

# ARTnews

SEPTEMBER 2011

**reviews:** new york

## John Mack

Robert Mann

In anticipation of the bicentennial of Mexico's independence from Spain and the centennial of its revolution, the Mexican government commissioned photographer John Mack to create a body of work that would go beyond stereotypes and attempt to capture the complexity of the country. Mack, who has been photographing there since 2002, published the results in *Revealing Mexico*, a book with essays by Susanne Steines and Teresa del Conde (powerHouse Books, 2010).

This exhibition revealed what Mack discovered as he traversed the country with classic black-and-white film and a Leica camera. To appreciate his achievement, we must look back to a period when Walker Evans and Robert Frank defined documentary photography. Mack's is a view of Mexico devoid of 21st-century cities and headline-stealing drug lords.

Instead, he offers intimate views of pueblos and rural towns. His airy and poetic image *Cholula, Puebla* (2008) captures flickering white banners decorating the town square, and in *Villa de Etla, Oaxaca* (2005) there is the haunting site of a lone basketball hoop—almost a found sculpture—in front of a church.

Mack's portraits are heartfelt and sensitive, as in his photograph of a pair of Indians, *Lacandon Community of Naha, Chiapas* (2002), and the one of a team of aging ranchers, titled *Torreón, Coahuila, Mexico* (2009). Mack relishes the perfect moment, as seen in *Downtown Durango, Durango* (2008), where two passengers—a boy resting his elbow out the window and a man in a cowboy hat—are framed by the window of a bus.

Arguably these photographs do not advance a view of Mexico beyond Paul Strand's moving prints of the 1930s, but they do demonstrate what Mexico has retained of its roots, despite globalization and political turmoil. —**Barbara Pollack**

