

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**

