

# MANUEL ÁLVAREZ BRAVO TODAS LAS COSAS QUE SUCEDEN

Paisaje y galope, 1932. © Archive Manuel Álvarez Bravo, S.C

## INTRODUCTORY

The Secretaría de Cultura de México and the Instituto Nacional de Bellas Artes y Literatura (INBAL), in collaboration with Museo de Arte Moderno (MAM), and Museo Cabañas, present the exhibition Manuel Álvarez Bravo. Todas las cosas que suceden, an exploration of the photographer's visual, thematic, and compositional interests. Through scenes that defy the transit of time, avant-garde explorations of territory, and daydreams provoked by everyday life, his work allows us to access a sense of wonder at life itself.

The 204 photographs currently on display for this show are part of the MAM's collection, whose photographic archive began in 1973 when INBAL acquired 400 works by Álvarez Bravo. Later, this collection was enriched by the donation of 886 pieces from his personal archive, including ferrotypes, daguerreotypes, and fundamental works by various authors from the 19th- and 20th-century.

The significance of Manuel Álvarez Bravo transcends the artistic realm, positioning him also as a key figure in the construction of the visual identity with which Mexicans, perceive ourselves. Todas las cosas que suceden focuses on the artist's perspective through the formal and

conceptual explorations that define his work. From seemingly trivial details, such as a sleeping dog or a long strip of wavy paper, to grand landscapes that include the crater of Parícutín volcano, Don Manuel's work captures moments filling the images with a unique poetic quality. On this subject, and in recognition of his magic and relevance, Diego Rivera, André Breton, Carlos Pellicer, Octavio Paz, and Carlos Monsiváis, among others, wrote about his work.

In contrast to the genre-based classification that dissects photographic work by separating nude, landscape, portrait, documentary, street, abstract, and other categories – An inheritance from painting – this exhibition revolves around the particular way in which the photographer observed his world. The five sections that structure this exhibition reveal Álvarez Bravo's unfiltered interest in everything happening around him and the revolutionary nature of his way of capturing it with his camera. This is merely a glimpse into the prolific career of an essential artist, not only in Mexican photography but in the International Art History.

**Katnira Bello and Silverio Orduña**  
*Curators*  
MAM



Parábola óptica, 1931. © Archive Manuel Álvarez Bravo, S.C

## PORTRAIT OF THE ETERNAL

The photographs of Manuel Álvarez Bravo have become deeply rooted in contemporary visual culture as one of the clearest aspects of modernity in 20th-century art, his radical experimentation with form, which established the artistic value of photography beyond its technical and documentary qualities. His urban perspective registers the changes brought by urbanization and the national development project after the Mexican Revolution. In addition to these contributions achieved through his vision, the emotional impact of his images reveals his interest in poetically organizing what he portrays, in such a way that his work immediately unveils a reason for wonder: a character immersed in introspection, the material detail of an object, the encounter of an element of reality in an

unforeseen situation, or the evocative reflection of a mountain in a lake.

Throughout a career spanning eight decades, Álvarez Bravo's artistic production was pioneer in promoting the modernization of photography as an aesthetic medium. Between 1925 and 1945, he consolidated a style that gained international recognition, leading to exhibitions in Mexico and abroad, alongside renowned figures in photography, such as Henri Cartier-Bresson. Furthermore, in 1942, the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) acquired a set of nine pieces for its collection, highlighting the artist's vision for its compositional simplicity and the cosmopolitan significance of his visual language, beyond the identity-based and nationalist codes of modern Mexican art.

## THE RIVER IS NEVER THE SAME

Visual experience was an instantaneous matter for Manuel Álvarez Bravo; however, the act of looking was closer to contemplation, attentiveness, and the ability to perceive time and change. From this perspective, his photographic work and his role as an observer reveal a profound and fortunate encounter with his surroundings. Due to the extraordinary nature of his images, this has often been interpreted as unusual, fantastic, or surreal. His connection with surrealism stemmed less from his work or aesthetic interests and more from his relationship with André Breton, whom he met in Mexico in 1938. Two years later, in 1940, he participated in the first surrealist exhibition in Mexico, organized by Breton himself, along with Wolfgang Paalen

and César Moro at the Galería de Arte Mexicano.

Like the "surreal effect," his photographs have also been linked to the construction of national identity, a connection arising from the correspondence between his images and post-revolutionary iconography, his proximity to the Mexican muralist movement, and his documentary work for the magazine Mexican Folkways. However, Álvarez Bravo's aesthetic inquiries stand out and transcend socially committed art. His landscapes and portraits go beyond an ethnographic perspective or the idealization of Indigenous people and the working class. Rather than reinforcing a set of cultural practices, his discoveries focus on capturing an entirely exceptional reality that is always in transformation.





Retrato de lo eterno, 1935. © Archive Manuel Álvarez Bravo, S.C

## GEOMETRY OF THE LANDSCAPE

Nature is perhaps the last place where we expect to find geometry, so prevalent in cities through lines, triangles, and trapezoids. Landscape, a genre long explored in painting, was approached by Álvarez Bravo from a modern perspective, through clearly defined images without distortion, offering new ways of seeing the familiar and, in doing so, reinventing it. In wide shots where the horizon line is visible—whether of seas, deserts, fields, villages, or urban areas—the artist’s interest in the properties, weight, and distribution of shapes within the frame is evident.

The maguey, an emblem of national identity, became the perfect thematic pretext for compositional experimentation. The artist’s formal interests are unmistakable, as he was influenced by artistic avant-gardes and sought to work with alternative visual canons. Angles and positions, unconventional for the time, allow for a unique approach to this distinctive plant. His images of magueys display high and low-angle shots, close-ups, wide frames, rule-of-thirds compositions, diagonals, axes, symmetry, rhythm, and perspective. Through his lens, no two magueys are alike.

## THE ASTONISHMENT OF REALITY

The world itself, whether captured in sweeping panoramas or seemingly trivial details, was an inexhaustible source of exploration for Álvarez Bravo. The uniqueness of his vision stemmed from a profound understanding of his surroundings, yet this did not diminish his sense of wonder. His images oscillate between narrative storytelling and the decisive moment frozen in time. The beauty of a fallen tree trunk resting on wind-sculpted sand, the shadows cast by a whimsical treetop, street vendors calling out in the streets, pumpkins drying in the sun, wooden carts, skeletons, laborers, stacks of firewood, or weathered doors—all could become subjects of marvel and fascination.

Álvarez Bravo’s body of work moves beyond nationalist frameworks; rather than reinforcing traditional patriotic imagery, he sought a different relationship with objects and themes repeatedly depicted as part of the national identity. This pursuit is perhaps most evident in his treatment of magueys and fabrics, which he depicted in a deeply personal way, leaning toward abstraction with a strong emphasis on form. His unique photographic production avoids the obvious, capturing life as it sways within ephemeral chance and allowing us to be astonished, even by ruins transformed into wonders.

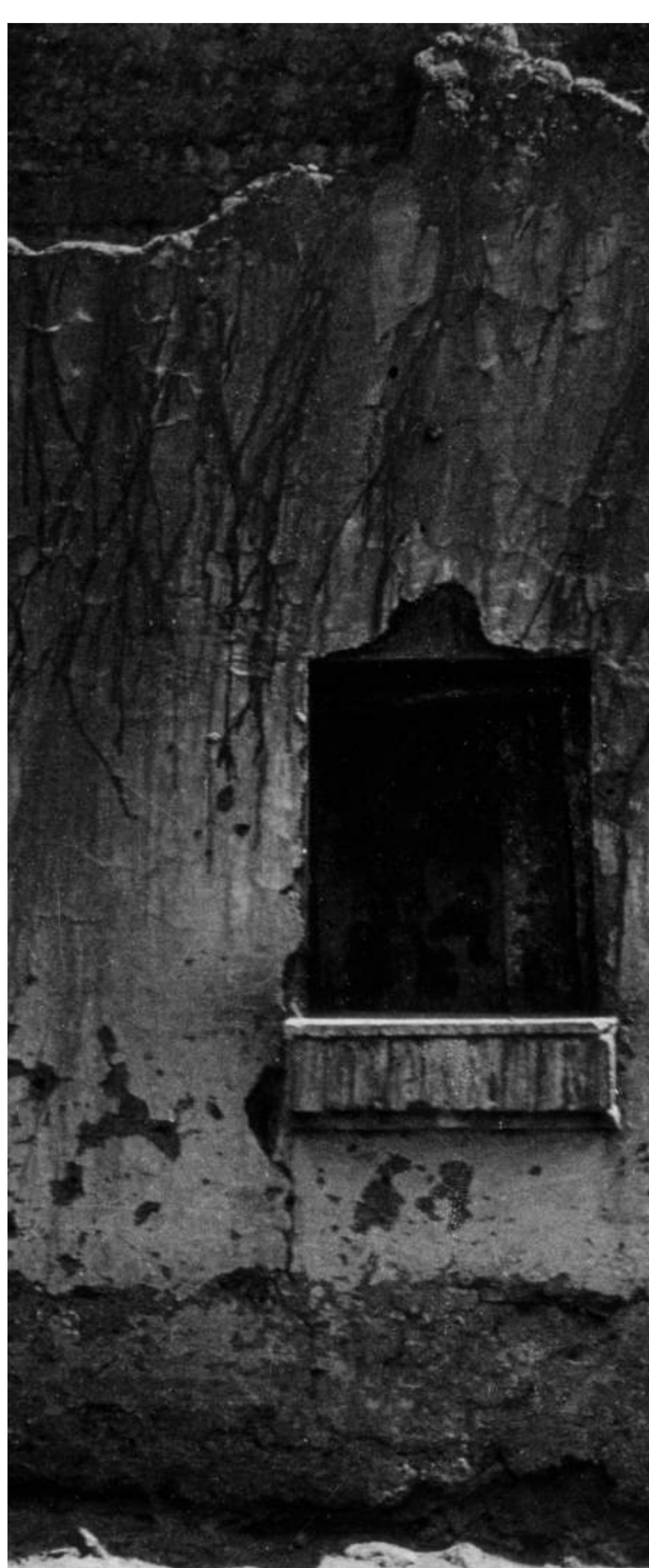


Las crinolinas, 1970-72. © Archive Manuel Álvarez Bravo, S.C

## A MODERN GAZE

Having initially experimented with pictorialism, characterized by soft focus and other photographic effects such as filters to create a dramatic atmosphere, Manuel Álvarez Bravo soon fully embraced direct photography. His early engagement with the works of photographers such as Edward Weston and Tina Modotti led him to explore the form of objects and reveal their physical qualities: the contours and textures of common materials like jicamas or those emblematic of modernity at the time, such as mechanical tools. This approach positioned him as a pioneer in establishing a fully modern visual grammar, where photography solidified its aesthetic qualities and artistic potential, emerging as a self-reflective medium in its own right.

Another defining aspect of Álvarez Bravo’s modern gaze is his documentation of the transformations brought about by urban growth and its social consequences. His photographs capture different temporalities both within and beyond the city’s hustle and bustle: the construction of roads, the movement of pedestrians, the grids formed by architectural geometry, objects found in the landscape, scenes centered on the working class, the nostalgic gallop of a horse, or the longing evoked by the ordered flight of a flock of birds.



Ventana cerrada..., 1927-28. © Archive Manuel Álvarez Bravo, S.C





Las lavanderas sobrentendidas, 1932. © Archive Manuel Álvarez Bravo.

# BIOGRAPHY, MANUEL ÁLVAREZ BRAVO

The photographer was born on February 4, 1902, in Mexico City. He grew up in the Historic Center, in a tenement behind the Metropolitan Cathedral, and attended primary school at the Patricio Sáenz boarding school in the town of Tlalpan. From an early age, the streets of the city and popular life were central to his experience. After his father’s death in 1915, he left school and began working as an assistant in the office of a French textile factory, which later led him to a bureaucratic position in the accounting department of the National Treasury.

In 1923, Álvarez Bravo met the German photographer Hugo Brehme, who had settled in Mexico and was famous for producing postcards. At Brehme’s photography studio on Avenida 5 de Mayo, Álvarez Bravo deepened his understanding of photography, which gradually shifted from a hobby to a central activity in his life. He pursued various interests, including studying homeopathy and painting at the Academy of San

Carlos, then known as the National School of Fine Arts.

In 1927, he met the Italian photographer and communist activist Tina Modotti and her partner, Edward Weston, an innovative American photographer associated with the avant-garde movements of the time. This encounter proved crucial, as both figures had a profound influence on him. Through them, he came into contact with leftist and communist artists producing revolutionary and nationalist art, including the muralists. Álvarez Bravo also met various artists and intellectuals who had emigrated to Mexico, bringing fresh and innovative ideas. Among them were Pablo O’Higgins and Emily Edwards, with whom he collaborated on a book about muralism. Influenced in part by Edward Weston, Álvarez Bravo explored abstraction in photography, as seen in his award-winning image from the 1934 Cementos Tolteca factory competition.



Through his distinct style, Álvarez Bravo captured a vision of Mexico that, in turn, became a defining representation of the country. His photographs are as fundamental to Mexican imagery as the paintings of the great muralists. His connection to painting is broad and complex. Initially, his work reflected pictorialism, a photographic approach that sought to replicate the effects of naturalist painting through photomontages, lens filters that softened light to create diffuse atmospheres, and techniques that played with focus. However, his artistic identity took shape through abstract and compositional moments inspired by avant-garde painting. Álvarez Bravo also engaged in a visual dialogue with the muralists, photographing their works—a direct reflection on painting through the lens. Mexican muralism developed a set of recurring images and representations of national identity, from which Álvarez Bravo could not entirely detach himself. Yet, he reinterpreted these themes from his unique perspective, avoiding simplistic folklorism and resisting merely recreating, through photography, the images already present on walls and canvases.

Álvarez Bravo presented a deeply personal image of Mexico. His artistic, intellectual, and even personal relationships with the international avant-garde played a crucial role in shaping his style. One notable example is his connection with French photographer Henri Cartier-Bresson, a key figure in the emergence of photojournalism, street photography, and spontaneous photography. When Cartier-Bresson visited Mexico, he walked the streets of Mexico City alongside Álvarez Bravo, and from these shared experiences, both artists produced significant photographic series. Their work was exhibited together in New York at the Julien Levy Gallery and in Mexico City at the Palacio de Bellas Artes, both in 1935.

André Breton described Álvarez Bravo as the artist who captures a light, a symbol where the heart of

Mexico beats with the fully objective value of his emotion. The photographer participated in various surrealist exhibitions and publications. In 1939, he responded to a commission from Breton by applying surrealist automatism, creating one of his most famous works, La buena fama durmiendo (The Good Reputation Sleeping). By 1942, the Museum of Modern Art in New York had acquired his works for the first time.

As a key figure in the formation of a new generation of photographers, Álvarez Bravo taught at the Academy of San Carlos and the University Center for Cinematographic Studies. Between 1943 and 1959, he worked in the Mexican film industry, contributing still photography for Luis Buñuel’s film Nazarín and collaborating on a now-lost film with José Revueltas. In 1959, he helped establish the Fondo Editorial de la Plástica Mexicana, where he played a role in promoting and studying national art through its publications—an extension of his prolific contributions to Mexican culture.

Throughout his life, Álvarez Bravo held numerous exhibitions and received multiple awards. Notable distinctions include the Elías Sourasky Prize in 1974, the National Prize for Arts and Sciences, and the John Simon Guggenheim Foundation Fellowship in 1975. In 1993, he was named Emeritus Creator by the National Council for Culture and the Arts. Among his most significant exhibitions are Manuel Álvarez Bravo: 400 Photographs, presented at the Palacio de Bellas Artes in 1972, and Evidences of the Invisible, a collection of one hundred photographs exhibited between 1994 and 1995 at the Museum of Fine Arts in New Delhi, the Imperial Palace in Beijing, and the Belém Cultural Center in Lisbon.

Álvarez Bravo continued his artistic practice well into old age. He passed away in Mexico City in 2002 at the age of one hundred.

Bicicletas en domingo, 1955. © Archive Manuel Álvarez Bravo, S.C

