MARY GAITSKILL ON THE CHIRPY SADISM OF GILLIAN FLYNN'S "GONE GIRL"

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Brief Encounters

An anthology of portraits offers a compelling survey of Mexican life

MAX KOZLOFF

MEXICAN PORTRAITS EDITED BY PABLO ORTIZ MONASTERIO, WITH AN INTRODUCTION AND TEXTS BY VESTA MÓNICA HERRERÍAS MEXICO CITY: FUNDACÍON TELEVISA/NEW YORK: APERTURE. 356 PAGES. $85.

Portrait photographs invite speculation, much as diplomatic treaties do when made public. In both cases, the product is the result of undisclosed, expected give-and-take between engaged parties. Their interests were adulterated in a process where agents jockeyed for an advantage, one side maybe losing, the other gaining some edge over the other. In portraiture, negotiations affect those who pose and those who make the picture, quite aside from those who compete by making similar pictures. Deliberate portraits are power outcomes, not always as involving when they appear harmonious as when they betray some compromise.

In a media zone that now promotes Snapchat and Google Glass, these considerations are beginning to look a little quaint. In the depiction of faces, fashion tends toward the ever more lightweight and ephemeral. What are you doing? Where are you? Who are you with? I can *show* you instant answers to such trivial questions by aiming and then swiping my gizmo. What we call portraits, by contrast, are tacitly public and durable records that visualize their occasions for mnemonic purposes. Any given action is intended to be generic, illustrative of an occupation that nominally tells of roles played by the subjects in their life off camera. As they carry out recognized social work, portraits enter into media and are channeled by the history of their forms. Portrait moments are self-reflexive, even symbolic events, as distinct from the buoyant phenomena of everyday life caught for diaristic purpose. Their story content is enlivened by tensions of interpersonal behavior. And their cultural interest is enriched by the self-consciousness of their manners.

A majestic study has quite recently been added to the literature on this subject, *Mexican Portraits*, edited by Pablo Ortiz Monasterio. A founder of the educational think tank Centro de la Imagen, in Mexico City, and a director of the review *Luna Córnea*, Monasterio is a quite distinguished photographer in his own right. From Fundacíon Televisa and many other sources, he has fashioned an anthology of faces radiating through a panorama of Mexican life, unforgettably clamorous and poignant.

The book opens with a clutch of images that accentuate human skulls, sardonic emblems of the Mexican Day of the Dead carnival. On its own mordant level is a recent color series by Carla Verea titled "(IN)Security: Types of Bodyguards in Latin America," which presents men flourishing their shotguns and assault rifles, tools of their work. From the great Casasola photo agency comes an unsmiling group portrait of 1920s railway workers repairing a locomotive in such hellish grime that the immaculate white shirt of one of the men appears supernaturally luminous. And we have a series of portraits of a slender figure of a man with a prodigious mustache—which gets smaller over four decades—Guillermo Kahlo, Frida's father. Like those other men, he improvises a stance that blends belligerence and respectability, settling into his pose as if these elements were compounds of each other.

There is nothing exclusively Mexican about this tension. Nor does the book make any claims about its material along ethnic or nationalist lines. If there had been any temptation to consider the circumstances of individual pictures, or to explore their meanings, the creators of *Mexican Portraits* declined it. So many of these photographs, after all, are making their debuts, necessarily out of context, and from obscure historical situations. For the moment, their presence—which is compelling—outweighs their pedigree. A couple in a 1940s photograph pose happily enough, but the woman's head has been

Romualdo García, untitled (Guanajuato, Mexico), ca. 1910, gelatin silver on glass.

replaced by a bird's nest containing eggs. The intent of this cryptically manipulated image, from a 2007 series called "Marriage Obituaries," by Patricia Martin, could not be exposited within the schematic overview of the book's short texts. For all that, though the sequencing of the photographs may look random, they have the potential to insinuate comparisons with each other pertinent to Mexican themes.

Romualdo García ran the chief commercial portrait studio in Guanajuato from 1887 through the early 1900s. There, people were stationed in front of a curious stage set that may have intimated a portal to a bower with painted fronds, viewed from within a fantasy mansion. These sitters don't seem to know what to do there, other than to sing or dance, or fan themselves in decorous costumes. They are treated as avatars of bourgeois etiquette and urban ways in an artificial and faded environment, merely a no place that defers to the presumed social status of the clients.

A far cry from such genteel pantomime in a provincial town, Graciela Iturbide's women in Juchitán (Oaxaca state, 1980s) are studied in their own habitat as workers or vendors, formally on display in a community known for its matriarchal assertiveness. The women are described with a startling monumentality, as they're visualized from a point of view lower than normal eye level. Here are subjects closer to the earth and more intimate with animals than would be found among citizens of middle-class districts in the capital.

Finally, in Carlos Somonte's account of campesinos, "The Last Poets," 1986, the subjects pose outdoors, in their fields, but something very anomalous throws the otherwise documentary effect off balance. A tone of squalor and loneliness is injected into the scenario by means of tripod-mounted blank fabrics, back of the figures, as if to suggest—impossibly—that the studio has replaced the field. Much is made of their squinting discomfort, the more painful because the cloth frames fail to neutralize the immense and inhospitable surround. Personified by these solitary farmers, the Mesoamerican heritage of Mexico continues to exist, but it would seem only in some indefinable limbo, indicated by seamless backdrops conspicuously exposed for the pretentious conceits they are.

In the projects by Iturbide and Somonte, the social "otherness" of the characters who posed, viewed by their likely audience, makes for pungent content. With this work, though, there is a use of class typology that does not typify, since it reverses formulae and upsets conventions. An artistic sensibility interferes with the genres, enough to destabilize their meaning.

It is as if the artists were saying that we do not observe even those close by, except at an ambiguous psychological distance. Bringing us generously into a view of current portrait practice, *Mexican Portraits* reveals this condition with a breathtaking ease that has historical overtones.

The volume's introduction and short texts have trouble with defining portrait art itself. It is true that the "Metamorphosis" section gathers examples to show how people dress up, accessorize themselves, or are fascinated by changes in their appearance, surely a main theme in portrait aesthetics. But the interest in discussing this topic is qualified by motives that were by no means always personal. They include fashion, reportage, movie promotion, ethnographical studies, medical services, etc. The more these functions are accepted as legitimate zones of inquiry, the more the study of the face in photography broadens its scope, helped or not by secondary attributes. A chapter on the mask, important in Mexican popular culture, is not out of place within the more general categories of portrait activity. A little section on people with very weird coiffures has as much physiognomic as fashion appeal. No one can predict where, in the sea of genres, a human expression will make itself felt, brought by a marvelous strangeness that comes with issue from a fellow human being. *Mexican Portraits* rightly runs amok with that enigma. □

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