

Mario Algaze

Tropical Heat

by CAROL McCUSKER

A conversation with Mario Algaze is an exuberant experience. He talks openly and passionately about politics, photography, movies, travel, weather, food, music, and love, all punctuated by wit, profanity, and vivid description. All of this is to say that Algaze is not a man who gradually ascertains his tastes. He intensely initiates, then quickly internalizes information and experience, resulting in the immediate recognition of what he finds true. He is resistant to analyzing why this is so. Yet, what an artist embraces in life becomes visible in his art. What he creates is the product of

who he is. For Algaze, this culminates in a romantic sensibility that is also tough, insistent, survivalist, and in love with beauty of the transient kind.

Algaze's life took shape in the turbulence of revolutions, Castro's Cuba and the social revolution of 1960s America, a decade and a half of enormous change that shaped not only him, but his entire generation. This includes leaving Cuba at a formative age, 'Sixties' counterculture, and the influence of major artists from both Americas (socio-politically minded filmmakers, writers, musicians, artists, and photographers) who inspired Algaze to express inner states-of-mind

If the art is honest it cannot be separated from the man who made it.

— Tennessee Williams



Mario Algaze: Carrettas



Curridabat

through formal, sensual descriptions of the outer world. Subsequently, his photographs capture what is archetypal, most specifically in Latin America — a line of street vendor’s carts, the ornate surface of a shoeshine kit, or the profile of a girl in a sea of white mantillas. Carved by light and shadow, oddly angled or dead on, each of his photographs holds the story-telling detail of a fable, or the mystery of *film noir*.

Mario Algaze was born in Cuba in 1947. His father came from Istanbul and settled in Cuba after WWI. Both his parents were lawyers, and sent young Mario to military school, where he learned either the benefits of discipline, or the need to rebel against it. In 1960, a year after the Cuban Revolution, Mario, then thirteen, left with his family for Miami. Entering the American south when segregation was still visible, gave the young boy pause. Having come from an island where people of color lived in harmony, Algaze observed America’s

racism with curiosity and repulsion. In time, he would read Tennessee Williams, whose revelatory descriptions of the south helped him understand the history and fears of his new home. Williams would later become one of many writers who inspired him to make photographs that were literary as well as visual.

In 1970, Algaze taught himself photography, excelling not just in the making of images but the intuitive pleasures of the darkroom. His passion for firsthand experience naturally led to travel, with his camera a passport. As a professional freelancer, he photographed extraordinary people, places, and events. He covered Mick Jagger, Bruce Springsteen, B.B. King, Dave Mason, and Carlos Santana, to name a few, on and off stage throughout the American south. *Zoo World*, and other alternative magazines and newspapers, regularly published his work. In the turbulent sixties, photography alongside rock and roll became the eyes and voice of a generation; no period before or since has produced as many

photographers or rock festivals. With 1960s/70s counterculture came a resurgence in subjective documentary photography that gave form to its tenet of free expression. Algaze became one of its busiest ambassadors.

Freelance assignments followed and paid for Algaze’s deeper forays into Central and South America, where, he said, his “cultural identity always resided.” There, he met older, more seasoned artists and intellectuals, Rufino Tamayo, Manuel Alvarez-Bravo, and Ernesto Sabato, among others, whose politics were inseparable from their art. Their influence drew him further into Latin America’s rich aesthetic complexity and political fierceness. His portraits of them, reproduced in *Vanidades* and other multinational magazines, are decidedly different from the tenor of *Zoo World*. They possess a solidity and respectful distance. What these men represented — struggle and triumph on their own terms — would shape the direction of Algaze’s personal work for the next four decades.

His most satisfying portraits are of Ecuadorian painter and sculptor, Oswaldo Guayasamin, and exiled Cuban writer and cineaste, Guillermo Cabrera Infante. Guayasamin leans toward the photographer, establishing their mutual regard. Smoke from his cigarette trails off the edge of the picture like a spent thought. Algaze emphasizes his forearms and hands, as the artist did in his own paintings. Their prominence links his physical relationship to the handmade wood, leather, and metal objects surrounding him. Infante is set squarely against two static rectangles of peeling wall, its surface like a Joan Miró painting. On the photographic paper, these geometries are transformed into land and sky, with the lower half mimicking a map of continents to which only Infante has traveled through his imagination.

In *Reflections on Exile*, Edward Said wrote that exiles often recreate their disrupted lives by seeing themselves as part of another community that re-assembles them back into a whole. With his own homeland denied

him for almost forty years, the people, cities and landscape of Latin America and Spain became, for Algaze, a touchstone of identification and a deeper sense of connectedness. In the colonnades, cafés, and old stones of Cusco or Colonia, he experienced “a true labyrinth ... my true home.” In pursuit of this, Algaze regularly boarded a plane for Ecuador, Peru, Mexico, or Colombia, and plunged headlong in, out, and around a maze of rural and urban scenes, narrow streets and ancient walls, mountainous landscapes and verdant fields. In 1999, he returned to Cuba for the first time in 39 years, a place he remembered as “sexy, mysterious, tropical, and taboo,” embellished by images and sounds from Hemingway and Irakere. Not quite a homecoming, the trip was nonetheless a reconnection to a set of memories, scents, colloquialisms, and urban scenes half remembered. The trip brought him full circle. He has steadily built a sum view of Spanish-speaking countries that no other photographer has done before or since.

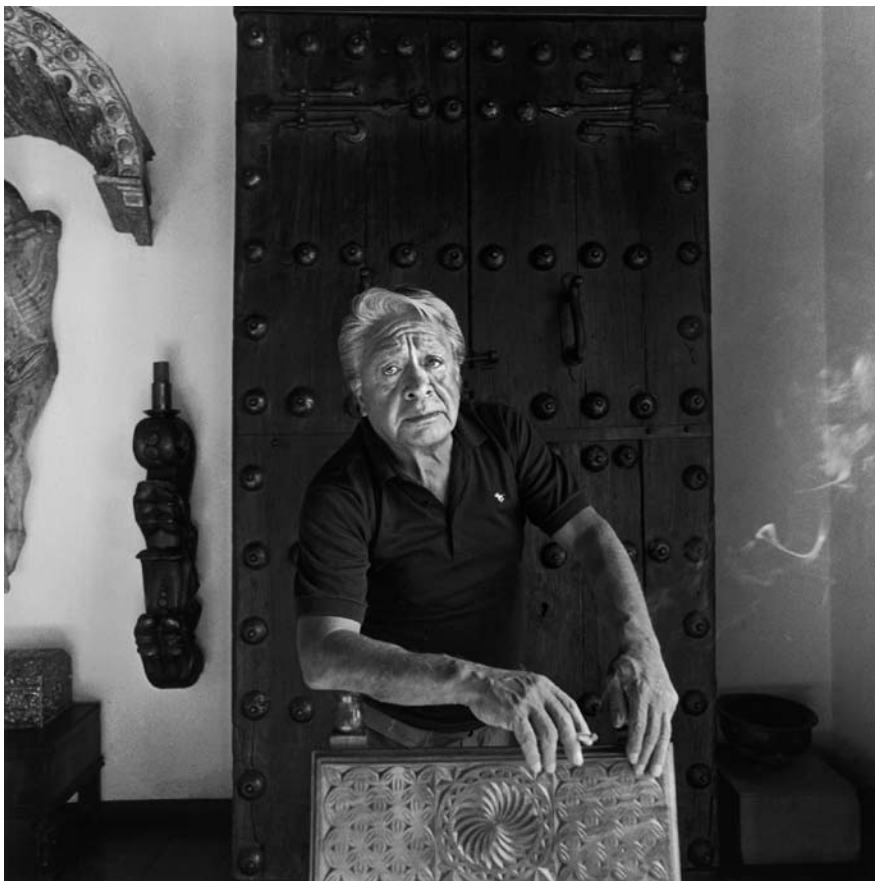


Mick and Keith

Algaze’s photography is the fruit of decades of reading, listening, and observing; the instinctual combined with the thoughtful. As an artist and a political being, a romantic as well as a realist, he was drawn, in other’s

work and in his own, to the simultaneity of outside and inside, of what the eyes saw and what the soul needed. His images are the “thing itself,” as well as stand-ins for history or endurance, not unlike the photographs of André Kertész, Walker Evans, or Jerry Uelsmann. He exhibited these photographs at *Gallery Exposures*, a space he opened in the 1980s devoted exclusively to photography. All the while, reading Gabriel Garcia Marquez, Graham Greene, and Paul Theroux, and, from the early 1960s onward, watching films by François Truffaut, Carol Reed, and Vittorio de Sica, directors who used wanderlust, personal history, displacement, and redemption as recurring themes.

The influence of cinema on his photography cannot be underestimated. Two films in particular, *The Third Man* (1949) and *Our Man in Havana* (1959), the former shot in Vienna, the latter in Cuba, have resonated with the photographer. In these films, the cameramen, Robert Krasker and Oswald Morris respectively, create atmospheric, on-location, black-and-white cinematography that mesmerized the young Algaze, specifically how to convey the mystery and emotion of place through light. In Algaze’s *Amanecer en Matanzas* reflected light casts haunting shadows across a town’s half-ruins where a single figure



Oswaldo Guayasamin

appears like an apparition. The mise-en-scene of *Homenaje a Titón* — a parked convertible on a narrow, port-side street, and a distant ship anchored at the vortex of the image — conjures up foreign powers, refugees, and black marketeers. As with cinema itself, Algaze's photographs are magic vessels in which a genie lies. We touch his images with our imaginations, and whole films unfold. In another life, he was, or will be born a cinematographer.

Elegance and symmetry are also recurring alphabets in Algaze's visual vocabulary. In *Paisaje Urbano*, Old World decorum is brought together and then set askew. A wrought iron gate and bank of trees, shot with a wide-angle lens, collapse controlled architecture and unbound nature into an echo of one another.

An open-air corner store sells brooms, with Campbell soup and V-8 juice cans neatly aligned behind a coffee grinder. An array of vertical and horizontal lines, textures, and signage pay homage to Walker Evans, as well



Amanecer en Matanzas



Homenaje a Titón

as transform the mundane into a Cubist array of space and form (*Brooms*).

Whimsy is seen in *Plaza Mayor*, where, among the heavy 19th century cobblestones, colonnade, and ornate street lamps, a man closes his eyes and turns his face like a plant toward the sun. Across from him, a woman's down turned face is buried in her knitting. The 'punctum' of the image (what Roland Barthes described as an arrow to the viewer's heart) is a sudden breeze that blows the single strand of yarn on which she works into an elegant arch toward him.

Like Plato's Cave, some of Algaze's photographs employ the reflection of things rather than the thing itself. These are among the photographer's best images, as with a couple amorously talking in the corner of a bar (*Cantina*), or Ecuadorians gathered at the public bath and open-air market in Otavalo (*Espejo Barroco*). Each is seen obliquely through reflections in large, ornate mirrors that, like the camera, consume the details of the world before them. Sometimes Algaze



Plaza Mayor



Espejo Barroco

treads close to the edge of cliché, a café in raking light, a perfectly framed diner seen from the street — the barrio version of Hopper's *Night Hawks*. But through them he asks: why do clichés endure? Is there truth in their time-honored forms that foster identification and cultural stability?

The art of Mario Algaze lies in the form he gives to the content of his imagery. Each is a combination of graceful lines, rounded forms, and single frame narratives with archetypal characters found in common places. The simple beauty of the everyday becomes profound through his framing of the irreducible particulars of domestic life. His own life holds a bit of the archetypal by way of separation, adventure, transformation, and return. His catharsis happens right there in the viewfinder through artful curiosity and readiness. He makes the camera a passport through the portal, with his democratic gaze diverting our attention away from what is divisive among us and toward what is familiar and human in our collective foray through the labyrinth.

Carol McCusker received her Ph.D. from the University of New Mexico, and is currently an independent curator, writer and educator. For eight years, she was Curator of Photography at the Museum of Photographic Arts, San Diego, where she curated over 35 exhibitions. She is an Adjunct Professor at the University of San Diego and UCSD, and recently won the 2011 Ansel Adams Fellowship from the Center of Creative Photography, Tucson. She was Juror for the 2010 ICP/NY Infinity Awards, and the 2010 Julia Margaret Cameron Award/UK. McCusker reviews portfolios nationally and internationally from the Lishui Photo Festival in China to Atlanta Celebrates Photography and Houston's FotoFest. She writes for B&W, Color, Communication Arts, and numerous artists' catalogues.

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