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**About the author(s)**

is an academic, writer and a literary translator. Her books on photography include a history of photojournalism, an anthology of photographers and a biography of Julia Margaret Cameron. She has curated numerous exhibitions, including of the work by her mother, the immigrée Picture Post photographer Gerti Deutsch. She publishes widely on European and Latin American photography, and writes photographers' obituaries for the Guardian.

Cover image:

# Photography in Latin America

by Amanda Hopkinson • 03.10.2019

By chronological coincidence, the French invasion of Mexico in 1838 coincided with the invention of the daguerreotype. An early photographic process reliant on a 'studio' camera, a heavy box contraption balanced on stork legs, with a massive brass lens through which the photographer would peer from beneath a black cloth, its use rapidly spread through the region. Attachment to antiquated photographic techniques persisted, and until this century it was still occasionally possible to see elderly photographers lugging box cameras up cobbled Andean streets or through lakeside villages, offering to take scenic portraits of visiting tourists.

In one sense, exhibition visitors are all tourists, looking to see something new and interesting, improving their understanding of other views. The exhibition *Urban Impulses: Latin American Photography 1959 to 2016* at the Photographer's Gallery, London, indicates how – as from the start – new photographic styles are prompted by technological developments. By incorporating images involving xeroxes and polaroids, silk-screens or newsprint, there is a sense of time captured. Fascinating, then, how often hand colour retouching is still valued over colour film, and black-and-white film over both; how traditional techniques are applied to contemporary work, blurring Latin America's historical trajectory.

Enrique Bostelmann's collage of discarded darkroom materials and newspaper images of headshots excised from larger images presents a large-scale and haphazard cross-section of both famous and anonymous Mexicans since the Mexican Revolution. They encircle a sinister camp fire, glowing blood red through carbonised coals. The collage faces two archetypal images of the Cuban Revolution by Alberto Korda: the *Quixote of the Street Light* [FIG.1](#) in his white clothes and *mambí* sombrero perched on the ladder bar at the top of a lamp post, high above a crowd of similarly clad peasants welcoming the 1959 Revolution; and *Heroic Guerrilla Fighter* [FIG.2](#) the instantly recognisable portrait of Che, his beret with its star badge crammed onto his unruly hair, eyes fixed on the glorious future. The irony did not escape Korda, himself a revolutionary, that he who never profited from this portrait had provided a capitalist market in t-shirts and posters with one of its most famous icons.



Fig. 1 *Quixote of the street lamp*, by Alberto Korda. Cuba, 1959. Photograph. (© Alberto Korda Estate; courtesy the artists estate; exh. Photographers' Gallery, London).

It is a Latin American commonplace that 'Here there's no such thing as apolitical'. It is thus unsurprising that photojournalism, given its role in bearing witness, was a paramount photographic tradition. Arguably politics, more even than art or technology, has conditioned the region's photography. In the 1970s and 1980s, political turbulence is documented by activists turned photographers who only subsequently turned professional.

The exhibition opens with an image redolent of John Heartfield. Fernando Bedoya's silkscreen photomontage *Pinochet* [Fig.3](#) confronts the viewer with two skulls in the eye sockets, a head framed by a general's peaked cap, a thrusting chin and a downturned mouth. Bedoya is Peruvian: international solidarity recurs as a hallmark, at least through the camera lens. Argentine Diego Levy's image of a Mexican *Policeman Assaulted by Demonstrators* (2003) shows bewilderment as well as fear on the fallen man's bloodied face. It is there too in Pedro Valtierra's

*Teachers Being Beaten* **FIG.4**, the victims clearly indigenous, under violent assault from behind by non-indigenous police wielding metal poles. Valtierra's earlier archive contains perhaps the most extensive documentation of the Nicaraguan Sandinista Revolution.

Included in the room showing *Urban Impulses* – oddly, for they are not actually urban – are striking images of the sex market in Pernambuco, Brazil. Miguel Río Branco's *Naked Woman Holding the Light* (1979) shows a woman reclining beside a pinboard of pinups, one fingertip pointing up a refracted light. Curiously, while some are typical 'nudies' others are pop stars or passport-style headshots. It is as if, like the light streaming in from outside, the pinboard displays all that is available: everyone is white, in contrast to the subject herself, who, like most northeastern Brazilians, is black. It is an outstandingly powerful image, as saturated with lush red and gold as with languid seduction. The country's *garimpeiros* – illegal gold scrabblers – previously immortalised in Sebastião Salgado's series on men at work, here queue for sex. In Rio Branco's black-and-white image, *Do Beto* (1976), they pose before a bar in miners' helmets, shorts and boots, cigarettes stuck to their lips, a picture of defiant masculinity. An adjacent group portrait, *Boite Amada a Mante* (1976), shows women sex workers gathered outside a 'love club', taking a breather together, unposed in friendly interaction.



**Fig. 2** *Heroic Guerilla Fighter*, by Alberto Korda. Cuba, 1960. (© Alberto Korda Estate; exh. Photographers' Gallery, London).

Transexuality attracts Latin American photographers of both genders. From Paz Errázuriz's portraits of Chilean transvestites incarcerated and persecuted under the Pinochet régime (first shown in an exhibition I curated for The Photographers' Gallery in 1992 and recently reprised at the Barbican),<sup>1</sup> to Agustín Martínez Castro's series *Direct from the Kit-Kat* [Fig. 5](#), the emphasis is as much on preparation as on performance. Whereas Errázuriz's colour images are crisply silhouetted, Martínez Castro's chromogenic prints are smoky and shadowed. Álvaro Barrios, in mock homage to Duchamp and Man Ray, exhibits a *Self-portrait as Rose Sélavy and L.H.O.O.Q*, which takes an original, deliberately ambiguous, concept to a camp extreme. The Colombian artist María Escallón has a very different take on club culture, following the attack on the El Nogal nightclub in Bogotá in 2003, allegedly by a FARC bomb, in which thirty-six died. Her chromatic prints show

marks left in ashes coating the walls, too easily interpreted in the mind of this viewer as the consequence of scraping fingers, slipping bodies.

Creativity is all and art is, obviously, everywhere. Although the curators, María Wills and Alexis Fabry, state their intention to avoid stereotypes, they creep in [FIG.6](#). Tango inescapably features, from Colombia to Chile and, repeatedly, Argentina. Inca walls, along with llama-embroidered jumpers, appear in a symmetrical series by the consistently inventive Peruvian photographer Milagros de la Torre. In the *Neo-Inca* series (2015–16), Pablo López Luz, from Mexico, photographs stucco copies of Inca walls in Andean tourist resorts. But popular culture is there too in globalised imagery, best in Pablo Ortiz Monasterio's *Flying Low* – a teenager leaping between two guns, painted under a Sex Pistols logo [FIG.7](#).

This is the most extensive exhibition of Latin American photographs held in Britain, occupying two floors of Britain's largest photography gallery. It allows for a wealth of lesser-known and more contemporary photographers to be shown, to the possible exclusion of some famous ones (no Manuel Álvarez Bravo, no Pedro Meyer). Yet, while it would have been wonderful to see more recent work by the prolific Graciela Iturbide, a single image by her epitomises what photography can do. In *Lord of the Images* (1983) an old man carries a large mirror across the Plaza de la Independencia in Quito, Ecuador. He turns to look back at what his mirror reflects, hesitantly meeting the camera's eye. As Iturbide puts it, surprise is what infuses 'the spark of the marvellous'. This exhibition offers many sparks and much to marvel at in a region that has been at the fulcrum of photography since its invention.



**Fig. 3** *Pinochet*, by Fernando Bedoya. 1987. Photomontage. (© Fernando Bedoya; courtesy the artist; exh. Photographers' Gallery, London).



Fig. 4 *Teachers being beaten*, by Pedro Valtierra. 1984. Photograph. (© Pedro Valtierra; courtesy the artist; exh. Photographers' Gallery, London).



Fig. 5 *From 10 to 11 p.m.*, by Agustín Martínez Castro. Mexico City, 1985. Photograph. (© Agustín Martínez Castro Estate; exh. Photographers' Gallery, London).



**Fig. 6** *Fifteenth Birthday Party in Ciudad Neza, Mexico City*, from the series *Mixtecos*, by Eniac Martínez. 1989. Photograph (© Eniac Martínez; courtesy the artist; exh. Photographers' Gallery, London).



Fig. 7 *Flying low, Mexico City*, by Pablo Ortiz Monasterio. 1989. Photograph. (© Pablo Ortiz Monasterio; courtesy the artist; exh. Photographers' Gallery, London).

**Exhibition details** Urban Impulses: Latin American Photography 1959 to 2016  
The Photographers' Gallery, London  
14th June–6th October 2019

## Footnotes

- 1 See A. Hopkinson: exh. cat. *Desires and Disguises: Five Latin American Photographers*, London (Photographers' Gallery), 1992; and A. Pardo, ed.: exh. cat. *Another Kind of Life: Photography on the Margins*, London (Barbican Art Gallery) 2018.

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