

1997

Santa Rosa Press Democrat

"Frida was blue. She cried and told me about the hardships of her life with Diego – how undependable and different from what she was used to, and how, if she stood up for herself, he is ready to say, "You don't love me!"
"We had lunch with O'Keefe and drank tequila, that tough Mexican drink, and went to say goodbye to Stieglitz and sang in the toilets there, then we each bought a rose and stopped at Diego's mural. Frida helped supervise the work there in the dust and rattle, she in her dainty Mexican costume. What a sight!"

- From the Diary of Lucienne Bloch, 1932

By MEG McCONAHEY

Staff writer

She peers up provocatively from the shadows, beads dripping from her lips, the back of a canvas framing her coiled braids.

It was a playful moment between girlfriends in a New York basement, Frida vamping for Lucienne's clever little Leica, the first 35mm camera.

For the young Lucienne Bloch, a classically trained sculptor who wanted to be "the next Michelangelo," it was just a fun snapshot.

That was 1933, a half century before Frida Kahlo, the wild child Mexican painter and wife of master muralist Diego Rivera, became a feminist icon and figure of public fascination.

Bloch took some 45 shots of the tempestuous lovers during the three years she and her late husband, Stephen Dimitroff, assisted and soaked up the vanishing art of fresco at Rivera's scaffold.

For decades they remained stashed along with other vintage prints and some 2,000 negatives in Bloch's cluttered studio.

Now some of those revealing shots have been printed and mounted for display at Gualala's Alinder Gallery, the first major retrospective of the unrecognized photographic work.

Bloch, whose Bulgarian husband at one time was a "factory guy," shot labor

strikes in Detroit and Flint, the plaintive faces of poor autoworker families, New York streetscapes, and of course, Frida and Diego, who she met at a New York banquet in 1931.

Long enamored with Michelangelo's frescos, she was excited to learn the art, which demands painstaking preparation then rapid painting while still wet, was still alive. She offered to grind colors for the muralist to learn his secrets and in the process befriended his wife.

"She was a wonderful gal. She could swear," laughs the diminutive Bloch, 88 and sharp-witted despite a failing memory. "She was the kind of person that just knew whether someone was smart."

With her tiny camera hidden in her blouse, she hoodwinked a night guard, and snapped the only record of Rivera's controversial Rockefeller Center murals before they were destroyed as anti-capitalistic.

The exhibit which opened in July,(1997) attracted more than 300 people, many drawn by the mystique of the dramatic, black-browed Kahlo, who favored the traditional Mexican skirts, Bloch said, to hide the crippling effects of polio and a horrifying streetcar accident in which she was impaled with an iron rail.

In the series of full-frame photos, some vintage, others from old negatives, Bloch shows the multiplicity of "Frida," confidante, and godmother to her first-born son: the cool artist smoking beneath one of her ubiquitous self-portraits, the good times girl with a doily whimsically plopped on her head, the devoted wife, eating ice cream beachside with Rivera, the object of her lifelong passion.

Bloch is self-effacing about her work.

"I'm proud. I think I didn't do badly," she says from her ranch studio. "But I wasn't a real photographer. I loved it. But I wasn't like some of the wonderful people that were continuously photographers."

Her standards however, are high. Her father, the great composer Ernest Bloch, was an exquisite landscape photographer on the side and is among only 33 lensmen whose complete archives were accepted by the Center for Creative Photography in Arizona.

The Swiss-born Lucienne studied sculpture at Paris' Ecole des Beaux Arts. Her glass animals for Royal Leerdam in Holland caught the eye of architect Frank Lloyd Wright, who asked her to teach at Taliesin. But she found herself relegated to gardening and fled.

Bloch's granddaughter, Lucienne Allen and her husband David, long knew of her

distinguished career as an artist and muralist.

The pair, Stephen as a plaster technician, teamed for several dozen tile and fresco murals, a coast to coast legacy including banks and churches in San Francisco and a wall at Tra Vigna Restaurant in Napa Valley.

The couple is credited for keeping alive the vanishing art of fresco, restoring Rivera's walls and teaching other artists, said Leslie Doyle, who learned fresco from a Bloch protégé and now teaches it at New York's prestigious Parsons School.

A 1938 series of walls, "The Evolution of Music", at George Washington High School in the Bronx, New York, is regarded as a masterpiece of modernist American art and is maintained by an endowment from pop star Madonna, who visited Bloch in 1989 when she was considering a biopic of Frida.

But it was only within the last few years, as soaring interest in Kahlo brought biographers to Bloch's door, that her offspring, including daughter Sita Milchev, turned to the precious prints and negatives tucked away in cigar boxes.

They set up a darkroom and taught themselves how to print, mat, catalogue and clean negatives, printing some for the first time. The generous Bloch gave much away, leaving prints without negatives and negatives without prints, thus resulting in several of Bloch's photos appearing uncredited in recent books.

From the studio they unearthed missives from Frida to Bloch – "I send you a big, big, big kiss on your magnificent and charming behind," she signs off in a 1932 letter, sketches the friends did together, Rivera doodles, and Lucienne's leather diaries chronicling times with the Rivera's, from details of Frida's tragic miscarriage to a mournful pilgrimage to Mexico when Frida's mother died.

When they brought proofs to Jim and Mary Alinder, the gallery owners were "blown away by their absolute excellence."

"Because she was classically trained as a painter and sculptor, her art did not have boundaries," said Mary Alinder, who collaborated with Ansel Adams on his best-selling autobiography. "So image after image are really great compositions and strong use of tone."

Before retiring to Gualala in the 1960's, Bloch and Dimitroff lived a working class life in Mill Valley, CA, where Dimitroff made a modest living as a picture framer and Lucienne taught art and raised three kids between murals.

Her heirs are racing to preserve their work, which, by its nature, is more threatened than canvas paintings. Some murals already are gone: a WPA wall in New York depicting Eastside slums, and a mural razed last year with the old Guerneville

School.

David Allen learned the intricacies of wall preparation from Dimitroff and optimistically hopes to build Bloch a wall for a final fresco, perhaps for the new Gualala Arts Center.

But Bloch is not haunted by unfinished business.

"I always have many things to do. My time now I enjoy. It's nice when people ask me about what I've done before. But I'm really living a good life."