

John Mraz, *Photographing the Mexican Revolution: Commitments, Testimonies, Icons*, Austin, University of Texas Press, 2012, 328 pp., 197 duotones, \$45, ISBN: 978029273580

Alejandro Anreus, Robin Adèle Greeley, and Leonard Folgarait, eds., *Mexican Muralism: A Critical History*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 2012, 394 pp., illustrations, \$39.95, ISBN: 9780520271623

Tatiana Flores, *Mexico's Revolutionary Avant-Gardes: From Estridentismo to ¡30-30!*, New Haven, Yale University Press, 2013, 376 pp., 48 colour and 122 b/w illustrations, \$65, ISBN: 9780300184488

Ellen G. Landau, *Mexico and American Modernism*, New Haven, Yale University Press, 2013, 224 pp., 39 colour and 71 b/w illustrations, \$50, ISBN: 9780300169133

Andrés Villar

---

Volume 38, numéro 2, 2013

Contemporary Scholarship on Latin American Art  
Approches contemporaines de l'art latino-américain

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1020800ar>

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.7202/1020800ar>

[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

---

#### Éditeur(s)

UAAC-AAUC (University Art Association of Canada | Association d'art des universités du Canada)

#### ISSN

0315-9906 (imprimé)

1981-4778 (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

---

#### Citer ce compte rendu

Villar, A. (2013). Compte rendu de [John Mraz, *Photographing the Mexican Revolution: Commitments, Testimonies, Icons*, Austin, University of Texas Press, 2012, 328 pp., 197 duotones, \$45, ISBN: 978029273580 / Alejandro Anreus, Robin Adèle Greeley, and Leonard Folgarait, eds., *Mexican Muralism: A Critical History*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 2012, 394 pp., illustrations, \$39.95, ISBN: 9780520271623 / Tatiana Flores, *Mexico's Revolutionary Avant-Gardes: From Estridentismo to ¡30-30!*, New Haven, Yale University Press, 2013, 376 pp., 48 colour and 122 b/w illustrations, \$65, ISBN: 9780300184488 / Ellen G. Landau, *Mexico and American Modernism*, New Haven, Yale University Press, 2013, 224 pp., 39 colour and 71 b/w illustrations, \$50, ISBN: 9780300169133]. *RACAR : Revue d'art canadienne / Canadian Art Review*, 38(2), 137-141.  
<https://doi.org/10.7202/1020800ar>

---

Tous droits réservés © UAAC-AAUC (University Art Association of Canada | Association d'art des universités du Canada), 2013

Ce document est protégé par la loi sur le droit d'auteur. L'utilisation des services d'Érudit (y compris la reproduction) est assujettie à sa politique d'utilisation que vous pouvez consulter en ligne.

<https://apropos.erudit.org/fr/usagers/politique-dutilisation/>

environment and her claim that the *Quadro* is a singular and unique vision of the Peruvian microcosm.

Indeed, Bleichmar accounts for the political and economic aspects behind eighteenth-century expeditions, but she always discusses these matters in connection with visual epistemology. She warns on many occasions that visual production, as a privileged means of knowledge transmission, was pursued by the scientific enterprise necessarily in relation to the empire's goals. That is, she argues that botanical images were used by travelling naturalists both to ensure the progress of the expedition and to convince Spanish governors of the economic and political benefits of the scientific enterprise.

Nevertheless, in the fourth chapter of her book, Bleichmar ponders the limits of the botanical image to promote any real commercial success for new overseas commodities. She discusses two cases in particular. The first is Juan de Cuellar's (botanist for the Philippine expeditions of 1786–1801) study of Philippine cinnamon, which he proposed as a substitute for Ceylon cinnamon. The second is Mutis's enthusiastic work on the "Tea of Bogotá." In both cases, the naturalists' images of these specimens demonstrate their similarity to other commodities already consumed in the European market. Cuellar, for instance, claimed that a comparison between the images of Philippine cinnamon he sent to Europe and those of Ceylon cinnamon published in Linneaus's or other European natural taxonomies showed that these two plants were identical. Cuellar therefore also used images as scientific and unquestionable proof to support commercial ventures. Nevertheless, attempts to commercialize these products in the European market failed. According to Bleichmar, these examples demonstrate that although visual epistemology was highly successful in taxonomic terms and for the progress of knowledge, it often failed to achieve commercial results.

Overall, *Visible Empire* is a brilliant history of travelling images and their creative context, showing that visuality played an essential role in the process of knowing and making visible imperial possessions. Along with Daniela Bleichmar's

other works, *Visible Empire* is a fundamental and highly lucid contribution to the study of the scientific expeditions of the Hispanic Enlightenment.

SEBASTIÁN FERRERO, UNIVERSITÉ DE MONTRÉAL

#### Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Carmen Sotos Serrano, *Los pintores de la expedición de Alejandro Malaspina* (Madrid, 1982); Antonio de Pedro Robles, *El diseño científico. Siglos XV–XIX* (Madrid, 1999); Marta Penhos, *Ver, conocer, dominar: imágenes de Sudamérica a fines del siglo XVIII* (Buenos Aires, 2005).
- <sup>2</sup> See for example "Seeing the World in a Room: Looking at Exotica in Early Modern Collections," in *Collecting across Cultures: Material Exchanges in the Early Modern Atlantic World*, ed. Daniela Bleichmar and Peter C. Mancall (Pennsylvania, 2011), 15–30; "A Visible and Useful Empire: Visual Culture and Colonial Natural History in the Eighteenth-Century Spanish World," in *Science in the Spanish and Portuguese Empires (1500–1800)*, ed. Daniela Bleichmar, Paula DeVos, Kristin Huffine, and Kevin Sheehan (Stanford, 2009), 290–310; "Visible Empire: Scientific Expeditions and Visual Culture in the Hispanic Enlightenment," *Postcolonial Studies* 12, 9 (2009): 441–66; "El imperio visible: la mirada experta y la imagen en las expediciones científicas de la ilustración," *Cuadernos Dieciochistas* 9 (2008): 35–63; "Exploration in Print: Books and Botanical Travel from Spain to the Americas in the Late Eighteenth Century," *Huntington Library Quarterly* 70, 1 (2007): 129–51; "Painting as Exploration: Visualizing Nature in Eighteenth-Century Colonial Science," *Colonial Latin American Review* 15, 1 (June 2006): 81–104.
- <sup>3</sup> Antonio de Pedro Robles, "Las Expediciones científicas a América. A la luz de sus imágenes artístico-científicas," in *Ciencia, Vida y Espacio en Iberoamérica*, ed. José Luis Peset Reig (Madrid, 1989), 415.
- <sup>4</sup> Daniela Bleichmar, "Seeing Peruvian Nature, Up Close and from Afar," *Res: Anthropology and Aesthetics* 59/60 (spring/autumn 2011): 82–95.

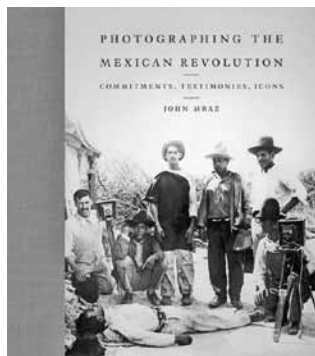
John Mraz, *Photographing the Mexican Revolution: Commitments, Testimonies, Icons*, Austin, University of Texas Press, 2012, 328 pp., 197 duotones, \$45, ISBN: 978029273580; Alejandro Anreus, Robin Adèle Greely, and Leonard Folgarait, eds., *Mexican Muralism: A Critical History*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 2012, 394 pp., illustrations, \$39.95, ISBN: 9780520271623; Tatiana Flores, *Mexico's Revolutionary Avant-Gardes: From Estridentismo to ¡30–30!*, New Haven, Yale University Press, 2013, 376 pp., 48 colour and 122 b/w

illustrations, \$65, ISBN: 9780300184488; Ellen G. Landau, *Mexico and American Modernism*, New Haven, Yale University Press, 2013, 224 pp., 39 colour and 71 b/w illustrations, \$50, ISBN: 9780300169133.

The visual culture of the Mexican Revolution of 1910 and its aftermath continues to be a rich source of material for scholars. Much of the literature devoted to this period has constructed the conflict and the decades that followed it as a momentous

period in the ongoing birth of the Mexican nation. The revolution has loomed large as the event that marks the boundary between a “before,” associated with the autocratic regime of Porfirio Díaz, and an “after,” that saw the flowering of the so-called Mexican renaissance and of the highly contentious notion of Mexicanness that came to be associated with a few heavily promoted iconic figures.

Four recent books that examine Mexican art and visual culture since the revolution develop a more nuanced picture, and explore how images in different media were created and disseminated, both inside and outside Mexico. Each text scrutinizes specific aspects of the social and cultural effervescence of twentieth-century Mexico. Collectively, they provide a complex picture of the images produced in the century since the revolution.



*Photographing the Mexican Revolution: Commitments, Testimonies, Icons* by John Mraz examines, as its title suggests, the photographic legacy of the revolution itself. Mraz's stated objective is to discover the identity of anonymous photographers who captured particular images, and to explore the development of their craft into

an important rhetorical medium through which competing agendas struggled for visual legitimacy. The project is complex, although Mraz's main intention is clear: to shed light on how, why, and for whom particular images were made.

That the identities of many of these photographers have remained unknown may seem surprising, given that some of the images reproduced in the book have been widely disseminated. The revolution was extensively photographed, but many of the resulting images were subsumed into the oeuvre of well-known photographers—such as Agustín Víctor Casasola—in whose archives they are located. In fact, Mraz effectively shows that the myth of Casasola as the photographer of the revolution is just that: a myth whose construction originates in state-sanctioned narratives promoted in the wake of the conflict. The images analyzed in the book suggest that things were much messier on the ground, and so *Photographing the Mexican Revolution* is an important step in addressing the complicated issues of image-making and authorship during this highly volatile period.

Mraz argues convincingly that many of the images were taken by professional photographers and that the illustrated magazines of the period provide clues to the photographers' identities and to the intended audience of their photographs. An important achievement of the book is to show how these

photographs and their makers were enmeshed in networks of competing interests. The images, however, remain fluid. Mraz provides numerous examples to show that many of the photographs, particularly the iconic ones, were reproduced, plagiarized, and recontextualized in a “war of images,” to use Serge Gruzinski's phrase.

The chapters in Mraz's book follow a chronology that begins in the last years of the Porfiriato, as Porfirio Díaz's tenure is commonly known. Chapters one to three provide an account of photography in early twentieth-century Mexico and how it developed as photographers “learned” to take pictures of the armed struggle. During Díaz's tenure, most photographers emphasized the “modern” aspects of Mexico and the achievements of the regime; with the advent of the revolution, however, “ordinary people” became a central subject for photography.

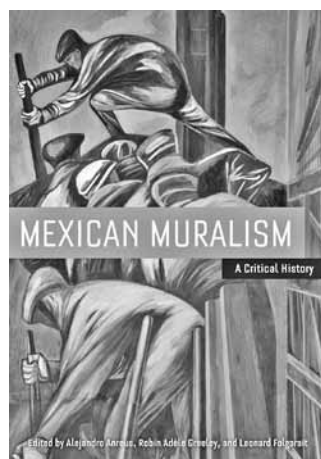
In chapters four to eight, Mraz charts the way photographers and their various patrons understood the symbolic value of images. Illustrated magazines in Mexico City were generally conservative, but as Mraz suggests, they were also opportunistic in adapting to shifts in power. Likewise, the *caudillos* (leaders) of the different factions quickly understood the potential of photography to promote their cause. They enlisted photographers to produce images of people and events that were, despite their intentions, open to different interpretations. For example, Emiliano Zapata and his followers were generally depicted as “barbarians” by the press in Mexico City; it was only after Zapata's death and the end of the revolution that this leader from the south became incorporated into the pantheon of national figures. Conversely, Pancho Villa was an early, international “star” of the revolution (he signed a contract with the Mutual Film Corporation, and even played himself in a now-lost film); his precipitous fall to the status of undesirable rogue was as fast as his rise to stardom.

In addition to searching for clues to the authorship of particular photographs, Mraz describes how new technology helped change the way in which such images were made. Since many of the photographers active during the conflict began their careers during the Porfiriato, their practices at the outbreak of hostilities reflected established conventions, such as creating photographs whose subjects were posed, often in the photographer's studio. Increasingly, however, with the advent of portable equipment, images of “spontaneous” events became more common, foreshadowing how the First World War and later conflicts would be documented.

*Photographing the Mexican Revolution* also provides examples of the multiple meanings that individual images can acquire, regardless of the commitments of photographers and their patrons to particular causes or agendas. This is examined in more detail in the epilogue, where Mraz pulls five images out of the historical narratives to which they have been confined and

reveals more complex and nuanced information than has traditionally been extracted from them. A fitting end to the book, the epilogue shows that the ambiguity that makes these images open to manipulation is an example of the polysemy inherent in the much larger photographic archive of the revolution itself.

Much of the book's strength lies in Mraz's measured approach as he discloses the history of specific images. In spite of the sometimes scant information about a photograph, Mraz successfully avoids the dangers of attributing false authorship and drawing erroneous conclusions. His inferences are sound, and his project provides fresh insights about the material he examines. By looking at photography against the insistent nationalist story in which it has been embedded for so long, Mraz has contributed to a better understanding of images produced during the revolution.



*Mexican Muralism: A Critical History* is a collection of essays edited by Alejandro Anreus, Robin Adèle Greeley, and Leonard Folgarait that examines what is perhaps Mexico's best known art movement. The book is divided into three groups of essays, followed by a chronology of muralism and a series of primary texts translated into English. Muralism was conceived as public art

by the post-revolutionary Mexican state in an effort to forge and consolidate a sense of nationhood. Histories of muralism have stressed this public impulse as one of its defining traits. *Mexican Muralism* examines this assumption and assesses the effectiveness of the mural movement as a critical intervention in the public sphere.

The first section of the book provides a history of the tensions implicit in muralism due, in great part, to its paradoxical status as a state-sponsored movement whose members believed themselves to be at the vanguard of cultural change—even though, as Greeley suggests in her essay on muralism and the state, the mural movement lost much of its critical edge in later years. While it began with the ostensible goal of looking at Mexican culture for elements of a post-revolutionary visual language, muralism came to be identified with a pantheon of individual artists whose aura was appropriated as emblematic of the very “national” culture that was under construction. This section's eight essays show both the variety of artists and projects linked to muralism in Mexico and the experimental character of artistic production in the 1920s. Mary K. Coffey examines Diego

Rivera's murals for the Ministry of Public Education (SEP) and shows the artist exploring subject matter and technique in an attempt to portray “Mexico on a wall.” Tatiana Flores sheds light on early muralism and on the impact other artists and writers had on this early phase of the movement. Robin Adèle Greeley describes the Contemporáneos group and their critique of muralism. This critique is further explored by Jennifer A. Jolly, who uncovers the tensions in David Alfaro Siqueiros's project for the Mexican Electricians' Syndicate, and by Esther Acevedo, who studies the muralists who worked at the Abelardo L. Rodríguez Market in Mexico City during the 1930s. Leonard Folgarait examines Orozco's commission at Dartmouth and provides a glimpse of work produced by Mexican muralists outside their country.

The second section delves into the influence of Mexican muralism on art in the American hemisphere. Gabriel Peluffo Linari analyzes Brazilian painter Cândido Portinari's alternative to Siqueiros's militant version of muralism and his negation of this artistic “solution,” which he deemed unsuited to the Southern Cone. Anreus describes Argentinian and Cuban artists' equally ambivalent reaction to Siqueiros. These two essays reveal Siqueiros to be an untiring, if dogmatic, advocate for muralism in his many travels abroad. Anna Indyk-López examines the controversies generated by murals produced in the United States by Rivera, Orozco, and Siqueiros.

The final section evaluates the legacy of muralism in Mexico and the United States. Folgarait describes the history of Tepito Arte Acá, a group formed in 1972 by artists from the Tepito neighbourhood in Mexico City, and whose mural painting is a vital form of street art that asserts communal self-representation in this still-marginalized sector of the Mexican capital. Holly Barnet-Sanchez considers how Chicano/a artists of the 1960s and 1970s adapted muralism to affirm a collective identity. Bruce Campbell concludes with a historical account of contemporary “muraling,” a term that shows that the legacy of public engagement initiated by muralism continues to thrive.

Any book that tackles such a broad topic across a wide geographic area and time span will, of necessity, be selective, and *Mexican Muralism* is no exception. Nevertheless, the choice of topics and their treatment are generally well-balanced. The essays in the collection are mostly by established and emerging scholars working in the United States, although Acevedo and Linari, who are based in Mexico City and Montevideo respectively and have written extensively on the art of Mexico and the Southern Cone, broaden the geographical scope of voices in the collection. *Mexican Muralism* conveys the heterogeneity of art production associated with muralism and shows how these cultural experiments spilled beyond the borders of Mexico long after the initial movement ended.



In *Mexico's Revolutionary Avant-Gardes: From Estridentismo to ¡30-30!*, Tatiana Flores expands on the essay she contributed to *Mexican Muralism*. Her monograph closely follows the unfolding of Estridentismo as a movement, from its beginnings in Mexico City in 1921 until its virtual demise in Xalapa in the late 1920s. Estridentismo was created single-handedly by

the poet Manuel Maples Arce by means of a strident manifesto that called for radical cultural change in Mexico. A small group of artists and writers soon coalesced around Maples Arce, and Estridentismo became a collective effort. Flores traces the ways the Estridentistas responded to different forms of visual culture, and points out that although Estridentismo is mostly studied as a literary movement, it did contain an important visual arts component. The overarching thesis of the book is that for the Estridentistas and for many artists and writers who emerged in post-revolutionary Mexico, the notion of the avant-garde represented an anti-academic stance embodying the optimism of a moment in which cultural renewal seemed possible. Flores also suggests that the Mexican avant-garde was not derivative or delayed, but was instead a direct response by artists to the needs of a local, Mexican context.

*Mexico's Revolutionary Avant-Gardes* follows a mostly chronological order, beginning with Manuel Maples Arce's manifesto of 1921 and concluding with the ¡30-30! movement at the end of the 1920s. Both these artistic manifestations are central to Flores's argument, though her notion of the historical Mexican avant-garde also includes other artists and writers, such as the muralists and the Contemporáneos group. The main exception to the chronological format is the book's introduction, where Flores highlights the work of Rafael Lozano-Hemmer, a contemporary artist from Mexico whose work explores the promises and pitfalls of technology, a subject that entranced some of the artists of the 1920s, particularly the Estridentistas. This shows that the intermingling of Mexican politics and aesthetics, so pervasive nowadays and such a seemingly contemporary concern, finds antecedents in the actions of young early-twentieth-century artists who rebelled against the hermeticism of institutional art practices. In this respect, a student strike at the Academy of San Carlos in Mexico City in 1911 evinces a disaffection with academic norms that preceded Maples Arce's manifesto and the urge for "renewal," to which muralism was a response.

The muralists that Flores examines at length—Fernando Leal, Jean Charlot, Fermín Revueltas, and Ramón Alva de la

Canal—have been generally overshadowed by the canonical figures of Rivera, Siqueiros, and Orozco. Yet it is in the work of these four artists that one can see the emerging visual language later identified with the movement as a whole. All four also responded in varying degrees to Estridentismo and created artworks for the group.

The formation, at the instigation of the muralists, of the Syndicate of Revolutionary Painters, Sculptors, and Engravers of Mexico indicates a shift toward socially conscious art as the 1920s progressed. Flores demonstrates that the Estridentistas' promotion of a "new" art was a response to the social awareness that inflected Mexican visual culture, and that the ¡30-30! group attempted to translate their anti-academic stance into concrete projects that merged art with popular culture.

The book is premised on the notion that Estridentismo, the muralists, and the ¡30-30! group, among others, constituted a Mexican avant-garde. She supports this claim by making a parallel with Peter Bürger's suggestion that European historical avant-gardes sought to conflate art and daily life. Flores argues convincingly that, with some qualifications, Bürger's theory is useful in a Mexican context because artists were, likewise, attempting to make art production a social, inclusive practice. She further argues against considering Mexican artists as examples of an "alternative modernism," as this reiterates the view of European and North American culture as the frame of reference.

Flores might have further explored the term "avant-garde," as critiques of a European- and North American-centred modernism are not new. However, her major contribution is to decentre Mexican modernism itself by drawing Estridentismo into the realm of visual culture where it, arguably, has had little presence. *Mexico's Revolutionary Avant-Gardes* is a thoroughly researched and important corrective to the "sidelining" of Estridentismo in histories of Mexican visual culture.



Ellen Landau's *Mexico and American Modernism*, broadens the reach of Mexican art and visual culture by describing its effects on well-known modernist artists from the United States. Landau's aim is to draw attention to the way Mexico's alterity with regard to the United States stimulated the artistic growth of figures such as Isamu Noguchi,

Philip Guston, Jackson Pollock, and Robert Motherwell. By placing the work of these artists in a discursive framework that

includes Mexico, Landau seeks to draw attention to habitually overlooked sources that inform their work.

*Mexico and American Modernism* is divided into two sections: the first examines the work produced by Noguchi and Guston in Mexico itself, and the second analyzes the impact of Mexico on Pollock, Motherwell, and Guston. In this latter section, Landau shows the extent to which the “heroic” stage of Abstract Expressionism, described for so long as an autochthonous artistic production, resonates with Mexican influences. Landau suggests that Pollock and Motherwell continued to make use of their early encounters with Mexican visual culture even in their mature work, and that modernism in the United States is deeply indebted to the culture, the ideas, and even the geography south of the Río Grande.

The Mexican commissions functioned as important catalysts for Noguchi and Guston; the latter worked in Mexico with his friend and fellow artist Reuben Kadish. All three were to some degree conscious of their status as outsiders in the United States—Noguchi because of his Japanese ancestry, and Guston and Kadish because of their Jewish heritage—and it is in great part this sense of alterity, Landau suggests, that allowed them to identify with the alterity of Mexico itself. Noguchi’s mural gave sculptural form to his explorations of space and of the human body. According to Landau, Noguchi’s sensitivity to space and gesture was enhanced through his collaborations with choreographer Martha Graham, which would continue for many years after his return from Mexico. The mural shows the young Noguchi using “anti-imperialist” imagery that fits comfortably with what his fellow artists were producing in the venue they shared (the Abelardo L. Rodríguez Market in a working class district not far from the centre of Mexico City) and that emulated the political critique of the muralists, particularly Rivera and Siqueiros.

Guston and Kadish were also motivated by leftist politics and were particularly indebted to Siqueiros, with whom they had worked in California: he had been instrumental in securing for them the Mexican commission. Guston and Kadish’s mural alludes to the persecution of Jews in Europe, and evokes associations with the violence of the Mexican Revolution. For Guston, the revolution was a watershed moment whose imagery would later resurface in his return to figuration.

The impact of Mexican art and visual culture is also seen in Pollock’s and Motherwell’s work. Pollock admired Mexican muralism and had absorbed its influence before becoming Thomas Hart Benton’s student. Motherwell’s encounter with Mexico, where he travelled with Roberto Matta, led to contacts with European Surrealists in exile and to a close working relationship with Wolfgang Paalen. The lure of Mexico, however, extended beyond these early experiences. Landau argues that Pollock’s well-known Abstract Expressionist canvases echo

Siqueiros’s attempts to express subjective and objective experience in paint, and that the colours and shapes of work produced by Motherwell in, and about, Mexico resonate in his mature work, particularly in the series *Elegies to the Spanish Republic*.

Landau also draws attention to recent scholarship that has begun to address the genesis of Abstract Expressionism with more nuance, and that criticizes descriptions of the movement as a mostly home-grown reaction to European art. Landau’s research and writing contribute to this scholarship by showing how Mexican culture affected the work produced by US artists. One could argue that there is too much emphasis on this influence from Mexico, but this would miss the point. Like Tatiana Flores, Landau seeks to decentre ensconced histories of art and visual culture, although in the latter case it is post-war artists from the United States who are under review. The “presence” of Mexico in these artists’ work challenges analyses that abide by too strictly defined cultural or national demarcations. *Mexico and American Modernism* is an important contribution that shows how varied the tributaries that fed modernism in the United States really were.

The four books reviewed here are excellent contributions to the literature on Mexican art and visual culture of the twentieth century. Collectively, they provide a multi-layered picture of the complex networks that connected images and image-makers in post-revolutionary Mexico. Several important threads weave their way through all four texts. First, the increasing awareness by artists and photographers, among others, of the power of images to intervene in the public sphere; second, the emergence in Mexico of “the people” as historical actors with a stake in the country’s visual culture; and third, the porosity of the boundaries defining objects of study as diverse as art movements, countries, media, and notions such as “Mexicanness.” Although far from exhaustive, these threads outline significant aspects of Mexican visual culture that, while evoking the country’s cultural heterogeneity, provided artists with ways and means to reach creatively beyond distinctions and across borders.

ANDRÉS VILLAR, THE UNIVERSITY OF WESTERN ONTARIO