

TINA MODOTTI

Roses, lillies, glasses, arches, stairwells – these images can simply be seen as a catalogue of studies by a photographer's apprentice; yet by observing them carefully, scrutinising all their textural possibilities and positioning light and shadow on their surfaces, Tina Modotti became used to the game of showing life through the camera's lens.

The exploration of familiar objects was a central theme of Modotti's work, as it was of Weston's, and there are many ways of interpreting this motif. But the artist's view is separated from that of the layman by a labyrinth of inclinations and motives. By attempting to explain the work, we are trying to enter this labyrinth for ourselves – and how can we decide what it was that Modotti and Weston saw in form?

Political involvement, too, had vivid repercussions throughout Modotti's life and changed the nature of her time in Mexico by introducing her to the first communists, who were then trying to establish a party among the cautious figures of the national underground. The impact of this new political activity on her work was far from slight and its burden cost her much; she was expelled from the country in 1930 and not long after, on arriving in Russia, political demands caused her to abandon photography altogether.

Some observers have commented on their preference for those of Modotti's photographs which allude to Weston and their time together, the most simple and obvious explanation being their belief in a formal, technical alliance – somewhat less agreeable if one considers her to be a novice at that time – while in her images of the Mexican people these same detractors can only find an empty, superficial fascination. Yet surely this line of thinking smacks of prejudice; at the very least it misses the fact that these photographs stem from a very different personal search, one which took her forward from the post-revolutionary, Renaissance decade of 1920s Mexico towards a new field of expression.

Naturally such a new departure creates an enigma, particularly in the light of her earlier explorations which were produced with such scrupulous care, but the real enigma must be that this photographer chose that most tricky, ephemeral and delicate of subjects: everyday life. At the height of her creativity Modotti went out into the streets in search of these images; in the Mexican countryside she gave life back to the faces that had been turned into symbols of the Revolution. Photographer as anthropologist, she closed the door on her “salón de pose” and went into the fields, trying to record through her art the disciplines of this singular life; her subjects, and the marks of daily work on their bodies, were not recorded by chance.

These images of the poor both dazzled and bewildered Modotti's contemporaries and seventy years later this equivocation is no less persistent, making us appear as vacillating fools. How, without mystifying them, do we confront these images? Certainly they have already suffered great mystification at the hands of Modotti's political comrades. To quote John Berger “Mystification is the process of explaining away what might otherwise be evident”. Modotti's achievement was to be the first foreign photographer to record the people and events created by the capitalist development of semi-rural Mexico City and its environs – with a camera Tina Modotti produced the same effect Jose Revueltas and Juan Rulfo were to have on literature several decades later.

Antonio Saborit

Legend and myth, Modotti's name is associated with the artistic currents and avant-garde of Mexico in the 20s, with muralists and the political movement of the left. Some of the aspects of her multi-faceted personality are presented in this portfolio – the photographer who reflects in her images her true history; the transition of an artistic woman into a political artist.

She forged a singular vision of Mexico, unsettling and penetrating; mixing the formal with the conceptual, she stamped a feeling of militancy upon daily life and imbued simple objects with the rhythm of continuous movement. From her earliest observations to her unsettling images of faces, the turmoil which distracted her from a medium already limiting to her political interests is palpable.

This portfolio reunites some of the images which reflect this development. The photographs are produced from the original negatives which have been in the custody of the Fototeca del INAH at the request of Vittorio Vidali since 1978; they allow us to witness the formation of a style which broke away completely from the long tradition of foreign photographers working in Mexico.

Servando Aréchiga