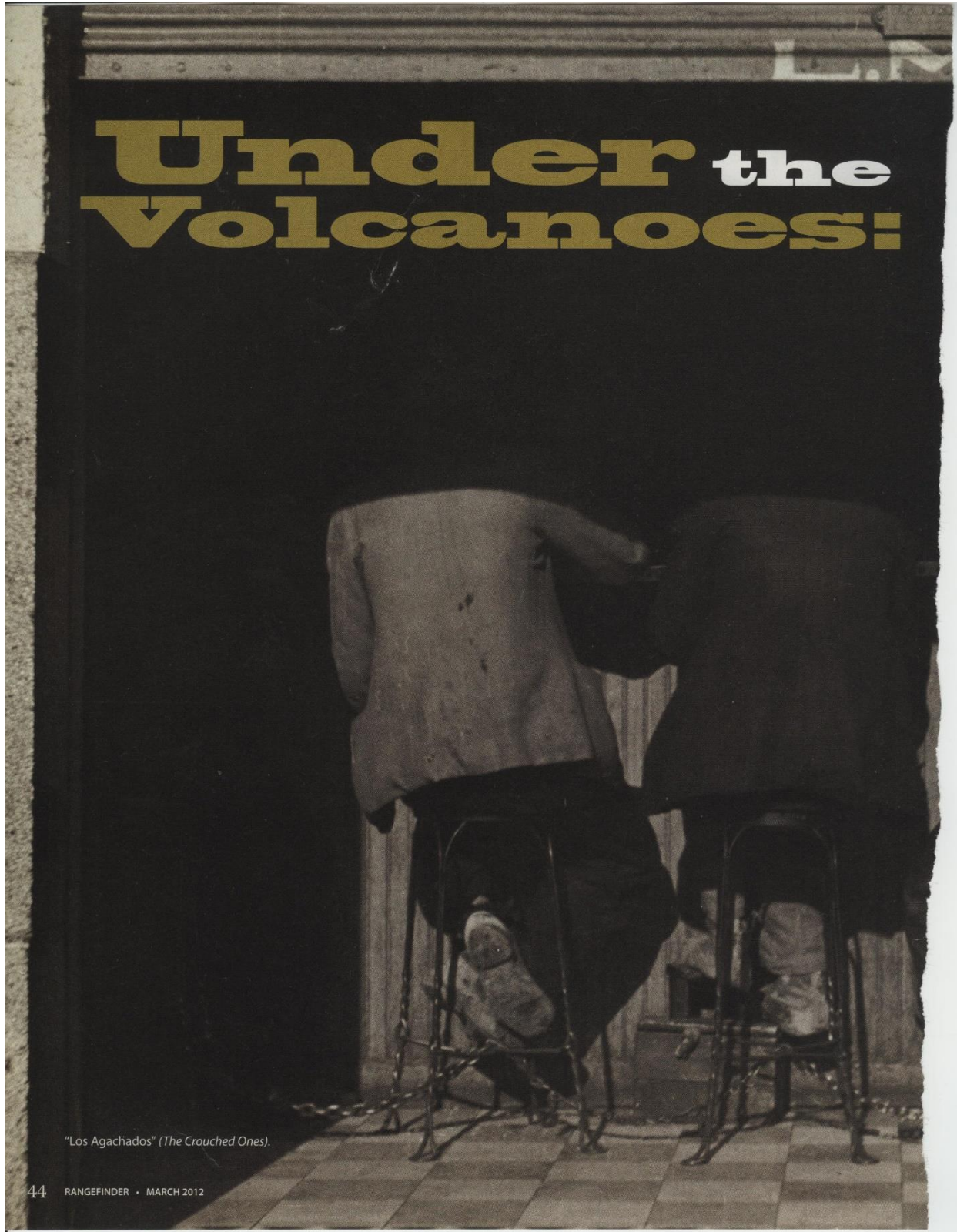


Under the Volcanoes:



"Los Agachados" (*The Crouched Ones*).

Images From the Soul of Mexico

By Jim Cornfield

Exploring the diverse tradition of photography in Mexico, and the wide-ranging approaches of important Mexican, American and European photographers who found the country to be a place of great artistic inspiration.

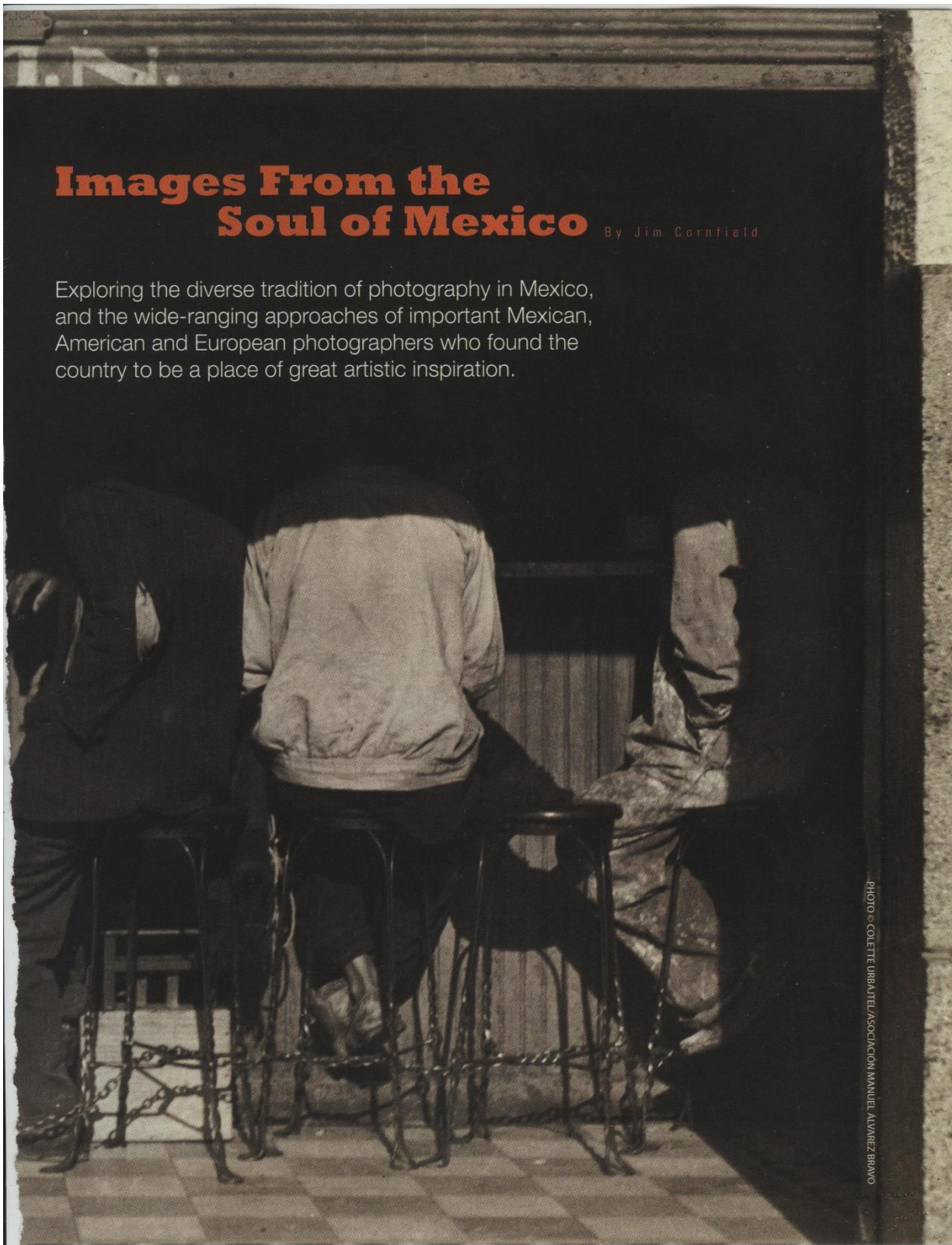


PHOTO © COLETTE URBATEL/ASOCIACION MANUEL ALVAREZ BRAVO



PHOTO © HÉCTOR GARCÍA

Above: Frida Kahlo.

Below: "Boda en Coyoacán" (a middle class wedding in Coyoacán).

It's a sunlit morning at the terrace restaurant atop Mexico City's stately old Hotel Majestic and the view embraces the sprawling Zócalo, the capital city's central plaza. On a clear day, you can see Popocatepetl, one of Mexico's great volcanoes, shimmering in the distance. But the real show, it turns out, is much closer. On the square below, groups of street performers, or *concheros*, revive the music and dances of their Aztec forebears in a dazzle of shell necklaces and garishly colored feathered headdresses. Across the plaza, more color—bright, exuberant, saturated—adorns the stairwells and walls of the Palacio Nacional in the form of vibrant Diego Rivera murals.



PHOTO © PEDRO MERER

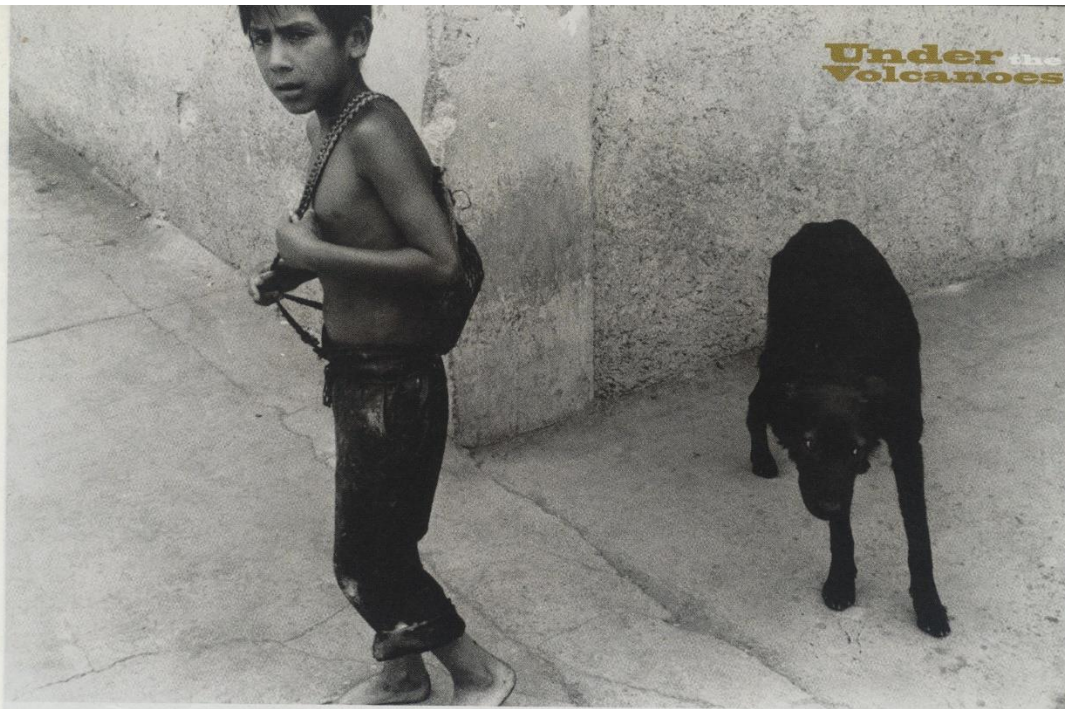


PHOTO © PABLO ORTIZ MONASTERIO

"Niño Obrero, México" (a child laborer in Mexico City).

Color is one of Mexico's defining characteristics and it's no secret that Mexico's color-drenched visual kaleidoscope is a huge draw for legions of commercial and editorial photographers. Their pictures are used to pitch tourism in travel magazine spreads, Web sites and poster art. But in the shadows of Mexico's volcanoes and the wake of her tumultuous history, plaintive themes infuse this country's national persona. They manifest themselves in the work of fine art photographers and serious photojournalists, and, paradoxically, much of this imagery is in black-and-white.

The Black and White Paradox

One excellent sampling of this work is represented in the exhibit that debuts this month at San Francisco's Museum of Modern Art (SFMOMA)—*Photography in Mexico: Selected Works from the Collections of SFMOMA and Daniel Greenberg and Susan Steinhauser*. The germination of anything approaching a Mexican photography "movement" can be traced back to the years following the Mexican Revolution, which lasted from 1910 to 1920. The SFMOMA exhibit has

assembled images from that time up to the present, with selections from the work of key Mexican shooters, along with a few simpatico expatriates. Some compelling examples are shown on these pages, courtesy of the museum's fine collections. In their blend of abstract and documentary motifs—helped by the reductive power of black and white—these photographs probe beyond the showy colors of clay pots and serapes into the dark ethos of a complex, sometimes beleaguered, country.

To get a fix on just how beleaguered, think back on the thumbnail version of Mexican history you learned in school. Those colorful Aztec dancers in the Zócalo celebrate a pre-Hispanic civilization that, for all its precocious scientific and architectural achievements, practiced human sacrifice on a hideous scale as one of its core religious practices. It venerated a weak, superstitious monarch, Moctezuma II, who effectively surrendered his nation to Spanish conquistadors, believing them to be the reincarnation of the god Quetzalcoatl. The ensuing 300 years of Spain's oppressive rule ended in violent overthrow in 1821 and the beginning of another 100 years of strife, this time in the form of mayhem among the victorious rebels. Even afterward, throughout a succession of governments

that followed, the first peaceful change of regime in all of Mexico's history didn't actually take place until the year 2000. Despite contemporary leaders who seem to be coaxing Mexico toward a semblance of harmony, the country still suffers under widespread poverty, immigration difficulties on its border with the United States and an illicit narcotics industry whose warring factions have racked up a death toll of more than 40,000 victims to date.

The Years of Sadness

The Wild Bunch, a popular 1969 American film, is set during the violent early 20th century regime of General Victoriano Huerta. In one scene, with the laughter and the tinny music of a rural fiesta in the background, a village elder turns to his gringo pal and says, "In Mexico, my friend, these are the years of sadness." One wants to ask, when was this ever not so, in particular this relentless duality between zest and despair? In his set of essays "The Labyrinth of Solitude," Nobel laureate Octavio Paz posits the notion that Mexicans' love of gaiety and brightness, their music and crowds and fiestas, is little more than an escape from a deep collective sense of personal isolation and sadness. Here are some of the great photographers whose



PHOTO © LOURDES GROBET

"La India Sioux en su Recamara" (the wrestler India Sioux in her bedroom).

images, featured in the SFMOMA exhibit, explore that sober idea:

- **Manuel Álvarez Bravo:** Easily the superstar of Mexican photography, Bravo lived during the most tumultuous period of Mexican history, from 1902 to 2002, with vivid childhood memories of gunfire during the early days of the Revolution. He was a close friend to muralist Diego Rivera and American photographers Edward Weston and Paul Strand, and he developed a style that blends the documentary and the surreal. His work is represented in Edward Steichen's celebrated *Family of Man* collection, and Rivera (whom Bravo photographed at work during the 1930's) said of him: "Profound and discreet poetry, desperate and refined irony emanate from [his] photographs... like those particles suspended in the air which render visible a ray of light as it penetrates a dark room."

- **Lourdes Grobet:** a free-spirited contemporary photographer, best known for her extensive studies of masked "Lucha libre" wrestlers. Masks have deep, symbolic importance in Mexican culture, going back to

the time of Aztec warriors, who unmasked vanquished enemies by custom. Grobet's mask images call to mind the passion for ritual in Mexican life, and the deeper melancholy issue of personal isolation.

- **Pedro Meyer:** a Spanish native, today experimenting with the imaging possibilities of the digital universe. In his black-and-white film work, Meyer produced potent, unsympathetic images of the rituals of his own economically privileged upbringing.

- **Pablo Ortiz Monasterio:** Founder of the Centro de la Imagen in his native Mexico City, he trains his camera on the sadder realities of this massive, some say dystopic, megalopolis. He often concentrates on young people whose lives in the city's labyrinth of poor neighborhoods hold little joy or promise.

- **Héctor García:** A militant social activist during the 1930s, he began taking pictures to forward the cause of Mexico's maltreated working people. Often prevented from publishing his controversial journalistic imagery, he became known for unconventional stylized portraits of subjects like the painters Frida Kahlo and José Orozco.

- **Edward Weston and Tina Modotti:** The pioneering American photographer

Edward Weston was bewitched by the exoticism of Mexico in the 1920s. He traveled there with the budding Italian photographer and radical activist Tina Modotti, by whom he was equally bewitched. Weston turned to earthy, abstract themes in Mexico. Over the course of his steamy affair with Modotti, Weston helped her to mature as an important fine art photographer and social documentarian—particularly of working class peasants. Together, exhibiting their images and networking with other artists, these two extranjeros helped light the spark for Mexican photographers—Bravo among them—to pursue the camera's serious potential. Weston and Modotti, writes SFMOMA curator Jessica McDonald, "gave Mexican photographers confidence that art photography was a viable path. There is no one 'Mexican photography.' But one strand that runs throughout is a synthesis of aesthetics and politics. We see that with Manuel Alvarez Bravo, and we still see it in work made decades later." **RF**

Veteran writer and commercial photographer Jim Cornfield, a contributing editor to Rangefinder, has worked and traveled extensively in Mexico over the past 35 years. (www.jimcornfield.net)