

HYPERALLERGIC

ART

How Photography Developed Argentina's Modern Identity

An illuminating exhibition at the Getty reveals how photography created and perpetuated a national imaginary in Argentina.



Olivia Gauthier January 18, 2018

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Gustavo di Mario, "Vilmar de la serie Carnaval / Vilmar from the series Carnaval" (2005, print 2015), chromogenic print, 19 11/16 x 24 13/16 in. (the J. Paul Getty Museum, Los Angeles, purchased with funds provided by the Photographs Council, © Gustavo di Mario)

LOS ANGELES — The invention of photography played a major role in the development of modern societies, as well as in the cultivation of national identity. This is well known in the Western canon of art, but the role of photography in the modernization of countries in Latin America has been largely understudied by North American institutions. As part of the Pacific Standard Time: LA/LA initiative focusing on Latin American and Latino art at the Getty, *Photography in Argentina, 1850–2010: Contradiction and Continuity* seeks to examine this neglected history, focusing on how photography created and perpetuated a national imaginary in Argentina. The exhibition begins 40 years after the country gained independence in 1810, and critically examines Argentina’s “heterogeneity” and postcolonial identity, focusing on its large population of European immigrants and erasure of indigenous peoples and culture.

Curators Idurre Alonso and Judith Keller have brought together some 300 photographs by 60 artists in this illuminating and rich display that covers 150 years of photography in Argentina from the beginnings of the medium to the current moment. While a sprawling exhibition, there is one major thread that runs throughout: the use of staged, artificially composed photographs to both create and undo national narratives. The show also reconsiders images commonly accepted as documentary photographs, revealing how they extend personal or institutional ideologies and often political propaganda.

Interestingly, early photography is presented alongside contemporary images. When speaking with Idurre Alonso, she commented on this curatorial choice, “We really wanted to show the continuance of some topics in photography in Argentina and how those topics evolve and change.” This is particularly evident in the images of the gaucho, who represents the ideal Argentinian man, not too dissimilar from the cowboy in American culture. The image of the gaucho, a rugged horseman who emerged as an idealized type at the turn of the 20th century, represents the heroic male whose masculinity dominates the land he occupies.



Marcos López Argentine, "Buenos Aires" (2009, print 2017), hand-colored inkjet print, 56 11/16 x 39 3/8 in (Rolf Art & Marcos López © Marcos López)

A series of staged photographs by Francisco Ayerza demonstrate this romanticized image of the gaucho. They depict men dressed in typical gaucho fashion against the Argentine landscape, and illustrate José Hernández's epic poem about a gaucho named Martín Fierro. Across the gallery, in a contemporary reinterpretation of the gaucho type, "Gaucho Gil" (2009, printed 2017) by Marcos López is almost ironic in its heavily constructed composition and overly performative presentation of the folk saint. López presents Gil with all the traditional trappings of the gaucho: a silver knife, bolas, a poncho, and lacy trousers; he confronts the viewer with intense eye contact, and is set against a fiery sunset with a cross in the background. López has framed this fabricated scene in a thick, red frame that oozes and drips like blood. The

ornate quality of the frame nods to 16th-century religious painting, underscoring the construction of the figure as a national myth.

No other individual image reveals photography's role in constructing Argentina's identity more than that of Eva Duarte de Perón, or Evita, as she is commonly referred to. The glamorized studio portrait, taken by Annemarie Heinrich in 1944, was quite literally constructed by the state as an icon of Argentina's first populist government.

The wife of Juan Perón, Evita became the symbol of Peronist government and her state-approved portrait was both carefully composed and widely scrutinized.

Perón even dedicated a department to control the media images and descriptions of Evita. Also an actress, she was well adept to portraying an ideal version of herself and performing for the popular imaginary. In the same gallery, Jaime Davidovich's video work "Evita, Then and Now: A Video Scrapbook" (1984) documents how Evita's image was controlled by the government and the ways her image was manipulated by the media.



Annemarie Heinrich, "Eva Perón" (negative 1944, print 1995), gelatin silver print, 12 13/16 x 10 5/8 in. (Galería Vasari © Archivo Heinrich Sanguinetti)

But the camera manipulated many subjects, not just individuals. In the late 19th century, Buenos Aires became an international metropolis, and European immigrants comprised nearly half of the population. Photographs of the city focused on its major building projects, helping to shape the image of a sophisticated urban landscape. A group of early albumen prints by Benito Penunzi, an Italian photographer who came to Argentina in 1861, documents the city which was modeled largely after post-Haussmann Paris. These photographic prints appear neutral at first: simple vignettes of the city's monuments with aesthetically pleasing oval shapes and softened edges. But the choice of focusing on monuments, such as the Plaza de la Victoria, is strategic, and the scenes are eerily devoid of people. Penunzi provides a romanticized image of the modern city without any semblance of displacement or the brutal conditions of the less fortunate populations of the city.



Hugo Aveta Argentine, "Ex Centro clandestino de detención, Ciudad de Córdoba / La Perla. Former Clandestine Detention Center, City of Córdoba" (2012) from the series *Espacios sustraibles / Extractable Spaces*, inkjet print, 9 3/8 x 57 1/16 in (image courtesy Hugo Aveta © 2012 Hugo Aveta)

Hugo Aveta's work provides an interesting contrast to Penunzi's project some 150 years later. In his series *Extractable Spaces* (2008–12) Aveta also takes the architecture of Buenos Aires as his subject; the interior spaces he depicts, which are actually maquettes modeled after real spaces, are similarly devoid of people. However, his focus is on the decrepit, abandoned urban sites that Penunzi overlooked. Aveta presents places, such as a former detention center, where crimes were committed under the last dictatorship, and the emptiness evoked by the uninhabited interiors suggest what was lost due to state violence. From 1976 to 1983 thousands of citizens disappeared, were killed and tortured, leaving voids in the country's social fabric.

As the title of *Contradiction and Continuity* suggests, the photographs offer a contradictory, complex look at the modernization of Argentina to the current day. The web of interlocking narratives, as told through both 19th- and 21st-century works, allow for a more nuanced understanding of both the country's modern history and the ways in which photos construct and perpetuate points of view.

[Photography in Argentina, 1850–2010: Contradiction and Continuity](#) *continues at the Getty Center (1200 Getty Center Drive Los Angeles) through January 28.*

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