urban landscape. Unlike the celebrated photomontages of the Dada movement, Álvarez Bravo used her own photographs

rather than found images in this body of work, and she arranged them to create the illusion of depth, rather than embracing the inherent flatness of the medium.



La Visitación, ca. 1934, printed 1971

Lola Álvarez Bravo: Picturing Mexico concludes with a group of six images that evoke photography's unique relationship to the acts of seeing and being seen. In these, the photographer, who once referred to the camera as a "third eye," uses doors, windows, and other portals as framing devices. In some images, such as the 1950 *Saliendo de la Opera* (Leaving the Opera), depicting three men hauling a prop horse as they exit Mexico City's Palacio de Bellas Artes, she captured her subjects in moments of transition. At other times, her camera catches a subject's direct gaze, as seen in *Los gorriones* (The Scroungers), of around 1955, an image of young boys idling on a staircase in which some of them look at the photographer while the others seem unaware of her presence, absorbed by their own act of looking.

Catalogue

Lola Álvarez Bravo: Picturing Mexico will be accompanied by a fully illustrated catalogue, published by Yale University Press, with essays by Ms. Weissberg and Karen Cordero Reiman, art historian, curator, and Professor Emerita at the Universidad Iberoamericana, Mexico City.

About the Pulitzer Arts Foundation

The Pulitzer Arts Foundation presents historic and contemporary art in dynamic interplay with its celebrated Tadao Ando building, offering unexpected experiences and inspiring new perspectives. Since it was established in 2001, the Pulitzer has presented a wide range of exhibitions featuring art from around the world—from Old Masters to important modern and contemporary artists—and exploring a diverse array of themes and ideas. Highlights have included the exhibitions *Blue Black*, curated by artist Glenn Ligon (2017); *Medardo Rosso: Experiments in Light and Form* (2016-17); *raumlaborberlin: 4562 Enright Avenue* (2016); *Reflections of the Buddha* (2011-12); *Urban Alchemy / Gordon Matta-Clark* (2009-10); and *Brancusi and Serra in Dialogue* (2005). In addition, these exhibitions are complemented by programs that bring together leading figures from fields ranging from art, architecture, design, urban planning, and the humanities to social work. Admission to the museum is free.

Located in the Grand Center Arts District of St. Louis, Missouri, the Pulitzer is free and open to the public between 10am–5pm on Wednesday through Saturday, with evening hours until 8pm on Friday.

###

MEDIA CONTACTS

National:

Ennis O'Brien

Betsy Ennis: betsy@ennisobrien.com | 917-783-6553
Lucy O'Brien: lucy@ennisobrien.com | 973-879-4037

St. Louis:

Katie Hasler Peissig: khasler@pulitzerarts.org | 314-754-1850 ext. 235

Image Captions:

Page 1

Lola Álvarez Bravo, *Untitled*, 1954. Gelatin silver print. 9 ⁵/₁₆ x 7 ¹¹/₁₆ inches (23.7 x 19.5 cm). Center for Creative Photography, University of Arizona: Lola Álvarez Bravo Archive 93.6.70. © 1995 Center for Creative Photography, The University of Arizona Foundation

Page 2

Lola Álvarez Bravo, *Unos suben y otros bajan*, ca. 1940. Gelatin silver print. 9 ¹/₄ x 6 ¹⁵/₁₆ inches (23.5 x 17.6 cm). Center for Creative Photography, University of Arizona: Lola Álvarez Bravo Archive 93.6.97. © 1995 Center for Creative Photography, The University of Arizona Foundation

Page 3

Lola Álvarez Bravo, *Sexo vegetal*, ca. 1948. Gelatin silver print 7 ³/₈ x 9 ¹/₈ inches (18.8 x 23.1 cm). Center for Creative Photography, University of Arizona: Lola Álvarez Bravo Archive 93.6.69 © 1995 Center for Creative Photography, The University of Arizona Foundation

Page 4

Lola Álvarez Bravo, *La Visitación*, ca. 1934, printed 1971. Gelatin silver photograph. 9 ¹/₄ x 6 ³/₄ inches (23.5 x 17.2 cm). Brooklyn Museum, purchased with funds given by the Horace W. Goldsmith Foundation, Adrian Gill and Coler Foundation, 1995.125. © 1995 Center for Creative Photography, The University of Arizona Foundation