

Century-old trove reveals a woman's quest

Curator Patricia Viaña speaks about Josefina Oliver's work, on display at the Palais de Glace

BY VERA VON KREUTZBRUCK

HERALD STAFF
@vkreutzbruck

Sometimes, unknowingly, families possess hidden gems in their houses that often go undiscovered. Luckily not in Patricia Viaña's case. During her childhood she had often heard stories about her unusual great-aunt. She knew she had written journals. Out of curiosity she started reading one and became hooked. After seven years of relentless searching in Argentina, Spain and Italy, she unearthed a bountiful universe of photographs, collages and texts. She knew right away that this treasure had to be shown to the general public.

At the Palais de Glace, a former dance hall built in the Belle Époque style in 1910, Patricia Viaña talked to the *Herald* about the exhibition *Josefina Oliver (1875-1956) — Colours of Silence* she curated for the museum, which is on display until June 1. The exhibit features more than 300 photographs, collages, postcards and journals, made by this self-taught photographer. A book and a documentary about Josefina Oliver are currently in the works.

The passion for art runs in the Oliver family; Viaña took photography and sculpture classes for more than a decade and produced two theatre pieces. The jovial and forthcoming curator offered the *Herald* an hour-and-a-half-guided tour of the show, explaining how she had found in antique shops old images of the houses her relatives had lived in over a century ago. She was particularly proud of one find she bought on Amazon: a copy of an oil painting from 1855 of the corvette whose captain was Pedro Juan Oliver, Josefina's father.

How did you come across your great-aunt's photographs and journals?

I had often heard stories in my family about her, about how different she was from other women of her time. I also knew that she had kept journals and that our relatives had them. Out of curiosity, in 2006 I asked Josefina's granddaughter to lend me one of her journals. Late one night I was reading it and I realized that the photographs in the journal were of same person that appeared in some black and white pictures I had at home. Shortly afterwards, I decided to look for the rest of the journals.

How many did you find?

I found twenty volumes with 8,500 pages, which were in Buenos Aires, Rosario and Udine, in Italy. It took me seven years to gather all the material, which includes 2,600 photos, 200 collages, 200 postcards, 400 letters and a book with collages, texts, images and newspaper cut-outs called "book of curiosities." But the hardest work was selecting which material to show in the exhibition and I had a great team to help me.

Why did you decide to show her work?



Curator Patricia Viaña talks to the *Herald* about the exhibition *Josefina Oliver (1875-1956) — Colours of Silence*, at the Palais de Glace, Buenos Aires.

Because the same night I made that discovery I knew that this didn't belong to me, I knew it was national heritage, part of the collective memory of a nation that had to be shown to the public. It has historic value because it shows aspects of daily life of Argentine society living between the end of the 19th century and mid-20th century. The city of Buenos Aires was booming at that time.

Did you get to meet Josefina?

Yes, she died when I was six. I remember she was always dressed in black. I have an image of my grandmother and her playing chess. She was a strange mix between a reserved person, a biddable wife, yet someone who could create the madness we see in her art.

Why is the exhibition titled *Colours of Silence*?

Because Josefina expresses in colours what she cannot express in public or on paper due to social taboos. She had to suffer several deaths in her lifetime — her mother's, her daughter's, her granddaughter's and, finally, her husband's. She channelled all these tragic experiences through her art, expressed in the journals and art works.

By silence, you mean that she didn't convey her pain in her journals?

Not directly, she writes about it in a Victorian tone, a distant tone. However, she does express herself in her art by using vibrant colours — a choice that was completely different from the colours used at that time, which were pastel and soft tones. She made photographic shrines of her dead relatives and pasted them in her journals.

Why did you choose a self-portrait of Josefina without her head to

present the exhibition?

Because it symbolizes the kind of art she did, which was very avant-garde. This woman had a special set of antennas in her head.

Her husband was supportive of her creative side?

Yes, he was an accomplice of her art. They knew each other very well before they married because he was her first cousin. In one picture for example, he is dressed as a woman and she is dressed as a man. In their private wedding pictures taken by Josefina they both jokingly pose as the settlers did.

How did she learn to take pictures?

She was self-taught. She read a photography guidebook by Francisco Pociello. Her friends and neighbours taught her too. Usually women in those times weren't allowed to do such things.

Did she write in her journals about the restrictions women had in her generation? In the exhibition, you printed fragments of her journal entries and one in particular reveals part of her personality. "Everyone is tied to his or her duty, one has to die there, where you have been placed."



Self-portrait of Josefina Oliver featured on the exhibit's bill.

Yes, exactly. This is a quote from a self-help book written by Samuel Smiles, a bestselling author and guru for women back then. She read all of his books.

Why did she stop taking photos when she married her cousin?

Because it was dictated at that time by society; the married women who went out alone or had an independent public life were frowned upon. She did take some pictures though, but after getting married she mainly painted photos she already had. For Josefina, taking photos was a form of social entertainment, a distraction.

That's when she started making the collages?

Yes, she made collages and postcards with her own photos, other people's photos and postcards.

Does she mention in her diaries that she missed taking pictures?

No, because she considered it an activity that she had to relinquish; it was normal to her, not because someone forced her to stop; it was a natural consequence. She married quite late for those times, when she was 32. When you take a look at her pieces you can see that she was trying out different paths. Paths she wasn't able to explore in depth then.

What about the letters, did she mention anything about the limitations women had back then?

In a letter written by her niece to her, telling her about her adventures in Europe, she wrote back commenting on her journeys: "If I had just five minutes of your freedom, I would go mad."

There are several photos that were taken in her bedroom.

Her room was a theatre for her; she prepared all the sets for her photo shoots. Her friends came to get their pictures taken by her. She wasn't really aware that she was creating a body of art.

However she bounded her journals.

In 1922, she suffered a retinal detachment in one eye and when she went to the optician, there was a bookbinder in the same building; and then she decided to edit her journals. She did so because she recognized the existence of a narrative, a story of her oeuvre. She instructed the bookbinder to insert blank pages between the journals so that she could add her own photos and collages.

There are some pictures of Eva Perón in her journals. What did she think of her?

I think she appreciated her as a woman, she thought she was a great woman. When Eva died, she created a photographic shrine for her. Eva could move in different social circles, places Josefina was never allowed to be in. Eva broke many barriers for women; in 1947, for example she fought for women's right to vote.