Traditions and beliefs

Photo exhibitions offer glimpse into dynamics of Latin-American life

BY MARY HALLEY

There is nothing quite like the provocative peace of a black-and-white photograph. The static, two-dimensional image can evoke tears, laughter or anger while remaining only a record of the past. Photographs can be of commonplace scenes, unknown faces or faraway journeys, but they all possess a certain familiarity that makes them appealing, if at least intriguing, to every viewer.

Two exhibitions celebrating modern Mexico’s influence on the art of photography will open with a free public reception from 3 p.m. to 5 p.m. on Sunday at the Fred Jones Jr. Museum of Art, 410 W. Boyd on the University of Oklahoma campus in Norman.


A vast display of works chronicling the progress of 20th-century Mexican photographers, "Contemporary Mexican Photography" is comprised of 90 pieces from 35 different artists, including Manuel Alvarez Bravo, Ignacio López, Mariliana Yampolsky, Victor Flores Ola and Pedro Meyer.

The photos act as a living history, documenting the richness of Mexican culture through compelling images of traditions and beliefs in action. From passer-by shots of donning peasants to a posed portrait of artist Frida Kahlo, the viewer is given a fly-on-the-wall peek into the dynamics of Latin American life.

"The richness and diversity of the Mexican people and their culture is captured eloquently by contemporary Mexican photographers," said Anne Tucker, curator of photography for the Museum of Fine Arts in Houston and curator of the exhibition.

"This exhibition presents an opportunity to showcase their distinct style, which has evolved from a mixture of cultural influences and from a strong and internationally recognized literary and artistic heritage."

Fred Jones Jr. Museum of Art’s recently appointed curator of education, James Scarbrough, pointed out, however, that the word "contemporary" somewhat misses the mark in describing this exhibition. As a multi-disciplined expert in art history, he feels the line separating modern from contemporary to be somewhat blurry. People tend to think of contemporary as being up-to-the-minute, whereas some of the work in this particular display dates back to the early part of the century, he said.

"The title "Contemporary Mexican Photography" is a misnomer," said Scarbrough.

"The exhibition is actually a survey of 20th-century Mexican photography that provides background for the truly contemporary exhibition "A Shadow Born of Earth," which features work done in the past five years. One is comprehensive and encyclopedic, while the other is more thematic. Both represent a brilliant introduction to both modern and contemporary Mexican photography."

The photos in "A Shadow Born of Earth" are done on a much larger scale and contain more overt aesthetic additions than are present in the basic, straightforward perspectives of the other exhibition. Of the latest generation of Mexican photographers, 16 are featured in the 77-piece exhibition, such as Laura Cohen, Pablo Ortiz Monasterio, Gerardo Suter and Eugenia Vargas. Most have had little exposure outside their native country.

All of the work is highly experimental and packed with social commentary. The young artists have taken crucial elements from the photography of their predecessors and built on them, creating their own highly progressive visual statements.

"In Mexico, photography is much more readily accepted as an art form, and it always has been," said Jill Johnson, public relations officer at the museum.

"A Shadow Born of Earth" is curated by Elizabeth Ferrer, an independent curator and critic specializing in Latin American art and photography.

Also currently on display at the Fred Jones Jr. Museum of Art is "Granite Landscape," an installation by Jesuí Bautista Moneos. The group of stone sculptures will reside in the museum until May 6.

Every piece in the installation begins to be touched by the observer, like a mother crying out for affection from her detached offspring. Humanity's kinship with the earth continues to fade as technology keeps toward autonomy of the individual, but Moneos' work reminds viewers that their attraction to the unblemishing beauty of stone is innate and should be embraced.

Some pieces have multiple notches carved out of them and produce a sound somewhere between a gong and a xylophone when struck. Others are rounded, designed to roll back and forth indefinitely, like circular metronomes keeping their own slow and steady beat. Each piece, whether its surface is rough or smooth, has a unique voice that is both visible and audible.

"It's amazing to hear all of the pieces resonating at the same time," said Johnson.

"Children really respond to being able to touch everything, instead of being reminded to keep their hands off. Adults react the same way."

Moneos claims he rarely knows what he will do with a piece of granite at the time he comes across it in the quarry. Sometimes he waits years for the rock to speak to him about how to bring out its personality through sculpture.

He views the walkway through the middle of "Granite Landscape" as a river whose banks can be climbed by museum visitors. On every other bank, a sculpture rests, requesting individual attention and saying something different to each person who encounters it. Traversing the landscape is like exploring a new, yet somehow familiar, universe.

Museum hours are 9 a.m. to 4:30 p.m. on Tuesday, Wednesday and Friday, 10 a.m. to 9 p.m. on Thursday and 1 p.m. to 4:30 p.m. on Saturday and Sunday. Free parking passes are available at the museum's security desk and may be used for the reserved spaces on the north ends of the Parrington Oval.

To obtain further information or arrange for a group tour, call 925-2372.