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Documentary by his grandson features rare footage of Rivera

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By Elda Silva - Express-News Staff Writer

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Filmmaker Diego López Rivera has no memory of his grandfather, for whom he was named.

The Mexican painter — as famous for his stormy marriage to Frida Kahlo as for his epic murals — died when his namesake was still a child.

About three years ago, López was surprised to see color film of Rivera, whom he knew largely through his artwork and black and white pictures, screened at an awards ceremony for documentary film at the Palacio de Bellas Artes in Mexico City.

"It was very emotional and completely unexpected," said López, the son of one of Rivera's daughters from his first marriage to Guadalupe Marín, speaking in Spanish.

Until that moment, only a handful of people had seen the footage, which was shot in 1949 for a documentary by cinematographer Gabriel Figueroa and photographer Manuel Álvarez Bravo. The project was never completed, and the footage languished for more than 50 years. After Figueroa died in 1997, it was re-discovered by his son, photographer Gabriel Figueroa Flores. The younger Figueroa's mother "(dug) it out of a cupboard or something," he said, speaking in English. "She sent me these rolls of film to be inspected — to see what it was."

The footage was unedited and had no sound.

"I thought it was very interesting footage, historical footage, strange for 1949 — Diego painting, in color," Figueroa said. "My immediate thought was 'I should sell it as stock footage.' That didn't happen, fortunately."

Instead, after the screening at the awards ceremony, López approached Figueroa, a childhood friend, and they decided to collaborate on a project they s relves. Together, they produced and directed "Un Retrato de Diego: la Revolución de la Mirada" ("A Portrait of Diego: The Revolutionary Gaze"), a documentary that combines the vintage footage with contemporary interviews and clips from classic Mexican films. Released theatrically in Mexico last year, the film will be screened at UTSA and the Instituto Cultural de México for FOTOSEPTIEMBRE USA, the annual photography festival. It is in Spanish with English subtitles. In addition the Instituto Cultural de México will present "Centenario de Gabriel Figueroa," an exhibit of stills from Figueroa's cinematography curated by his son.

Figueroa believes his father intended to use the footage for a documentary that would have been part of a national exhibition celebrating 50 years of artistic production by Rivera, but ran out of time or money or both.

Álvarez Bravo was behind the camera for the project.

"He was commissioned by my father, who was the producer for this would-be documentary, to go with Diego to all the locations where Diego made his major art work, like Tehauntepec, Oaxaca," Figueroa said.

There is very little color film footage of Rivera in existence.

"We presume it's probably the only footage in color that shows Diego Rivera painting and directing his own compositions in movement," Figueroa said.

Though the title of the documentary implies it is entirely about Rivera, it is also about the elder Figueroa and Álvarez Bravo. Like Rivera, the elder Figueroa and Álvarez Bravo were giants in their respective fields.

"It's a documentary about the visual revolution that happened in Mexico in the



(From 'En Retrato de Diego')

This photograph of Mexican artist Diego Rivera was taken in 1949 by Manuel Alvarez Bravo.

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Festival highlights

Officially FOTOSEPTIEMBRE USA runs Sept. 1-30 — hence the 'SEPTIEMBRE' part of the photography festival's name — but some exhibitions start a little earlier and some run on and beyond. So don't worry if you can't make it to every show in one month. This year, the festival includes about 50 events.

Here's a handful of highlights; for a full schedule, go to safotofestival.com:

"Missed or Misunderstood": Jennifer Khoshbin combines drawing, cutting, photography and collaged materials in this exhibit, one of three at the Southwest School of Art & Craft. Opening reception 5:30 p.m. Aug. 28, Ursuline Hall Gallery, 300 Augusta St., (210) 224-1848, www.swschool.org. Through Oct. 19

"International Exposure: Looking at Contemporary Photography": An exhibit of work by 17 artists using a range of photography techniques curated by Patricia Ruiz-Healy. Opening reception 5:30 p.m. Sept. 4, City of San Antonio International Center, 203 S. St. Mary's St., (210) 804-2219, www.ruizhealyart.com. Through Sept. 30

"Centenario de Gabriel Figueroa": An exhibition of images from the cinematography of Gabriel Figueroa curated by his son, photographer Gabriel Figueroa Flores. Opening reception 4 p.m. Sept. 6 at the Instituto

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'40s and '50s commanded by Diego Rivera in painting, Gabriel Figueroa in cinema and Manuel Álvarez Bravo in photography," Figueroa said.

The documentary also explores how the three men influenced each other. The elder Figueroa and Álvarez Bravo worked together on several movies including "La Perla." Meanwhile, Rivera, who was a close friend of the cinematographer, was interested in both still photography and film. While doing research for the documentary, scriptwriter Margarita Mansilla discovered that Rivera intended his murals to be viewed as "a cinematographic scene," Figueroa said.

New material for the documentary includes interviews with writer Carlos Monsiváis, who was critical of Figueroa's work in the past, and painter José Luis Cuevas, one of the principals of the Rupture Generation, artists that broke from the school of social content lead by the muralists. Both Monsiváis and Cuevas have softened toward the objects of their criticism, according to Figueroa.

López's mother, Guadalupe Rivera Marín, was also interviewed. Now 83, Rivera had a tempestuous relationship with her father. Figueroa and Mansilla conducted the interview.

"That day, we agreed that it would only be Gabriel and Margarita, because we thought my mother would be able to talk with greater freedom if I wasn't there," López said. "That's how we did it, and I think it was a good thing because my mother says things she doesn't usually talk about, and she says them in a very entertaining tone, very gossipy, and it adds a lot of flavor to the documentary."

During the making of the documentary, López said he gained a greater understanding of his grandfather.

"It was like he ceased to be this figure that crushed me with his presence, with his power, with his prestige," he said. "I thought, 'What a fabulous guy — full of contradictions.' He was who he was and I am who I am. It's like there was a reconciliation."

"Un Retrato de Diego: la Revolución de la Mirada" will screen 6:30 p.m. Sept. 5 at the Retama Auditorium, UTSA, 1604 Campus. A question and answer session with Diego Lopez Rivera and Gabriel Figueroa Flores will follow. Call (210) 458-2923. The documentary will screen 5 p.m. Sept. 7 and "Centenario de Gabriel Figueroa" will be on display Sept. 6 through Oct. 26 at the Instituto Cultural de México, 600 HemisFair Plaza Way. Call (210) 227-0123.

Cultural de Mexico, 600 HemisFair Plaza Way, (210) 227-0123, www.saculturamexico.org. Through Oct. 26.

"Chocolate: A Photography Exhibition": Conceptual artists Frédéric Lebaïn, Priscilla Monge, Vik Muniz, and Chuck Ramirez use chocolate as source material in this exhibit curated by David S. Rubin. Sept. 6 through Jan. 11, San Antonio Museum of Art, 200 W. Jones Ave., (210) 978-8100, www.samuseum.org.

"¡Presente! Photography and the Art of the Present Moment": Work by more than 40 photographers built on the premise that the key to happiness is living in the moment. Opening reception 6 p.m. Sept. 19, Centro Cultural Aztlan, 1800 Fredericksburg Road, Suite 103, (210) 432-1896. Through Oct. 20.

— Eida Silva

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