

Focus on the art of photography

By ANN ROSENBERG

Many of Vancouver's current exhibitions focus on photography. They prove, once again, that the camera reflects the preoccupations and personalities its users.

Manuel Alvarez Bravo's *Revelaciones*, a one-man show at Presentation House (333 Chesterfield, North Vancouver, to May 5), is the first Canadian retrospective of this major photographer's work. Bravo, 89, has spent almost even decades recording Mexico and its people. His well-composed black-and-white images — whether created in the 1930s or last year — recall those of Henri Cartier-Bresson and other pioneers who transformed the photo-document into art.

The more than 100 photographs in *Revelaciones* offer a generous survey that includes political and social imagery, photographs, nudes and many fine portraits.

Bravo has captured the exquisite beauty of Diego Rivera's wife, Frida Kahlo. Her Ingres-like pose is miniaturized and reflected in the mirrored ball that rests on the table beside her, and her calm features are echoed by a terra-cotta relief that is set near her feet.

Similar care has been given to composition and symbolism in a photograph called *The Daughter of the Dancers*. In this work, a child looks searchingly into what appears to be a deeply inset mirror. Her round straw hat is complemented by the circular shape. Just as Kahlo is the vehicle for a deeper statement about human beings' unknowable qualities, here the unidentified girl stands for all who have asked: "Mirror, mirror on the wall, who's the fairest of them all?"

Similar poetics are apparent in the urban scenes. In *Optic Paraboloid*, for example, the eyes decorating the street sign and windows of a shop reverberate with each other and with the eyes of the viewer. Although this was taken in 1931, the "Optica Moderna" logo represented in the photo is an ever-fresh advertisement for a contemporary vision.

Bravo's works are splendid examples of classic art photography characterized by a respect for tonal value, composition and effective narrative. That most of his photographs also contain secret codes, parables and metaphors distinguishes them from the photographs of his peers and ensures that his images are more than social documents.

Revelaciones tells us more about Bravo's rich inner life than



it reveals about Mexico, and that's why this exhibition can vault gracefully over geographic and temporal borders.

Oraf's *House of the Empty Sign* at the Pitt Gallery (56 Powell, throughout April) is a striking counterpoint to Bravo's work.

Like Bravo, Oraf creates dramatic black-and-white photographs that communicate social, political and poetic narrative. In each of the murals and smaller photographs in the exhibition, two images are butted together to become one. Because at least one of the pair of photos contains words, the artist ensures his work is as literary as it is visual.

But although words are used, the messages of the photomontages are anything but literal. In a piece titled *Heir to Lawns*, a photo of grass-surrounded tombstones inscribed with "Mother" and "Father" is welded to one that features a house set in a newly mown front yard. In this work, the artist seems to imply that house and garden labor are

the death of mom and dad.

In another, the bottom photograph of the word "Daddy" supports the image of a king-like sculpture whose back is turned toward the viewer. This montage suggests parental indifference.

Not all the photos are concerned with human relations; some recognize contemporary issues. A trash box labelled *Proud to Keep America Clean* is set under a view of a Washington State nuclear chimney. Elegant granite letters spelling out "The World" are set beneath a car wreck.

Oraf's *House of the Empty Signs* is full of meaning delivered through montage. Because many works are suspended from the ceiling, one walks, quite literally, through a barrage of messages. In presenting so many paradoxes, in offering so many critiques, the artist has shot salvos of protest against the inhumanity and moral poverty of North American life.

Katherine Kotikow's installation captures the excitement of human activity

and emotion. This Or Gallery exhibition (314 West Hastings, to April 20) features sumptuous black-and-white images that look like elegantly painted abstracts but which are, in fact, long-exposure photographs that transform real-life subjects into almost non-representational impressions.

The restless visual enigmas are contained between sculptural plaques that serve as borders. These cool, formal barriers remind one of TV consoles, although they don't emulate their shapes.

There are undertones of political unrest. A huge, emotion-ridden female face begins a sequence that includes images suggestive of rallies and riots. The flanking borders, although black, recall the red stripes on either side of the maple leaf on Canada's flag.

But that's just one interpretation. In fact, the photographs don't document civic unrest; rather, they are blurred records of architectural sculpture urged



LENS IMAGERY:

Heir to Lawns (left) by Oraf, from his show *House of the Empty Sign* at the Pitt Gallery in Vancouver. *The Daughter of Dancers* (above) by Manuel Alvarez Bravo, from his show *Revelaciones* at Presentation House in North Vancouver

into movement by the sweep of the artist's camera.

Kotikow leads us to see things that were not there. The disintegration of patriarchal structures and visual language is the true subject of this handsome piece. This striking installation would look wonderful in a foyer, where its visual vivacity would match the activity of the real world.

Kiku Hawkes, at William McCarter's Bookstore (213 Carrall, until April 30), offers the viewer an oasis of calm. Her hand-tinted black-and-white photographs of backyard gardens are as peaceful as Kotikow's murals are agitated.

The inclusion of classical motifs (for example, the column) gives the unpretentious subject historical depth. Artifacts like the derelict Thistle pram used as a wheelbarrow and a pitchfork set near some nasturtiums help to set the images in a timeframe.

The exhibition also includes some interior views that continue the gentle tone established with the gardens.