

AMÉRICAS

APRIL 2007

US \$4.00 CAN \$6.00

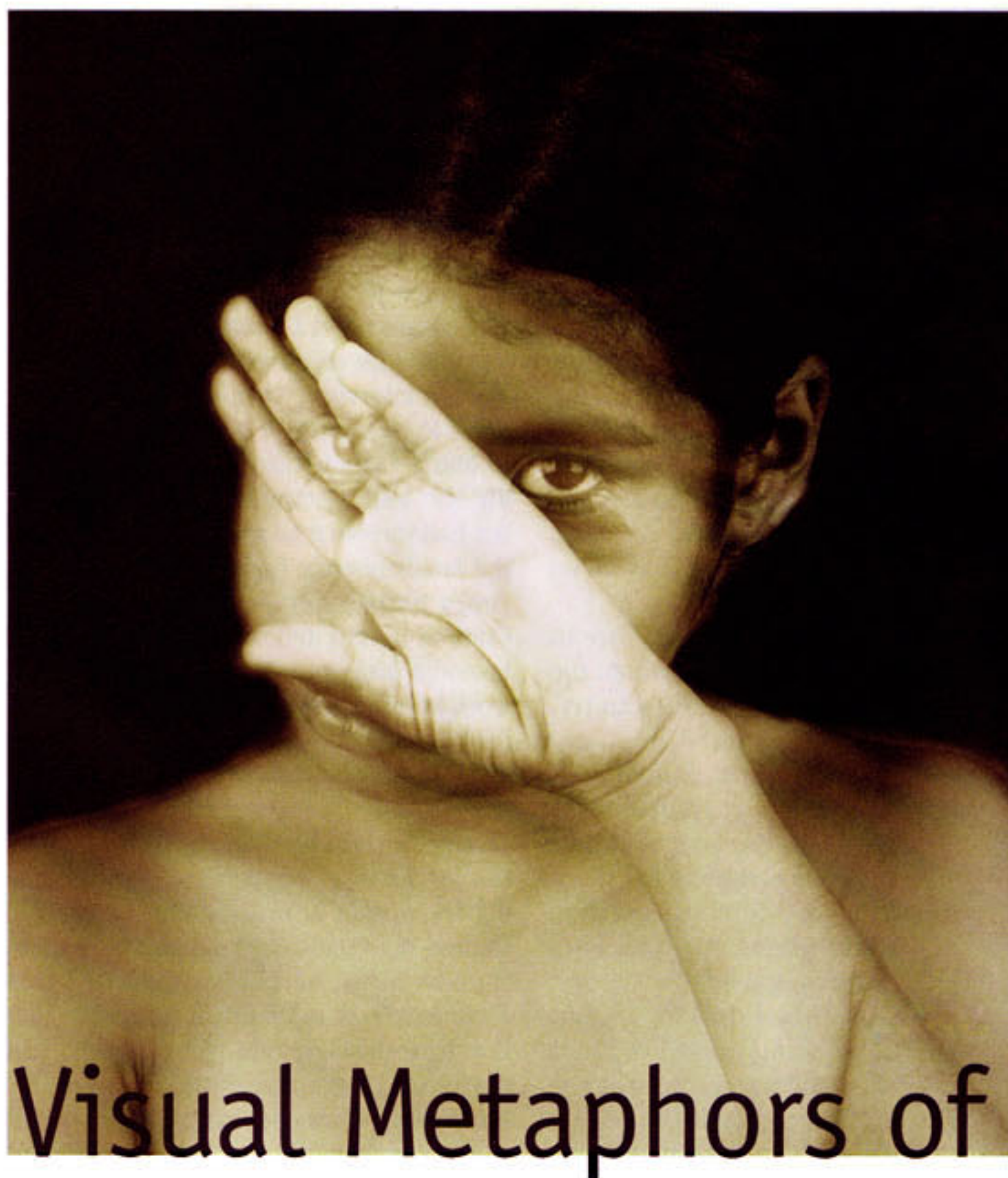
**NEW MEXICO'S SKY CITY
REACHES NEW HEIGHTS**

**JULIA ÁLVAREZ: A VERMONT WRITER
FROM THE DOMINICAN REPUBLIC**

**FLAMINGOS FLY AGAINST
ALL ODDS IN THE ANDES**

**DENZIL L. DOUGLAS REVEALS HIS
STRATEGY FOR ECONOMIC IMPACT**





Visual Metaphors of

Human Ironies

Peruvian photographer Ana De Orbegoso artistically accentuates her social commentary with unusual and inspirational images

by K. Mitchell Snow

It's always entertaining to watch Peruvian photographer Ana De Orbegoso transform verbal concepts into visual comedy. Her humor arises from the realities of daily life, but her images of the human comedy never document day-to-day occurrences. She approaches her photographs like a theatrical designer approaches a script, carefully assembling the elements she needs to convey her message. Her created scenarios mirror the foibles of human society, lifting the edges of social convention to show the truth that often lies just below the surface of propriety.

Above: Angela (The Others), from The Invisible Wall, 2005/2002
Right: The Virgin of the Trinity, from Urban Virgins, 2006





"My primary fascination is with human beings—their internal worlds and the boundaries between them," De Orbegoso says. "Through my photographs, I always attempt to convey that almost imperceptible world of emotions, thoughts, and sensations. The images themselves are almost always staged and often manipulated—my version of a grammatically structured sentence."

Before changes in technology made it possible for the "perfect moment" philosophy behind modernist photography to emerge, photographers routinely acted as stage directors. Their studios were filled with props and their images with carefully placed performers.

Modernism actively discouraged such creative expressions, pushing this practice into the background for nearly a century. Photographs that had been built rather than encountered began to reappear during the post-modernist era and reblossomed with the advent of digital photography.

Modernist photographers thought staged images weren't the kind of serious art the medium demanded, and there's no denying that De Orbegoso's images can make viewers laugh. Critics in both North and South America have noted the artist's propensity for childlike delight in creating her scenarios; they also recognize that her humor is fun of the most serious variety.

De Orbegoso began her artistic career studying art restoration and decoration, which is why she considers photography only a point of departure for her art. After establishing herself as a decorator, she began to pursue intensive work in cinema and photography in New York at the International Center of Photography, the Pratt Institute and the School of Visual Arts. She also studied digital photography with a number

of notable artists, including John Paul Caponigro.

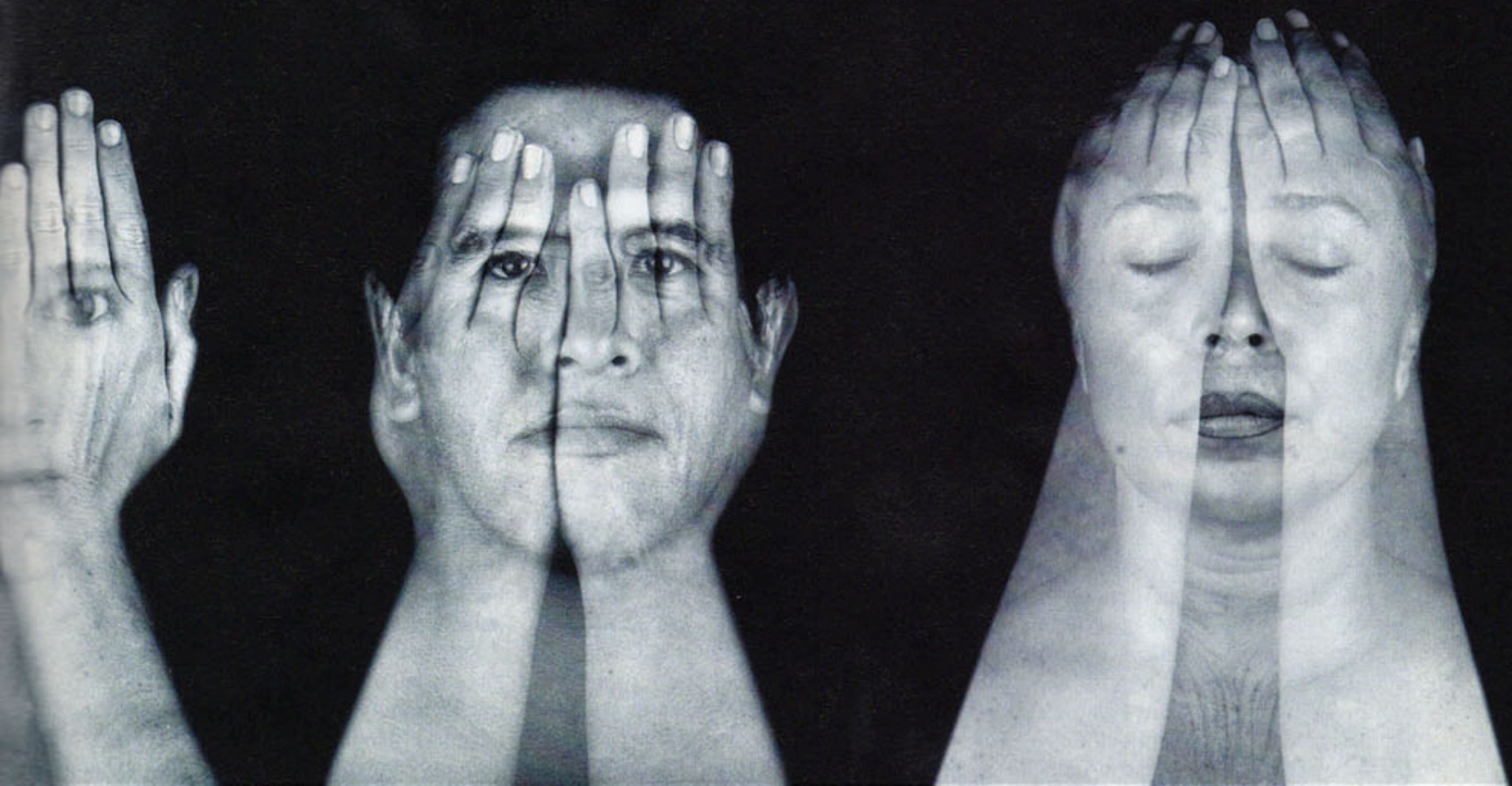
De Orbegoso makes use of all of her varied studies and experiences in the arts to create her images. Her artwork, she explains, arises from the "need to express myself visually. The result is almost always a photograph, although I am always mixing other plastic media, which satisfies another need—that of including hand work in the creative process, whether in pre-production of the image or in the dark-room. I manipulate the image using processes that give me some physical contact, and this gives me more intimate contact with the work."

The hours she spent surrounded by facsimile beings during her employment at a mannequin manufacturing and rental company inspired her first notable series, *Notes on a Parallel World* [Apuntes sobre un mundo paralelo]. Surrounded by bodies that look like humans but lack the spark of animation and personality, she discovered a number of juxtapositions of the seemingly real which carried a very real emotional charge.

Using nothing more than old, tattered mannequins to construct these images, De Orbegoso evoked an astonishing range of human emotions and conditions. With De Orbegoso as a guide, we see just how closely we have invested these metaphors of ourselves with our own characteristics.

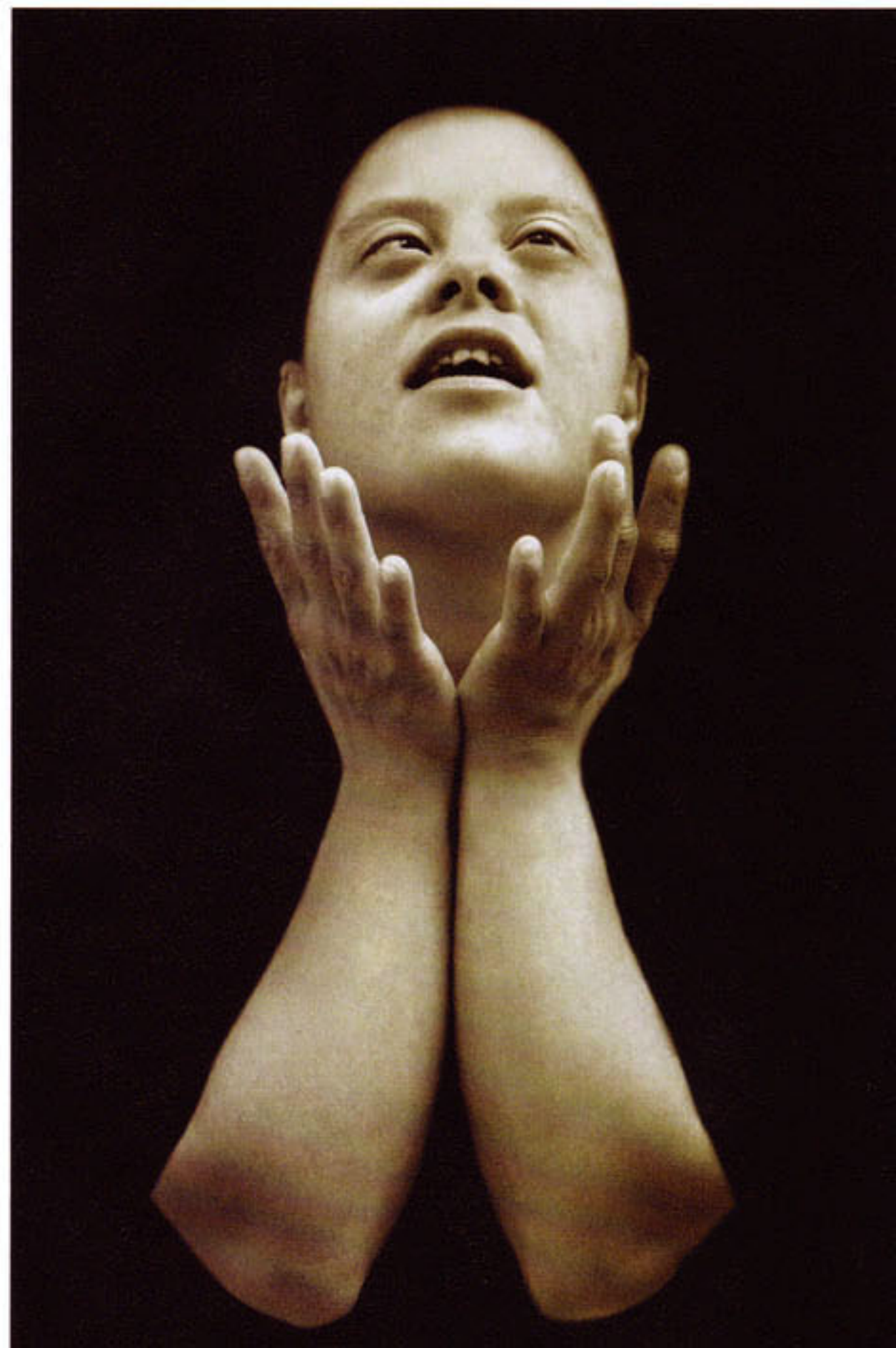


©JANIS STOLL



Above: *The Wall*, below: *Carlita (The Others)*, from *The Invisible Wall*, 2005/2002

"My primary fascination is with human beings—their internal worlds and the boundaries between them"





Left to right: Impersonator; Self-protection; Thinking Heart; from *The Journey*, 2001

Because they seem so fully human, there is something both monumental and unsettling about the mannequins in *Notes on a Parallel World*. One of the headless figures in the series echoes the form of ruined marble sculpture from the classical world. Another recalls Hans Bellmer's infamous surrealist photographs of dolls. But De Orbegoso's constructions are far more about the realities and complications of human relationships than they are political statements. A stack of arms readily recalls the horrors of war, while row after row of hands, most opened in supplication, are fitted together like a jigsaw puzzle, marking both the urgency of human needs and the enigma of finding the appropriate response to the ever growing demand for assistance.

Photographs themselves provided the materials she used to build her next major series. For reasons no one can explain, De Orbegoso has no photographs of her childhood years. Evidently, none were ever taken. Using her characteristic wit and ingenuity, De Orbegoso decided to remedy this situation by creating her own album of childhood photographs. With help

from her friends, she collected images of all of the milestone events of youth that are usually commemorated by at least one person with a camera. Then she created a self portrait for each of these events, imagining how she might have been portrayed. She replaced her friend's youthful faces with her adult self portraits. If this tactic weren't humorous enough, she left most of the borders around her self portraits intact, leaving no doubts about the manufactured nature of the resulting images.

The deliberate awkwardness of this approach serves to reinforce the title of the series—*My Childhood Album* [Mi álbum infantil]. It seems, at first glance at least, that only a child would attempt to create such obvious fictions. The overt borrowing, however, underlines a more sophisticated commentary. Her self-created photographic biography confronts the entire history of popular photography. Its conventions have become so pervasive that residents of the western world immediately recognize each of the events these photographs intend to document. The people in them—always responding to the camera's lens in a socially-approved

fashion—become secondary to the events they show. Their faces automatically become interchangeable with the faces of millions of other people.

Playing with the ideas behind the images we all recognize led De Orbegoso on a journey that culminated in her adoption of another venerable form of comedy: literal interpretations of the metaphors that populate human languages. What seems at first like an unsophisticated or naive error actually shows metaphors and other devices of language for exactly what they are: imperfect and often bizarre characterizations of complex realities. Why we humans find such juxtapositions funny has puzzled linguists and literary critics for centuries and will undoubtedly continue to do so. Meanwhile, the rest of us simply enjoy the joke.

Love, another longstanding wellspring of comedy, provided her with the metaphorical basis for her next series. By substituting cattle hearts for human hearts in *Straight to the Heart* [Directo al corazón], De Orbegoso achieved a visual representation of human emotions that is simultaneously laugh inducing and thought provoking.

Such is the power of the heart as a symbol in the western world that there is a nearly perfect correspondence between the metaphors used in both Spanish and English to describe specific emotional conditions. The word play De Orbegoso took as inspiration for these images literally needs no translation.

The heart besieged by a platoon of toy soldiers is undoubtedly suffering a heart attack. The heart covered in powdered sugar and ants is just as clearly a sweet heart. The meaning of a man holding a heart in his hand is equally obvious. Yet



Left to right: Me at Jeannette's Photo Studio; Me & Papa; Me Angel; from *My Childhood Album*, 2000

Her self-created photographic biography confronts the entire history of popular photography

these “obvious” images raise fascinating, unanswerable questions. How, for instance, did such a potentially gruesome spectacle as handing a potential lover one’s heart ever become a poetic means for expressing love?

Visual wordplay takes an entirely different form in the group of works that followed.

In a series titled *INTRA*, De Orbegoso replaced words with physical objects that embody the emotional values of the meanings they carry. Regardless of the viewer’s native language, the content of the conversations depicted in *INTRA* is perfectly clear. The shards of glass, nails, and swarms of insects filling the air speak for themselves just as clearly as her cow hearts.

The objects in these extraordinary conversations don’t fly back and forth between two people, but rather between different aspects of the same person. As the series’ title suggests, the conversations take place internally. They depict conversations most of us will recall.

“I feel very inclined to explore the concept of identity, whether individual or group,” De Orbegoso explains. “*INTRA* is a visual exploration of the different facets of internal dialogue that each person establishes in themselves. We have the power to create our own reactions. In this computerized era, the world seems to lean toward improving our abilities to keep in touch with others, at all times and everywhere. We need to keep in mind that our ability to understand and reach others depends on our ability to communicate with ourselves.”

Explorations of individuality also inspired *The Invisible Wall* [La pared invisible], which began with an open invitation to artists to create works based on the walls of colonial Lima.

“Generally, I think in terms of individuals, so for me the walls of Lima were the people who make up Lima, and their hands symbolize the walls,” she explains.

Like her earlier photographs of mannequins, the works that form *The Invisible Wall* deal with the more poignant aspects of the human comedy. Here, human hands serve as metaphors for the psychological scars that are largely hidden beneath the surface of our skin. Interestingly enough, the hands in these works also reveal what they conceal. The eyes are made all the more haunting through the failed attempt at self camouflage.

The Invisible Wall is divided in two parts. The first half of the series consists of individual portraits. The second half is largely composed of duos, who De Orbegoso says “are more open. They expose themselves to the world with fewer fears, fewer walls.”

Most telling of all is De Orbegoso’s portrait of Carlita which completes the series. Alone among the cast of men and women, young and old, partnered and solo, Carlita does not use her hands to hide part of herself from the world. They are, instead, open in offering. “Carlita is the only person I have encountered who has no walls, perhaps

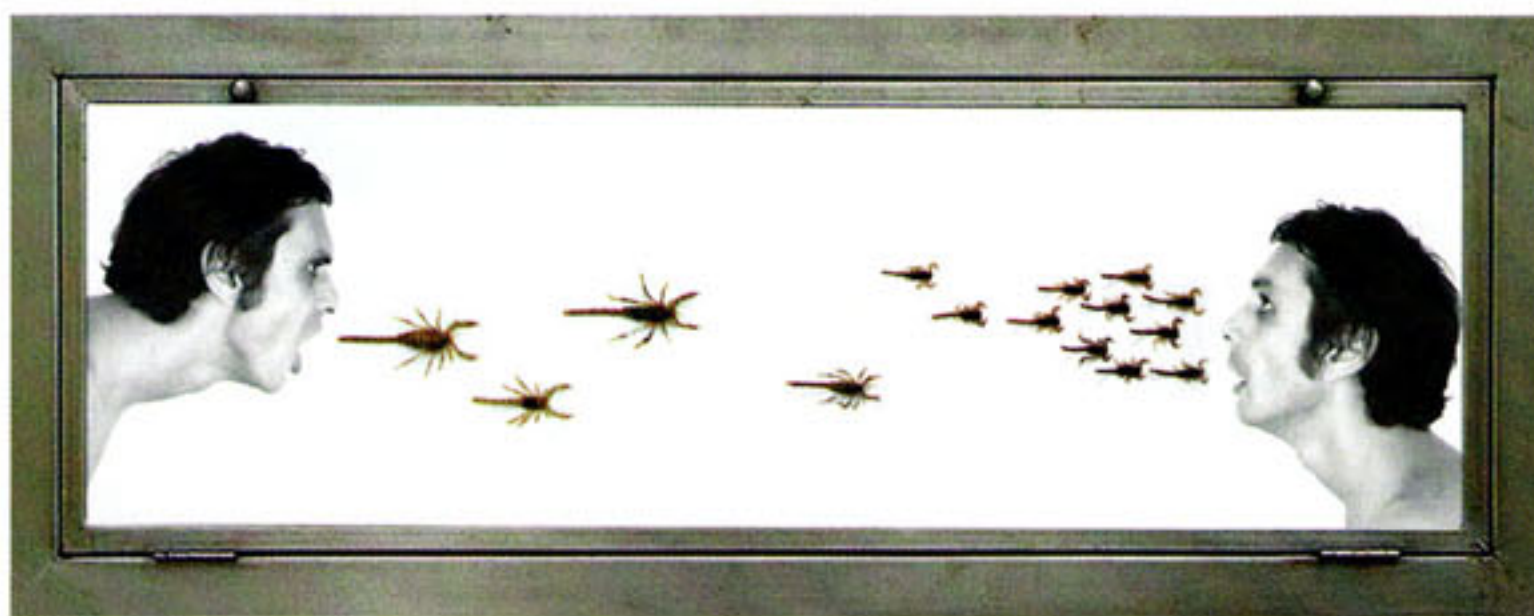
because she has no fears or prejudices,” De Orbegoso says. “Perhaps Down Syndrome has kept her free from such impurities. She is a symbol of emotional freedom.”

Symbols of a similar sort occupy center stage in her most recent work, *Urban Virgins* [Vírgenes urbanas], which is rooted in her experience as an art restorer of colonial era religious art.

The artists of colonial Peru filled their images with brightly-hued armed angels, virgins dressed in indigenous clothing and saints surrounded by birds and flowers sacred to Andean peoples—all visible references of Peru’s Pre-conquest past. The



Above: Installation of *Straight to the Heart* exhibit (2001), ICPNA, Lima, Peru, including *With Heart in Hand*, left, and *Straight to the Heart*, right



Above: Closing the Circle, from INTRA, 2002
 Right: Pachamama (Mother Earth), from Urban Virgins, 2006

cast of players in these artworks, however, remained resolutely European in their overall appearance.

Taking the settings and iconography elaborated by the celebrated School of Cuzco painters, De Orbegoso has repopulated that world with Peru's present-day residents. This work, she says, depicts the "women of today, real beings who work, who create, who nurture, who protect and provide, not from the heavens in the divine sphere of the spiritual and the mystic, but in the earth, in the real world."

"I want to use colonial art—which was originally created as propaganda for evangelism and for imbedding western stereotypes in the Andean world—to create a propaganda that values the Peruvian women of today."

Her depiction of Saint Rosa of Lima, the first saint of the Americas, is an exuberant example of her approach to the subject. The roses that provide a background for the saint were taken directly from a colonial era painting. The artist has introduced

iconic and realistic. The painted elements lend an aura of eternity to the scene, while the saint herself is undoubtedly of the here and now.

The artist has captured Saint Rosa in a way that would have shocked the painters of the Cuzco School. Despite the colonial basis for this portrait, her saint is anything but traditional. The lamb and the child she carries, while not necessarily out of place for a saint whose life was dedicated to adoration of the Christ child, do not belong to the saint's iconography. Neither do the elements of indigenous clothing that add a splash of color to the work. Saint Rosa was, after all, the daughter of a Spanish immigrant family, which is what makes De Orbegoso's portrayal so radical. Her Saint Rosa is emphatically Andean. The artist has replaced the aesthetic figure of the mystical, suffering, Spanish saint with a robust indigenous woman who positively radiates joy. This expression of emotion, at least, would likely have won the admiration of colonial painters. There's no doubt that

beings into the realm of everyday life, while playing with the conventions of language which have, for generations, likened children to angels.

The stated purpose of De Orbegoso's *Urban Virgins*—transforming the propaganda of one era into an effective tool for visual communication in today's world—summarizes the importance of her work as a whole. Throughout her artistic career, De Orbegoso has discovered ways to make the ideas behind her images clearly readable. She not only communicates through her images, she helps her viewers understand exactly how her images carry meaning. Despite the explosive growth of visual communications over the past century, the supply of what cultural critics call visual literacy is still dangerously limited. By giving effective visual form to verbal constructions and reviving older symbols in a way that continues to resonate with contemporary viewers, De Orbegoso bridges the better understood world of words with the ever evolving universe of visual symbols in ways that help make us all more literate. While the human comedy will undoubtedly continue as it always has, De Orbegoso's education of our eyes is still something worth smiling about. ✱

K. Mitchell Snow writes frequently on American art and culture. His latest book, *Moving to the Rhythm of the Music*, is forthcoming from the Fondo de Cultura Económica, Mexico City. All images and artwork are courtesy of the artist.

"We have the power to create our own reactions . . . In this computerized era, the world seems to lean toward improving our abilities to keep in touch with the rest"

one subtle change into the work. Keeping the painted sky of the original work in place, she replaced the depiction of Lima's colonial architecture with a recent photograph of the same scene. Although no automobiles or other signs of the 21st century are immediately evident, the small figures on the city's streets, including a few foreign tourists, are dressed in contemporary clothing.

While it is clear that the image is a collage of both old and new elements, De Orbegoso's manipulation of her visual materials also has changed. Unlike the discordant juxtaposition of photographs that marked her *My Childhood Album*, the components of her *Urban Virgins* blend together to create a scene that is both

this Saint Rosa has transcended the trials of daily life. Capturing the moment of transcendence in a way that is easily communicated is no easy task for a painter, let alone a photographer.

One of the most charming works in this series further extends De Orbegoso's appropriation of the art of colonial evangelization. Her "Virgin of the Trinity," a young woman of mixed ethnic heritage, is surrounded by tiny angels bearing the faces of children one might find in most any Peruvian market. The crowning touch, however, is the pacifier which comforts the child whose face the artist has given to the paired cherubs who support the garland of flowers surrounding the virgin. With one tiny detail, she brings these heavenly



Performance of the Urban Virgins exhibition in front of Koricancha, Cusco, Peru

