



Untitled, Tlacotalpan, Veracruz, no date.

Mariana Yampolsky An Impassioned Eye

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Mariana Yampolsky's photographs are steeped in an emotional intimacy and intensity that is startling to behold.¹ Throughout my long friendship with the artist, I struggled to come to terms with the seeming dissonance between the difficult lives of the rural poor she photographed and the raw beauty suffusing much of her imagery. This is not to say that Yampolsky aestheticized poverty; quite to the contrary, she could be strident in criticizing the deep social and economic inequities in Mexico. Yampolsky herself found poignancy in the fact that she found beauty in unexpected realms, among marginalized people who make do with so little and in the stark environments which frame their daily existence. In bearing witness to these realities, Yampolsky gave to the world eloquent images of elemental truths —im-

passioned and utterly honest in what they say about the human condition.

Yampolsky's artistic practice was inextricably bound to an ethos that guided her daily life, one in which superficial differences like economic class and social standing mattered little in judging a person's true worth. She was motivated, rather, by a profound respect and concern for people who others ignore, and by the camera's ability to validate and inform. Her photographs became captured moments of transcendence, revealing in everyday lives a sense of beauty that may be all but invisible to a less discerning eye.

Born in 1925 in Chicago, Illinois, Mariana graduated from the University of Chicago in 1948. She arrived in Mexico in 1944 after being introduced to the work of the Popular Graphics Workshop and becoming intrigued by its revolutionary idealism and innovative working methods. Its members were engaged in the carefully aligned goals of producing images that compellingly responded to the most urgent concerns

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The Apron, 1988. San Simón de la Laguna, State of Mexico.



Chamel-house, 1973. Dangú, Hidalgo.



Cone Granery, no date. La Trinidad Hacienda, San Luis Potosí.

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Orange Stand, no date. Axochiapan, Morelos.



Child Pulque Seller, 1979. Soyaltepec, Tlaxcala.

of the rural poor and other underprivileged people in Mexico, and of distributing their work to these very communities by way of inexpensively produced graphics. Yampolsky's work as a printmaker and curator with the group became fundamental to her artistic and political formation. Through it, she developed an understanding of art as essentially social in purpose and as a powerful tool of communication and persuasion.

Yampolsky began experimenting with the camera early in her career, in the late 1940s, when she had the good fortune to enroll in photography classes at the San Carlos Academy taught by Lola Álvarez Bravo. She began to use the camera sporadically during her tenure with the workshop, producing photographic records of her travels. She pursued her first sustained project with the medium much later, in the mid-1960s, photographing popular traditions in many parts of the country for a seminal work on Mexican folk art, *Lo efímero y lo eterno del arte popular mexicano*² (The Ephemeral and the Eternal in Mexican Folk Art). These photographs were to guide the direction her work was to take in the 1980s and 1990s, the decades of artistic production for which she ultimately became best known. As she evolved as a photographer, Yampolsky was consistently drawn to two primary subjects: people, the Mexican people whom she profoundly loved, and architecture, a less appreciated but equally significant aspect of her work.

The formal rigor with which Yampolsky approached the photographic medium might best be observed in those compositions without people, in her architectural images as well as in her elegant studies of maguey plants and other aspects of the rural landscape. In ap-



The Beast, 1988. Suchiatepec, State of Mexico.

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Flowery Bread, no date. San Pablito, Puebla.

proaching architecture, the artist constantly animated the inanimate and uncovered beauty in unexpected realms. But it is people, those whose faces have been made memorable through Yampolsky's photographs, who have the most enduring place in her oeuvre. Perhaps her most concentrated body of work involved photographs of impoverished Mazahua women from the State of Mexico. Yampolsky's images of these women are exceptional for a number of reasons, one being that she gave them a substantial role in the creation of their own image. Often when photographing people, she worked in relative anonymity, calling little attention to herself as she captured fleeting passages of time, moments of spiritual intensity, or the random gaze of passersby. In her work with the Mazahuas, however, Yampolsky's subjects were keenly aware of her presence, and her photographs of them mark intimate encounters shared equally by photographer and subject.

For Mariana Yampolsky, the photographic medium also maintained special value because it could amply reveal the complex struggle between tradition and modernity that lay at the heart of contemporary Mexican life, urban and rural. So

much of Yampolsky's imagery portrays communities striving to maintain traditions even as they integrate aspects of a global, commodity-driven culture into their worlds. Tradition, as photographed by Mariana, is seen as part of a continuum that necessarily embraces the past *and* present. Rather than seeking to portray an idealized version of Mexico, especially later in her life, she saw the need to photograph the country (especially the countryside), as it underwent radical, even violent change. In an age when the veracity of photographic imagery was being broadly questioned (as it still is), Yampolsky remained firm in her reliance upon the camera—and in the unmanipulated black-and-white print—not only for its unique expressive capabilities, but for its ability to impart truth.

NOTES

¹ This text was adapted from "Mariana Yampolsky: Una Mirada Apasionada/An Impassioned Eye," in *Mariana Yampolsky: Imagen-Memoria/Image-Memory*. Mexico City: Centro de la Imagen, 1999.

² *Lo efímero y lo eterno del arte popular mexicano* (Mexico City: Fondo Editorial de la Plástica Mexicana, 1971).



The Exterminating Angel, 1991. Tlaxcala.