

PORTRAITS

Fundación MAPFRE Collections

Until February 9th, 2025

Portraiture has always been one of the most vigorous of the fine art genres, a tradition that is at the heart of photography. Although it was not the first, in just a few years it became the most widespread and fastest developing genre. Today we are too familiar with photographic technique and with our own image to understand the symbolic value of those early portraits, which were said to contain “the captive soul”. And while the possibility of taking, sharing and immediately disseminating quality photographs is available to us with greater ease than ever before, the truth is that we never tire of portraying ourselves and others.

The journey we propose with the present selection of works from the Fundación MAPFRE Collection reveals the variety and richness of portraiture throughout the 20th century: from frontal portraits – heirs to the tradition of the Fine Arts – to fleeting street snapshots of subjects who were unaware of the camera to pictures taken in a family setting in people’s homes. These photographs depict instances of shared happiness, loneliness and despair, silence, noise, loss and death. Scenes that reflect time and memory – the foundations of the photographic image – as no other form of artistic expression is capable of doing.

It is our hope that this collection of images serves as an open space for the imagination of our visitors, who are invited to appreciate the immense creative capacity of the artists represented here and the complexity and richness of 20th-century photography – and in short, to enrich themselves with all that art offers us in order to better understand our time and our place in it.

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Blind Woman, taken with a camera fitted with a concealed lens attached to its side, became an icon of Strand's work and of the history of photography when Alfred Stieglitz exhibited it at his 291 gallery and published it in the last issue of *Camera Work* magazine. It was one of a series of pictures taken by the artist of anonymous people from the lowest strata of society. The portraits, among which this one stands out, were taken in the street in Manhattan's Lower East Side, and were surprising for their spontaneity and freshness, a direct expression of the times that had never been seen before.

Blind Woman, New York, 1916

© Paul Strand / Courtesy Aperture / [@aperturefnd](#)

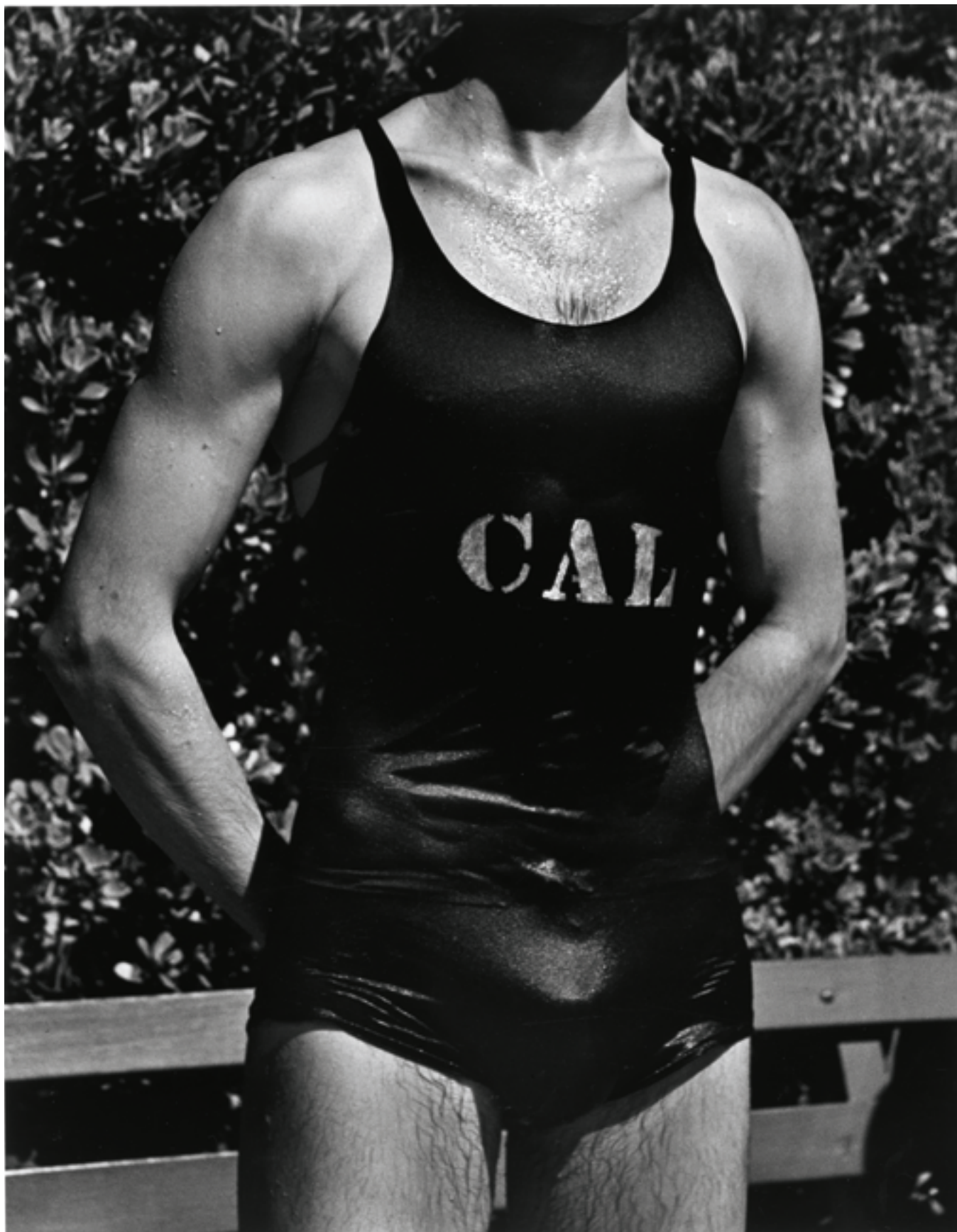
Vienna, 1901 – New York, 1983



Taken during one of Lisette Model's most fruitful periods in New York, the portrait of this jovial, voluminous woman by the seashore is one of the artist's most celebrated works. The result of a commission on Coney Island, it was the first of her photographs to appear in *Harper's Bazaar* magazine. The closeness of Model's work with her subjects carries viewers right into the depicted scene, as if – in this case – they too were on the beach.

Coney Island Bather, New York, ca. 1939-1941

© Lisette Model. Courtesy baudoin lebon and Avi Keitelman



The descendant of a Jewish family, John Gutmann emigrated from Nazi Germany to the US, arriving in San Francisco on 1 January 1934. Fascinated by the dynamism and uninhibited nature of American society, he began to photograph the city and its surroundings tirelessly. His pictures reveal an extraordinary sensitivity to popular culture, as can be seen in the image of this swimmer, imbued with the same gentle sensuality with which the artist also captured shots of dancers, singers, tightrope walkers and participants in parades.

The Swimmer, San Francisco, 1934

John Gutmann © Center for Creative Photography, Arizona Board of Regents



An artistic heir to Henri Cartier-Bresson and Walker Evans, Helen Levitt's pictures of the streets of New York are among the most genuine portraits of the city in the 1940s. Without pretending to create social documents, her images depict the daily routine of neighbourhood life, always capturing a surprising and usually unstable moment, as in the case of this mother or governess whose upper body is hidden as she leans over a pram in which a child is laughing, perhaps because it is being tickled. In her photographs, Levitt's gaze focuses on emotions, anticipating the most spontaneous and natural scenes of everyday life.

New York, ca. 1940

Helen Levitt © Film Documents LLC. Courtesy Galerie Thomas Zander, Cologne



From 1950 onwards, a novel generation of photographers known as the “new avant-garde” – which included Joan Colom – renewed the language of Spanish photography. This picture belongs to a series of photographs that the artist took in the streets of Barcelona between 1958 and 1961, in what is now the Raval district, and which he grouped together in 1961, under the title *The Street*, in an exhibition at the Sala Aixelà. As Colom himself pointed out: “I didn’t know I was doing social photography at the time. I was just doing photography and looking for images that moved me. I have sometimes used this term to define my work, but for me it simply means that I don’t do landscapes or still lifes. I do the street”.

Untitled, from the series *The Street*, 1958-1961

© Joan Colom, VEGAP, Barcelona, 2024



In the course of his career, Garry Winogrand produced some of the most striking and innovative portraits of street life in the history of photography. He created complex images that “evoke much, but explain little, and require quiet contemplation”. With his repertoire of pictures of the vital and chaotic world of 1960s American society, Winogrand – like a latter-day Charles Baudelaire – becomes a *flâneur* in the midst of urban flux. He depicts the world without moral judgement, in a direct photographic style that does not resort to technical manipulation, using small cameras to capture quick shots that sometimes distort the rules of the medium.

New York, 1968

© The Estate of Garry Winogrand, courtesy Fraenkel Gallery, San Francisco

New York, 1928 – Tijuana, Mexico, 1984



Considered one of the most important photographers of his generation, Garry Winogrand was featured together with Diane Arbus and Lee Friedlander in the famous *New Documents* exhibition at MoMA in New York. In addition to showing the influence that Walker Evans and Robert Frank had exerted on all three of these photographers, the exhibition revealed a novel, much closer way of understanding photography and underlined the differences between this new generation of documentary artists and their immediate predecessors.

Diving into 1960s New York, Winogrand's compositions offer a dynamic look at the 1964 World's Fair, held in the borough of Queens and attended by people from all over the world.

World's Fair, New York City, 1964

© The Estate of Garry Winogrand, courtesy Fraenkel Gallery, San Francisco



After visiting an August Sander exhibition in 1981, Alberto García-Alix realised that he wanted to devote himself entirely to photography, which became for him a way of understanding the world. He is a portraitist first and foremost: even when people do not appear in his works, hints of them are sometimes offered through objects such as a belt or a pair of trainers. In his portraits, the artist immerses himself in the personal world of his subjects, often including their families, partners and pets. What the viewer thus encounters is an atmosphere of trust and relaxation. García-Alix began his career as a self-taught photographer, going on to produce a freely created body of work that has come to be recognised as part of an entire era's landscape of the imagination.

Xuri in Trance, 2000

© Alberto García-Alix, VEGAP, Barcelona, 2024



García-Alix was part of a movement in Spanish photography which from 1970 onwards gave visibility to marginalised segments of the population, also helping the artist himself to find his footing and establish a relationship with society. He identifies with the rock-music environment to which he belongs, with its characteristic way of life, its aesthetic and its fellow travellers, many of whom are featured in his photographs.

Looking at *The Master of the Street*, one is struck by the similarities and the differences between this dog and human beings. By placing himself on a level with his subject, García-Alix has managed to bridge the deep gap that usually separates a photographer from his model, in such a way that the animal's expression is not so different from what we find in any of the author's other portraits.

The Master of the Street, 1986

© Alberto García-Alix, VEGAP, Barcelona, 2024



Harry Callahan's 1950s portraits of women walking the streets of Chicago, lost in thought, are a metaphor for the isolation and loneliness of big city life. Segregated from their surroundings, against backgrounds from which all narrative references have been removed, the photographer's subjects are portrayed in the full intensity of their physical presence. The technical complexity of these shots, with the photographer and his model in motion at the same time, are enormous. Callahan took his pictures using a 35-mm camera fitted with 90-mm lens, at a distance of about two metres.

The artist's work is in the tradition of formal experimentation typified by László Moholy-Nagy, who taught at The New Bauhaus art school in Chicago – later known as the Institute of Design – where Callahan was also a professor from 1946 to 1961.

Chicago, 1950

© The Estate of Harry Callahan, Courtesy Pace Gallery



Around 1950, Harry Callahan produced *Women Lost in Thought*, a series of candid close-ups of anonymous female pedestrians on Chicago's State Street. Uniting his quest for conceptual expression and devotion to precise craft, this innovative body of work explores a central theme in the photographer's oeuvre: the modern urban landscape and its inhabitants.

Deeply shadowed and at times brooding, these images transcend the external cityscape to render visible the internal urban state of mind. As psychological portraits of the city, void of any direct reference to its physical architectural space, they capture moments of introspection and isolation amid the crowds and traffic of the modern metropolis. In *Chicago* (1950), Callahan's subject remains unaware of his presence, her gaze detached and expression uncomposed as the light catches her cheekbone and earring. Though solitary and seemingly impersonal, the work presents a powerfully resonant portrayal of the post-war American spirit.

Chicago, 1950

© The Estate of Harry Callahan, Courtesy Pace Gallery

New York, 1890 – Orgeval, France, 1976



Considered one of the fathers of ‘straight photography’, Paul Strand was influenced by the social work of Lewis W. Hine at the Ethical Culture School and later by Alfred Stieglitz, who introduced modern art to the United States. In 1950 the artist travelled to France, took a series of photographs around the country and published the book *La France de profil* [France in Profile], which includes this photograph of a young man. A simple, direct, frontal portrait that seems to condense the reflection of a whole life.

From 1940 onwards, Paul Strand became interested in portraying villages and communities, an idea he developed in different countries and cultures, such as France, where he settled in 1955.

Young Boy, Gondeville, Charente, France, 1951
© Paul Strand / Courtesy Aperture / [@aperturefnd](#)



Cristina García Rodero was the first Spanish photographer to join the Magnum agency. Her pictures depict universal experiences that raise awareness of issues such as poverty, violence and war.

This portrait of a mother hugging her sick daughter belongs to the series *Georgia*, which was begun in 1995 and continued until 2013, commissioned by Médecins Sans Frontières to denounce the situation of emergency in the country following its civil war. García Rodero travelled through refugee territory, capturing reflections of the anonymous lives of people who had fled the conflict and focusing on individual portraits as a way of depicting communities as a whole. García Rodero's photography is closer to the documentary genre than to reportage.

The Sick Girl, Sugdidi, Georgia, 1995
© Cristina García Rodero/Magnum Photos



Fazal Sheikh's photographic projects go beyond mere documentary interest. His personal involvement in the situations he addresses and his knowledge of the topics he depicts give a voice to the communities he photographs, as their members speak through his images and tell their own story. Each project is published in the form of a book, in which written pieces by the artist or his subjects are featured, conveying the latter's experiences. Sheikh usually focuses on little-known human dramas. This picture was taken in 2002, when the photographer travelled to Dadaab, in northeastern Kenya, to visit the Ifo, Hagadera and Dagahaley refugee camps and resume the unfinished work he had begun there, and previously collected in his book *A Sense of Common Ground*.

Abshiro Aden Mohammed, Women's Leader, Somali Refugee Camp, Dagahaley, Kenya, 2002 © Fazal Sheikh, 2024



In 1996, Sheikh travelled through Nepal, Bhutan and Pakistan in search of his grandfather's legacy. Arriving at the Pakistan-Afghanistan border, he found the area full of Afghan refugees, more than a million of them, who had settled in villages created after the Soviet invasion of their country in 1979. The photograph depicts a mother holding between her fingers the portrait of her son, who died at the age of eighteen while fighting the Soviets in 1986. This image reveals like no other the ability of photography to speak of life and its loss, to preserve and transmit a fragment of fragile memory: what is remembered is saved from oblivion, what is forgotten is left behind.

Qurban Gul with a Photograph of Her Son, Mula Awaz, Afghan Refugee Village, Khairabad, Northern Pakistan, 1998. © Fazal Sheikh, 2024



In 1979, Graciela Iturbide began a series of photographs that would bring her international recognition: *Juchitán of the Women*. While creating her project, the photographer lived in the community of Juchitán, in southeastern Mexico, for a number of years.

This picture, one of the author's most famous images, depicts Sobeida Díaz, a sort of Mesoamerican Medusa-like figure who sells her iguanas every day at the local market, a place run by women and off-limits to men. The project arose when artist Francisco Toledo invited Iturbide to hold an exhibition at the Casa de la Cultura in the town of Juchitán, on the Isthmus of Tehuantepec in Oaxaca, the centre of Zapotec culture and a symbol of the struggles of the indigenous communities.

Our Lady of the Iguanas, Juchitán, Mexico, 1979
© Graciela Iturbide, 2024



The women of Juchitán practice a kind of primitive communism that is characteristic of the Zapotec people. In this society, practically alien to the capitalist way of life, men are not allowed into the market, which is only open to women and muxes (transvestite males). One such *muxe*, Magnolia, was portrayed by Iturbide on several occasions.

In this community – not entirely matriarchal, but run by women – “men who do themselves up as women,” as David William Foster has pointed out, “are hoping to merge with what holds the greatest symbolic power” by seeking to incorporate the signs of the powerful Juchitecan woman into their bodies.

Graciela Iturbide’s series *Juchitán of the Women* was published in book form in 1989, with a written commentary by Elena Poniatowska.

Magnolia, Juchitán, Mexico, 1986

© Graciela Iturbide, 2024



Between 2000 and 2002, Anna Malagrida took photographs in people's homes for a series she entitled *Interiors*. In the author's own words, "The sitters were always friends or relatives, and I liked the idea of going to their homes and constructing these scenes [...]. My subjects were asked to pose in unblinking stillness for quite a long while. This experience of time emptied their faces of anecdotal expressions and involved them in the act itself of posing, in a dimension of contemplation and perception that brought them into the 'here and now'".

Although the scenes are staged, the absence of artifice in the approach to these portraits makes them look like visual slices of everyday intimacy which the viewer can wander into, playing the role of a *voyeur*.

Untitled (Kazuko), 2001

© Anna Malagrida, VEGAP, Barcelona, 2024



As a rule, Jitka Hanzlová organises her work into different series in which she reflects on her own life experiences and on the representation of places and themes in art history. *Francesca* belongs to the series *There Is Something I Don't Know*, produced by the artist between 2000 and 2012. Rather than focusing on the relationship between her subjects and their environment, in this case Hanzlová seeks to depict the individual in an atmosphere of timelessness. Through a careful process of research, she relates her models to the tradition of portraiture in the history of art since the Renaissance. As in her previous work, the effect of the studied poses in these compositions results in the individualised representation of the human being.

Francesca, 2007

© Jitka Hanzlová, VEGAP, Barcelona, 2024



The portrait of Agnes, a frequently recurring model in Richard Learoyd's pictures – of which the Fundación MAPFRE owns two – has its roots in the past, in this case going back to the very origins of photography, as the picture was taken with a camera obscura of the photographer's own manufacture, with which he produces life-size portraits. Although the process used by the artist resembles photography, the project's true origin is to be found in the experiments in optics and the development of the camera obscura as a drawing aid in past centuries.

While looking toward the past, this photography also conveys a modern wish to reflect the loneliness and isolation of the human condition.

Agnes, 2013

© Richard Learoyd. Courtesy Fraenkel Gallery, San Francisco



Edith Morris became the muse and the central focus of Gowin's creative universe from the moment they met. For the photographer, his wife was not just a subject, but the incentive he needed to ignite an explosion of creativity within the context of the family. Gowin portrays those moments that remind us of the simplicity and beauty of things everywhere around us, but which few people have the ability to capture with a sense of poetry and formal elegance, in such a way that they seem natural and imbued with specialness at the same time.

Here we see Edith with her back to the camera, her hair gathered up and her head slightly turned. Like all Gowin's work, this photographic moment is an instance of biography, springing from the depths of his soul and piercing Edith's to contemplate the world through her eyes, whose gaze loses itself in the blurred landscape and turns inwards.

Edith, Chincoteague, Virginia, 1967

© Emmet Gowin. Courtesy Pace Gallery

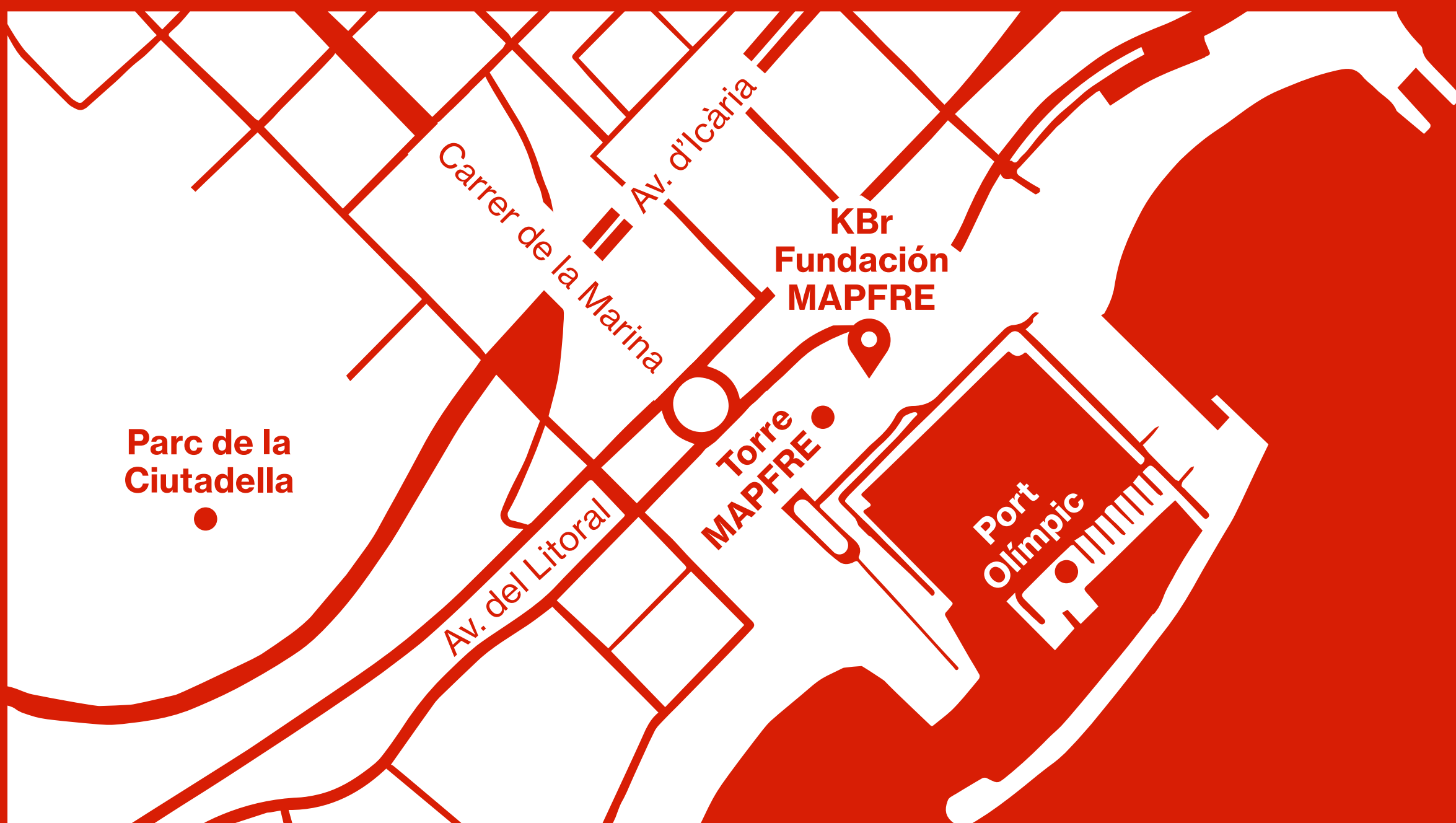


Without the aid of camera flashes or photometers, Pérez Siquier's *The Seaside* series intuitively conveys the light of his homeland, bringing to life the colours of swimming costumes, bathing caps, parasols and towels, the shine of oil-smeared flesh and make-up and the blue of the sky. The photographer's shift from black and white to the dazzling brightness of contrasting colours reflects an interest in the new, somewhat *kitsch* consumerist world that arose from the massive influx of tourists into our country. The non-normative bodies and the strange designs of street furniture, outdoor decorations and public advertisements capture his attention, coming together in the form of an ironic photographic corpus that reveals the visual paradoxes of a specific period in Spanish history.

Marbella, 1974

© Pérez Siquier, VEGAP, Barcelona, 2024

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Tuesdays – Sundays
(and public holidays): 11am-7pm
Last entry: 6.30pm

The exhibition hall will be cleared
10 minutes before closing.

Tickets

Standard ticket: 5 €
Ticket with reduction: 3 €
Free standard ticket: Tuesdays
(except public holidays)
Groups: 3 € / per person

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