

TRADICIÓN, DEVOCIÓN Y VIDA

SPANISH COLONIAL ARTS SOCIETY
750 CAMINO LEJO, SANTA FE

WHEN SHOWN A COLLECTION OF BLACK-AND-WHITE PHOTOGRAPHS TAKEN

in both Mexico and New Mexico, assembled by photography enthusiasts Anne and William Frej. David Setford, director of the Museum of Spanish Colonial Art, saw the makings of an exhibition. Supplementing an array of those photographs with additional prints from the Palace of the Governors, the New Mexico Museum of Art, Setford's own museum, and some individual photographers, including William Frej, Setford curated *Tradición, Devoción y Vida*, which continues its run through October 31 on Museum Hill. It's an impressive selection of artistically crafted modernist prints that collectively suggest a view of religion and tradition in both Old and New Mexico, and how those cultures intersect. The exhibition includes prints by masters such as Adams, Weston, Strand, Gilpin, Van Dyke, and Porter, mostly on loan from the other institutions, but the Frejs's collection itself is expansive enough to carry the show.

As an avid amateur photographer and member of the diplomatic corps, William Frej developed a love of photographing indigenous life throughout his abundant travels. While in Mexico, he and his wife came upon a print by Flor Garduño and were so enamored they began a new avocation—collecting images by other photographers. While their collection currently includes the work of artists worldwide, it was in Mexico that they found a treasure trove of talent.

Starting with Manuel Álvarez Bravo—considered the most important figure in twentieth-century Latin American photography—enough artful photographers followed in his influential footsteps that Mexican photography has become known as a school of its own. Of the nine Mexican photographers included, it's notable that a handsome number of them are women. Lola Álvarez Bravo, Manuel's first wife, is represented, as are a group of more contemporary women—Flor Garduño, Graciela Iturbide, Mariana Yampolski, and Alicia Ahumada. All of these photographers are known for the lush sensuality of their prints (Ahumada made prints for all of them), and all often focused their cameras on the indigenous people of Mexico. It is those women photographers who offer some of the most powerful work in the show.

The three Mexican males included in addition to Bravo offer three varying approaches to black-and-white photography. Antonio Turok is a photojournalist who has shot a personal examination of life in Chiapas, and many of his images contain the urgency of journalism. Manuel Carrillo, an avid mid-twentieth century amateur, offers iconic, humanistic images of the peasantry. And Humberto Suaste, a heavily exhibited educator, shoots in a more naturalistic style. Each displays a keen sense of light.

The Frejs moved to Santa Fe in 2010, and William retired soon thereafter to concentrate on his own photography of regional religious rituals in both candid of worshippers and landscapes that often include a church. As they learned of the work of other local photographers, the Frejs became aware of the similarities between the photography of rural life and religious rituals in Old and New Mexico. They collected from the works of Miguel Gandert of Albuquerque, who prolifically shoots Chicano life, and Norman Mauskopf of Santa Fe, who, best as I can tell, shoots whatever he wants

out of whatever he sees, including an abundance of images of Mexican-American rituals.

One or two black-and-whites by a handful of others round out the show. What they all have in common is that they document rural life and traditional Hispanic Catholic activities to such a degree that the entire exhibition looks—other than the occasional appearance of a car or truck, or an incidental watch—as if they had been shot in the nineteenth—or if the photo-technology had existed—even the eighteenth or seventeenth centuries.

A predictable critique of this exhibition might declare that it doesn't offer realistic insight into either modern-day Mexico or New Mexico, and it presents an overly romantic view of life in Hispanic America. By portraying a near-idyllic religious and rural society, it might be said that the show represents a condescending, European perspective of an indigenous culture. This critic thinks that critique is inapplicable.

The show never purports to be a thorough survey of Old and New Mexico, or of Old and New Mexican photography. The very title tells us the show is about tradition and faith. It establishes how ingrained Catholic imagery is in Mexican and Mexican-American life, not just because of Spanish influence on Mesoamerican culture, but also because Mesoamerican culture refashioned Spanish Catholicism. Of course the show reflects Spanish colonial influence on the Americas—it's mounted at the Museum of Spanish Colonial Art, after all.

Despite having been collected and curated by gringos, it is hardly a patronizing view of Hispanic life; the heavy majority of photographers represented are, in fact, Hispanic themselves. Insofar as implications that the show conveys a colonial, condescending perspective, *Tradición, Devoción y Vida* is innocent.

—RICHARD BARON

Flor Garduño, *Agua, Valle Nacional, Oaxaca, Mexico*, vintage silver gelatin print, 1983. Collection of William and Anne Frej.

William Frej, *El Santuario de Chimayó, Chimayó*, archival ink jet print, 2014. Collection of the artist.

