



Photo courtesy Ron Herman

Norka during her visit to Foothill College

# MODEL STORY

BY JENNIFER WADSWORTH

**B**EFORE Alberto Díaz Gutiérrez captured the image of Che Guevara that he called *Guerrillero Heroico*, the lensman known as “Korda” was considered Cuba’s leading fashion photographer. Although his photos during and after the 1959 Cuban revolution brought Korda recognition, the first chapter of his career was nearly lost—including many of the photos of his model and muse, Natalia “Norka” Mendez, whose slender physique once graced the runways in Paris and the pages of *Elle*.

Ron Herman, chair of the photography department at Foothill College, set out to change that during a trip to Havana earlier this year. He tracked down Korda’s models and scanned their prints. The 30 black-and-white images that make up the exhibition *Korda Moda* are the results of Herman’s work. *Korda Moda* runs through December 6 in the Krause Center for Innovation Gallery on the Foothill campus.

Norka flew in from Cuba last week in time for her 75th birthday to share memories of her early celebrity. The former model opened up about their brief tumultuous marriage and life after the divorce.

“This is the first time ever in the world these photos have been displayed together,” says Herman,

a former fashion photographer for Ralph Lauren, who hopes to see the exhibit go national. “Norka, when she saw it, was very emotional. She was very impressed to see them restored to the way she saw them herself when they were new, when she was young.”

Pulling together the exhibit was no easy task. Herman ran into Korda’s daughter, Diana, during one of several photography trips to Cuba. He perused her collection of her father’s works and noticed a few fashion photos.

“As a former fashion photographer, that obviously piqued my interest,” he says. “When I found out that none of them existed, that the negatives were lost, I became even more fascinated. I had to find them.”

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© Korda Estate

Norka in the Hotel Nacional's casino, 1958

After months mining his network of photographers and friends, he connected with Norka. He tracked down other models, friends and family members who still own original prints of Korda's early work.

"A lot of these images were torn, bent or faded," Herman says. "I had to carefully, piece by piece, scan, retouch, restore and archive all the originals."

Those photos represented an era Cuba tried to forget, one marked by

decadence. Post-revolutionary Cuba was very much about simplicity and national pride, values that dramatically altered the dynamic of Korda's photography. Instead of echoing European designs, his

photos celebrated natural lines and emphasized the waist.

"For me, bringing this together had nothing to do with the politics ... it was just the aesthetic of his fashion photography," Herman says.

Norka offered a personal past inextricably linked to the photographer's. She was 15 when they met. Korda fell for her almost immediately, artistically and romantically.

"I wanted to become a famous fashion photographer because that way I would be able to meet the most beautiful women in Cuba," Korda once said. "I had great difficulty finding a woman with classic lines ... finally I met Norka."

Of course, the lust that drew Korda to his art led him astray, too. One particular day, Norka was in labor with their second child. Somehow, despite the contractions, she mustered the strength to take a taxi to Korda's studio. "I went and knocked on the door. I thought he was developing film," she said. The studio was locked; she used a spare key to open it. She stepped inside and was greeted by a naked woman, running away, and a very surprised husband.

Korda's infidelity became too much for Norka, but divorcing the most famous photographer in Cuba effectively meant putting herself out of work. At the age of 24, with two very young children, Norka left Cuba for France by way of communist East Germany. She found work on the runways in Paris and with a Danish designer.

"I never stopped loving Alberto despite everything I say about him," Norka says. While Korda went on to become the photographer of the Revolution, Norka faded into the background to raise her family. She remained friends with Korda until his death in 2001.

"He was a *descarado* [shameless] until the finish line. I think the alcohol made him crazy. He didn't like to be alone. He was one day with one girlfriend and the next day with another. ... I didn't stop loving him, but I am broke because he had another woman and I caught him."

Nonetheless, she says, "good people have the obligation to forgive." ❏