"A Shadow Born of Earth" and "Contemporary Mexican Photography" are the two exhibitions at the Fred Jones Jr. Museum of Art through Feb. 20. These two very fine shows explore the physical and spiritual nature of Mexico through photographic essays.

These photographs done by native artists approach the media as personal testimonials of what it is like to be Mexican. Religious and political themes are woven into poetic surrealist levels even in the most mundane photo journalistic approach.

All the participating photographers seem to have a puzzle part that indicates the richness of Mexico. This exhibition shows much more than a travel brochure — it reaches for the heart of Mexico.

"Song of the Heart" is 12 sequential photographs of a girl drawing two hearts on her bare chest. The first heart is drawn anatomically correct as a human heart. She stabs this heart and it bleeds. She erases this heart with her hand and draws a simple Valentine-style heart for the last frame. The body pain vs. fantasy escape is a major metaphor in Mexican arts. The personal fragility through political and cultural restraints are the bread-and-butter imagery of this show.

Gerardo Suter's large photos of spiritual and ritualistic symbols of native Indian origins are some of the most powerful in the exhibit. The dramatic lighting and simple composition that emphasizes the tactile qualities of soil and skin that manifest into prayer and identity. This series of photographs seem to breathe in the meanings of the ancient words and breathe out an understanding of what was intended.

Laura Cohen's beautiful formalistic abstracted photos of simple elements juxtaposed together create the most sublime statement in this collection. They speak of the past and the future without the blatant political statements. The beauty is sad, happy and thoughtful all at once. These photos sum up the cultural in the most minimal and direct visual poetic way.

— George Oswalt