

Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

REFUGEE—Photographs at the Annenberg

Elisa Leonelli · Wednesday, June 1st, 2016

The opening of the [Annenberg Space for Photography](#) in Century City in [March 2009](#) was an exciting event for me, a former photojournalist. This museum features not only large prints, as photo galleries usually do, but also digital displays and video documentaries, produced for each exhibit, that show the photographers in action, and include interviews explaining how they work.



Refugees, Germany © Tom Stoddart 2015

I am very impressed with their latest show, [REFUGEE](#), particularly by the work of two photographers: [Tom Stoddart](#), born in England in 1953, and [Graciela Iturbide](#), born in Mexico in 1942. They both started photographing in the early 70s, as I did; they still use analog not digital cameras, 35mm Leicas and 6×6 Mamiyas, and shoot Black & White film, with its rich, deep chiaroscuro tonalities that are characteristic of old-fashioned photography. They both cite as their influences Henri Cartier Bresson and Eugene Smith, Iturbide adding Sebastian Salgado (to learn more about the extraordinary work of this Brazilian photographer, watch the 2015 documentary by Wim Wenders, [The Salt of the Earth](#)).



Refugees, Mexico (c) Graciela Iturbide

To accompany their photo exhibits the Annenberg offers a series of free lectures, called IRIS Nights, at their Skylight Studios, located downstairs across the courtyard. [Tom Stoddart spoke on April 28](#), saying that he is usually detached when he photographs, but he felt very emotional on this assignment, while capturing the arrival by boat of Syrian refugees on the Greek island of Lesbos. He added that we need photo-journalism now more than ever.

Personally, because as photographers we tend to be techies, I was struck by an anonymous quote on Stoddart's website: "When people ask me what equipment I use, I tell them: my eyes." In fact my first question to Graciela Iturbide, when it was her turn to speak in person at [IRIS Nights, on May 26](#), was what cameras she uses, because I had seen her in the video load spools of 120mm into a large format camera, the same film that I used in my Hasselblad. She replied: a Mamiya 6×6, a very old Rolliflex 6×6, and a Leica for 35mm.

What was so interesting to me was to see a woman older than myself, still passionate about her work in her 70s, traveling on her own to document the lives of Latin American communities. She said that being a woman is never a problem because she generally lives with the people she is photographing and they help her. To see more examples of her work, check out [her website](#). On this latest assignment, she was accompanied by an assistant for the first time, Osvaldo, who served

as her English interpreter at the lecture, since Graciela only speaks Spanish. They were assisted by UNHCR, the UN Refugee Agency, in contacting several shelters in Mexico, that offer refuge to immigrants walking north from Honduras and [El Salvador](#) to flee gang violence. They follow the tracks, jump illegally on top of the running train nicknamed *The Beast*, because it often cuts off their arms and legs if they fall off. To learn more about this tragic exodus, watch the 2009 movie *Sin Nombre* by Cary Fukunaga. In 2013 the Mexican government started offering asylum to these desperate people, and they do fill this paperwork that takes 3 months, but they still wish to cross into the United States. They hold on to the American dream, that they will find better paying work in the US and be able to send money back to their families. Graciela reassures a concerned audience member that they were never in danger during this trip, but very sad that they could not do more to help these people, that unfortunately Mexican police hit and rob the immigrants, rather than protecting them. It is priests and nuns that privately ran these shelters, not the government. So it is up to “civil society” to come to the rescue, to ameliorate the plight of these immigrants.

We encourage you see this REFUGEE exhibit, and attend upcoming lectures on this subject, such as Alixandra Fazzina: Visualizing Migration, June 10. Also read our article about the [refugee crisis](#).

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