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A Displacement of the Self: How Manuel Álvarez Bravo Uses Hair to Represent the Reassertion of an Indigenous Feminine Identity in Postrevolutionary Mexico

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Having already received a degree from Webster University in studio art with a minor in philosophy, Brooke Lashley is now completing her second undergraduate degree at the University of Missouri in St. Louis with a Bachelor of Arts in Art History and a minor in Spanish. Brooke especially enjoys studying modern art history, Latin American art history, seventeenth-century French art history, Spanish literature, and gender and identity studies of Latin America. She plans on attending graduate school in the fall of 2013 where she will study Latin American modern art history and continue to do so in post-graduate school. Brooke's career goal is to become a professor of Latin American modern art history and continue research in the field.
Abstract

Many artworks created during the Mexican Revolution (1910-1940) and in the years immediately following it contained nationalist themes that served to reinforce the importance of maintaining a traditional Mexican identity amongst the Mexican people. As a result, many Mexican artists questioned such traditional representations. This can be seen in images of Mexican women that depict them within the perimeters of an idealized traditional Mexican aesthetic. However, as a burgeoning feminist agenda arose, women were urged to present themselves as free from the oft-oppressing patriarchal traditions of Mexico's past. Now choosing between the ideologies of their pasts and promises of a more free future, many women began to question the ways in which they chose to represent themselves. However, as evident in Manuel Álvarez Bravo's Woman of the Isthmus Combing Isabel Villaseñor's Hair (1933), Portrait of the Eternal (1935), and Hair on a Patterned Floor (1940s) and in Frida Kahlo's Self Portrait with Loose Hair (1947) a deliberate reassertion of an indigenous feminine identity is indicated. This research serves to provide a deeper understanding of this reassertion as it presents itself in the images created at the time.
In artwork depicting everyday aspects of life, a common origin can be established that provides a platform from which viewers can relate to others and learn more about his or herself. This origin can be found in the simplest of objects, compositions, and subject matters, and it is within such simplicity that life begins to unfold. To experience this, one can simply look at images born from cultures whose inhabitants have historically lacked the freedoms necessary to give way to an independent discovering of the self. In postrevolutionary Mexico, for example, artwork created both during and after the Mexican Revolution (1910-1940) offered realistic interpretations of life after a war that generated discourses on identity and questioned preconceived notions of gender. That is, it was the contribution of women, in particular, to the war effort that gave birth to Mexico's burgeoning feminist movement. Women became increasingly involved in politics, and it is by viewing images of women from the era that we can begin to hear the sound of their oft-silenced voices. When we listen, we will hear two voices: one repeating the traditional mantras of their forefathers and another demanding equality in a language all their own. Now caught between the legacy of their pasts and the uncertainty of their futures, such works as Manuel Álvarez Bravo's *Woman of the Isthmus Combing Isabel Villaseñor's Hair* (1933), *Portrait of the Eternal* (1935), and *Hair on a Patterned Floor* (1940s) indicate a possible reassertion of an indigenous feminine identity by Mexican women during the nationalist movement of postrevolutionary Mexico. This phenomenon is the purpose of this paper.

Mexican artist, writer and actress, Isabel Villaseñor, appears repeatedly throughout a three-part series of black and white photographs by Mexican photographer, Manuel Álvarez Bravo. In the 1930s, many Mexican artists became involved in the League of Revolutionary Writers and Artists (LEAR) as a means to exert social change through their art both individually and collaboratively. Both Álvarez Bravo and Villaseñor were a part of this group. In *Portrait of the Eternal* (Fig. 1) Villaseñor is seated in solitude on a dimly lit wooden floor. She adjusts her hair with the help of her handheld looking glass. She appears in profile. While she gazes into her small mirror, she is wide-eyed, concentrated, and focused on herself. A ring on her left hand signifies the possibility of marriage, and her fringed wrap represents her Mexican heritage. A white light from an unknown source cuts the image in half and spills onto the wooden floor while illuminating portions of the model's face, handheld mirror, hair, and body. Her long, dark, rippling locks fill up the composition, as they reflect this light and demand attention.

Many of the same aspects can be seen in *Woman of the Isthmus Combing Isabel Villaseñor's Hair* (Fig. 2). Also in black and white, one can gather that Álvarez Bravo has brought the viewer out of the small room in which the previous image
was shot. Darkened, the room to which an opened wooden door is attached gives way to a set of unpolished stairs that lead to a cobble-stoned foreground. Barefoot and standing in the open air, Isabel is photographed in profile, once again. She is shown with a companion whose identity is explicated in the title of the work, as the phrase «Woman of the Isthmus» gives us insight into her companion's heritage. With her hair draping down her back, Isabel is dressed in a traditional Mexican ankle-length skirt and a simply patterned blouse. Her darker-skinned female partner is dressed in a similar fashion, as she stands in profile behind her. Wrapping completely around her head, a bow secures the Isthmus woman's short, kinky hair, as she tends to Isabel's flowing locks. Both models are expressionless, and the action of the Isthmus woman suggests her role as a maid or caretaker. Rendered without embellishments, it is within the simplicity of this photograph that Álvarez Bravo offers his viewers a glimpse into the everyday lives of two postrevolutionary women.

Along with Portrait of the Eternal and Woman of the Isthmus Combing Isabel Villaseñor's Hair, hair is the central focus of Hair on Patterned Floor (Fig. 3). In the third and final black and white photograph, a bundle of hair lies on a tiled floor. Seemingly detached from its owner's head, the artist uses it as the subject of the work. Centrally located within the composition, the hair is tightly bound together by a thin piece of dark material. This binding suggests that the bundle was cut directly from the head of its owner. Trickling down the entirety of the image, the hair is lit harshly creating a contrast between the cadences of its wavy texture. In shades of black, gray, and white, a repeating geometric pattern on the ceramic tiles decorates the flooring that runs diagonally across the image. The straight lines of the patterned tiles contrast the organic texture of the hair resting upon them. In the corner of the image stands a metal leg that appears to have been from a nearby chair or table.

The aforementioned images of everyday acts of being lend us insight into the female experience as it might have been towards the end of the Mexican Revolution. As the artist photographs one woman as she adjusts, maintains, and eventually discards her hair, he uses this process as a metaphor for becoming an idealized image of a prototypical indigenous Mexican woman. This can be seen, most strikingly, in Portrait of the Eternal, as the model's maintaining of her hair indicates a dedication to tradition that acts as a means to communicate the importance of this tradition to the viewer of the work. The dissonance created by this and the photographer's focused illumination of it can prove to be a signifier of the complexities of the subject matter, as well. Amidst the tradition, however, it is as if the artist is attempting to deconstruct it in his staging of his model. Isabel's hair
conceals a large portion of her face and body, and as she pulls it back to see what lies behind it, she uncoversthat which she could not see before. In his rendering of this action, it is possible thatthe artist is presentingthis woman as she begins to reveal her true self by pushing aside the trappings other traditional Mexican heritage as signified by her long hair and traditional Mexican attire. As renowned writer and close friend of the photographer, Octavio Paz, says, "to see" is to "shed light on oneself". As the model is shown in the act of looking, she not only sees her reflection in the mirror, but also, she becomes herself within it.

Álvarez Bravo's choosing of an Isthmus woman and Isabel as his models for Woman of the Isthmus Combing Isabel Villaseñor's Hair indicates that he is possibly commenting on the indigenismo of 1930's postrevolutionary Mexico that developed as a result of the Mexican government's efforts to modernize the country. As a result of this effort, many women began to look to American and European women as models of femininity. Simultaneously, they struggled to uphold traditional Mexican values and roles. This can be seen in the images of Isabel clothed in unconventional Mexican attire. According to Mexican photographer and founder of the Mexican Council of Photography, Graciela Iturbide, the actress and artist wore this uniform in her everyday life to represent her dedication to her indigenous Mexican heritage. This type of indigenismo continues in the photographer's choice to include an Isthmus woman in the photograph. At the time, many non-Mexicans thought of Isthmus women "as paragons of Mexican female beauty and independence." Amongst them, close friend and early supporter of Álvarez Bravo, photographer Tina Modotti, often celebrated these women in much of her own work. Therefore, it is possible that Álvarez Bravo was influenced by this interest. While in the Isthmus of Tehuantepec on the set of 1930's avantgarde film, ¡Que Viva México!, the artist had the opportunity to photograph "in the isthmus... using Isabel Villaseñor and a local woman as models." Therefore, it can be said that Álvarez Bravo's decision to show modern actress Isabel alongside an Isthmus woman was deliberate. His juxtaposing of an icon of modern cinema dressed in traditional Mexican attire and a popular symbol of female independence indicates that this image was created to represent the evolving roles of women as they began to shift from singularly matriarchal to uniquely dualistic in their attempts to find a balance between the old and the new.

This shift culminates in Hair on Patterned Floor. By cutting off the long strands of a woman's hair, the artist objectifies it. Although not much has been written on this work, in particular, the artist's objectification of the hair attaches the series to the political climate of the time. By the time the photographs were taken, the length of a woman's hair was the center of debate over the issue of gender...
roles in Mexico. According to scholar Anne Rubenstein, this can be seen in the events beginning in 1924. She says, "the debate over the length of women's hair had escalated to the point where men...violently attacked women" in Mexico. An issue that arose ten years prior to the creation of Álvarez Bravo's photographs, it shows that the way in which Mexican women chose to wear their hair had become a key factor in the molding of their Mexican identities and, therein, served as a public testimony to their dedication to the country. Therefore, by focusing on the model's hair as the principle element of the series, Álvarez Bravo reflects on the socialinstabilities of 1930's Mexico.

Furthermore, hair acts as a boundary between the model and the world around her. What is at question here is the primary function of this boundary, its apparent purpose and its appeal to those who may or may not come into contact with it. As Mónica Amor observes in her article, «Manuel Álvarez Bravo: The Impossibility of the Archive,» the artist's work walks a fine line between modernist and traditionalist. With this in mind, a woman's hair, as presented in the series, can be thought of as a metaphor for this fine line. Standing between the old and the new, its dominating presence describes not only the state of the artist's work at the time, but also, the tightrope many Mexican women walked as they struggled to redefine themselves within an increasingly modern social context. In the staging of the images, the photographer offers us not moments of vanity, but rather snapshots of the tension that arises when a woman begins to lose herself in her desire to perfect her appearance according to society's ever changing tastes. The models in the first two images are posed in such a way that neither their facial features nor their physiques appear as visually important as the maintaining of Isabel's hair. The locations of the images appear to be ambiguous. This ambiguity rids the images of distractions and allows for the viewer to focus solely on the hair. As the model focuses on her hair, the viewer does so as well. In each image, light is used as a tool to pull the viewer's focus on what appears to be the true main character of the works--Isabel's hair. As Mexican writer, Octavio Paz asserts, the artist's work "abounds in apparently simple images, which contain other images or produce other realities." This series of photographs takes something as fluid as the style of a woman's hair and places it against a backdrop of steadfast Mexican iconography. This pairing describes the dualism inherent in the previously mentioned female struggle. In this way, the artist has done as Paz describes. He has created dramatic scenesthat can translate as the altered realities of postrevolutionary Mexican women.

Hair takes on a significant role in works by other artists of the era. InSelf Portrait with Loose Hair (Fig. 4), surrealist painter, Frida Kahlo, clings to it as an
icon of her traditional Mexican heritage and utilizes it as a means to identify herself and express her political opinion. In this autorretrato (self-portrait), Kahlo paints a bust of herself with her dark hair untied and cascading over her shoulder. The thick texture of her hair consumes the right portion of the image. She is wearing traditional Mexican attire. The background appears to be representative of gray stone, and a green leaf is placed near her head. At the bottom of the image, a tattered scroll spans the width of the composition and reveals loosely painted text. As indicated by Kahlo’s decision to allow her hair to encompass a large portion of the portrait, this painting is similar to Álvarez Bravo’s series on Isabel’s hair and provides further historical evidence of the important role a woman’s hair played in the formulating of one’s identity during the time the painting was executed.

Much like Isabel’s hair, Kahlo wears hers in a natural and free flowing style allowing it to grow past her shoulders. By wearing her hair this way, Kahlo utilizes it as a means to identify herself as both a unique and free individual. By choosing to do as such, Frida visually establishes a connection between herself and her Mexican heritage. Although the painting is, perhaps, autobiographical, it is possible that Frida’s decision to render herself in this way is deliberate. The text in the image states that the woman she has painted is, in fact, herself, as she announces her presence by stating, “Aquí me pintéyo, Frida Kahlo…” (“Here, I painted myself, Frida Kahlo”) and goes on to associate her personal history with the portrait when she says, “…con mi reflejo en el espejo. Tengo 37 años y es Julio de 1947. En Coyoacán, México, el sitio en donde naci” (“...with my reflection in the mirror. I am 37 years old and it is July 1947. In Coyoacán, México, the place where I was born”). The honesty and directness of her text is further endorsed by her decision to place it directly beneath her portrait. Due to the candidness of the text and the Mexican iconography within the painting, this work can be seen as an image that aims to represent the artist as traditional, and yet, modern in the boldness in which she publicly describes herself.

Where Kahlo’s work differs, conceptually, from Álvarez Bravo’s photos of Isabel and the Isthmus woman is in her employing of herself as the lead character in the work and her reliance on her personal past as a means to develop her ideas. Despite this, Kahlo’s willingness to maintain a traditional Mexican identity both in her personal life and her paintings parallels that of model Isabel’s personal choice to publicly live her life dressed in indigenous attire.

Therefore, because both Kahlo’s work and the images of Isabel in Álvarez Bravo’s series remain true to the models’ own devotions to their respective indigenous ideologies and due to the fact that the works by both artists can be, stylistically, placed within a modern milieu, their works can be thought of as somewhat similar. Symbolically, Kahlo’s efforts to formulate an identity that pays
homage to Mexico's past can be seen in her explicit use of Mexican iconography. This density adds a weight to the images as if Kahloís describing the weight of the pressure that was placed on woman to adhere to a homogenous nationalist image following the war. Although Álvarez Bravo's series includes some elements of Mexican iconography, it does not explicitly use them as Kahlo does. Instead, the photographer subtly integrates such signifiers, and, therefore, creates works that can appeal to a broad spectrum of viewers.

Progressing slowly, each work in Álvarez Bravo's series depicts the experiences of one woman as she is becoming, being, and growing. So appropriately does this progression fit within the social climate of 1930's Mexico that one must only look to the images in relation to this social climate as a means to understand them. The women of postrevolutionary Mexico fought to establish fundamental civil rights under a nationalistic government that refused to acknowledge their incredible contributions to the revolutionary war effort. In their contributions, many women took on masculine identities as a means to fight in the very war that would spawn the war on gender that would eventually hold them back. Despite this, they independently continued to place themselves within the center of Mexico's political arena and remained there fighting for true gender equality. The effects of this conflict can be seen in the violent attacks on women who chose to cut their hair short and, therein, identify themselves as different from the traditional feminine ideal of postrevolutionary Mexico. That is, in postrevolutionaryfeminist Mexican ideology, the shorter a woman's hair was, the more powerful she was perceived to be. If a woman kept her hair long, she was considered to be"weak" and, therefore, less able to contribute to rising feminist efforts. Álvarez Bravo's images depict the less publicized moments within this struggle by representing the in-between, more intimate moments that, perhaps, facilitate true and lasting growth. Not alone in his choice of subject matter, painter Frida Kahlo conveys a similar notion in Self Portrait with Loose Hair. Likethis painting, Álvarez Bravo's series questions notions of identity. When speaking of it in relation to art making, he says, «A painter can say he is doing Mexican work. How can something be only Mexican? How? When?» In the narratives within Portrait of the Eternal, Woman of the Isthmus Combing Isabel Villaseñor's Hair, and Hair on Patterned Floor, the artist does not attempt to answer his questions on identity nor does he aim to push his personal ideologies onto the psyches of his viewers. Instead, he offers his audiences an opportunity to witness the meanings of his works as they slowly develop before them.
Figure 2. Manuel Álvarez Bravo, *Woman of the Isthmus Combing Isabel Villaseñor's Hair*, 1933. Gelatin silver print, 8 5/8 x 7 9/16 in. The J. Paul Getty Museum, Los Angeles.
Figure 3. Manuel Álvarez Bravo, *Hair on Patterned Floor*, 1940s. Gelatin silver print, 9 3/16 x 7 1/4 in. The J. Paul Getty Museum, Los Angeles.
Figure 4. Frida Kahlo, *Self Portrait with Loose Hair*, 1947. Oil on masonite, 24 x 17 3/4 in. Private Collection, Des Moines.
Endnotes


2 The name of this model is revealed in the title of Álvarez Bravo’s work *Woman of the Isthmus Combing Isabel Villaseñor’s Hair*, 1933, The J. Paul Getty Museum, Los Angeles.


9 Ibid.


11 Olcott, *Sex in Revolution*, 57.
12 Mónica Amor, “Manuel Álvarez Bravo: The Impossibility of the Archive,” 


14 Rebecca Block et al., “Fashioning National Identity: Frida Kahlo in 

15 Spanish text quoted from Frida Kahlo, *Self Portrait with Loose Hair*, 
1947, Private Collection, Des Moines. Translated by Brooke Lashley.


17 Olcott, *Sex in Revolution*, 57-65.

18 Tim Golden, “In the Studio With: Manuel Álvarez Bravo; Mexican Myth, 
Master of Images,” *New York Times*, December 16, 1993, Section C, Late 
Edition.
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