

Calendar

White Art

Baja California's Beautiful Brides

The brides of Yvonne Venegas go beyond beautiful. Yordana, in white, is stressed, standing at the top of a stairway that seems like a precipice. Another bride, her wedding day long passed, looks frazzled at her baby shower. And then there's the "bride" in black — hairdresser's cape, that is — waiting for her tint to take.

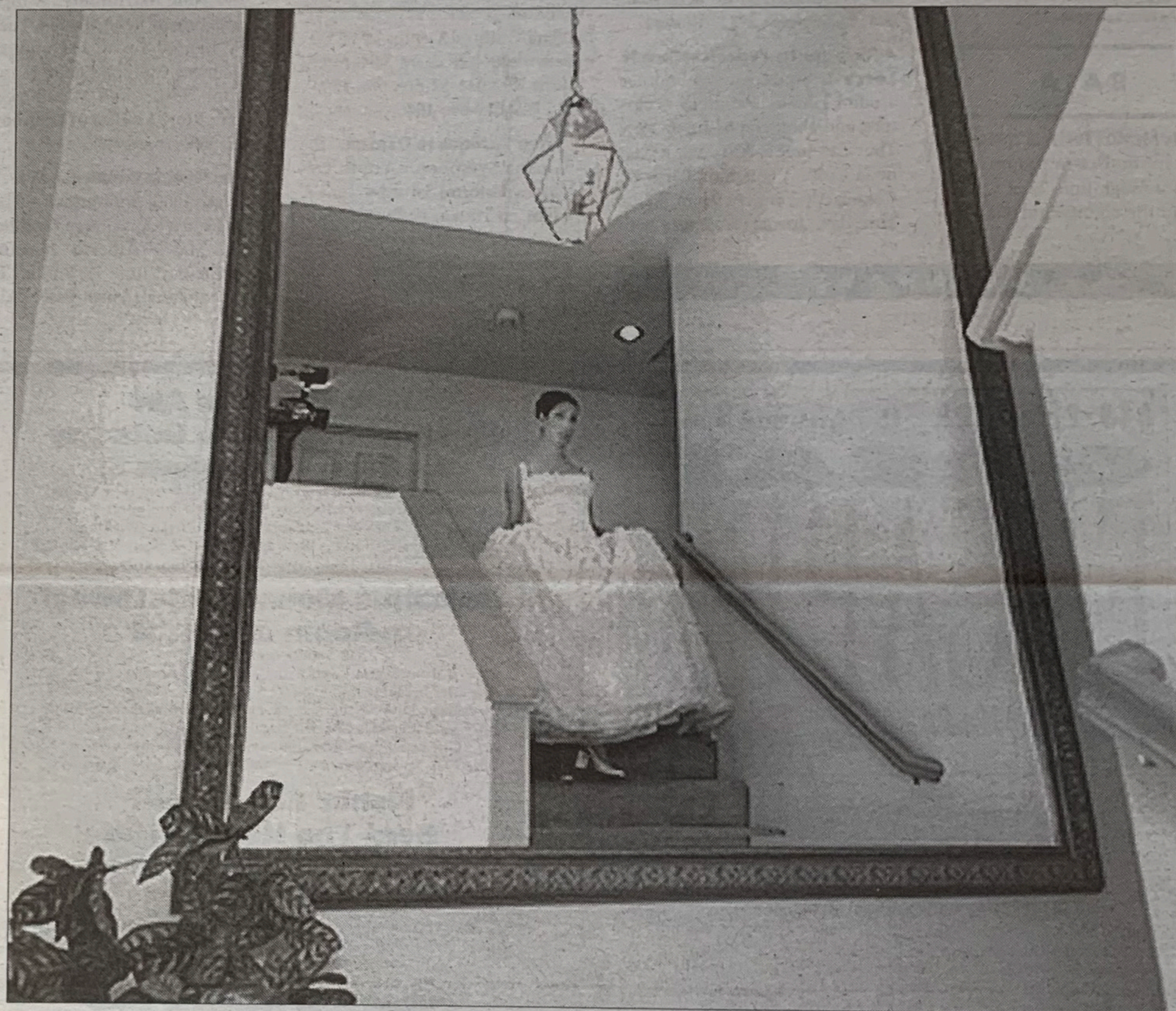
Born in 1970 in Long Beach, Venegas moved with her family to Tijuana as a child. She was taught by nuns at Colegio La Paz, then went to Southwestern College in Chula Vista. Her father, José Luis Venegas, was a wedding photographer to the upper middle class that is now the subject of

his daughter's art. By phone from Tijuana, Venegas, who has returned there after

some years in New York, answered questions about her current exhibition.

How did she get permission from friends and others to make art out of their lives, especially at formal occasions, like weddings? "Only a few people understand it as art," she said. "And actually the word 'art,' to a lot of them, sounds a little glamorous, so they're flattered. Some joke, 'Oh, my God, am I going to be in the Guggenheim?' Besides, events like weddings are really the easiest place to photograph." Because those settings are already theatrical? "Exactly. Of course, I can't tell if they fully understand my intentions. But I think that many times they're just happy with being part of a project about Tijuana. Also, they're very trusting with me. When you're kids, you're just 'you,' no? There's not all this masquerade. But so many people, when I see them again, reconnect with me and that childhood we shared."

And none of them mind being shown in less-than-flattering lights? "No. Many times I have been asked, 'Is this a critique of their lives?' And there are a few images that I probably won't ever exhibit in Tijuana, because it's possible they would be misunderstood there. I find San Diego a safe distance. But I don't think it's unflattering; what I'm trying to convey is their humanity. When we look at a wedding album, we're so used to seeing ourselves as these stiff, pretty people. I'm trying to show people that this is not necessary. What's interesting is that, in the last year, the group I have been photographing a lot have actually bought pictures from me. For one couple, I took pictures of the parents'



Wedding-day photo of Yordana

meeting, when the groom asked for the bride's hand. And when the mother of the bride saw them, she bought a ridiculous number."

Even though she hasn't paired her father's photos with hers, it's easy to imagine what his look like. What has he made of her work? "My father is fatherly. He keeps telling me to make a living out of what I'm doing. That's his main concern. But he does take time to sit and look, and he tries to understand. He says, 'Okay, I get it. So there's all this other stuff going on.' Or, 'Oh, my God, I would never do something like that.' Or, 'Oh, that's so original!'"

As a kid, did she go with him when he was working? "Yes, at his photo studio, after school, my twin sister and I would sometimes have to wait till he took us home. A couple of times he had to take us to weddings, and it was awkward. Once, when we were about seven, we were there till one or two in the morning, falling asleep. It

was a different world, going into a place where nobody knew us and we weren't supposed to be, and there were all these dressed-up people, and we were in overalls."

Has she herself ever done any straight wedding photography? "Very little. Yordana asked me to photograph her wedding, but it was a nightmare. Reality hit; the mother was, like, 'Oh, come on, we have to do the tables.' She hired me because she wanted it to be different, but when she saw the pictures, she kept choosing ones that were very traditional, very easy, although she did choose that one of Yordana."

Venegas said she hasn't entirely escaped the life she has portrayed, nor does she want to. (Briefly married once, she was photographed, traditionally, by her father's friend.) But she does try to keep it in perspective. "Considering my dad's job, we were really the employees. It was a different experience altogether.

We were a total of five siblings. My dad worked hard to put us in expensive schools and buy a house in the right neighborhood. He worked three times as hard as other parents. He was making such an effort to have us be part of that class, it made the point that it wasn't normal. Now I understand I was an observer the whole time."

At the opening, Venegas will be available to answer other questions. There will also be a DJ, wedding cake, and more.

— Jeanne Schinto

"The Most Beautiful Brides of Baja California"
Thursday, June 5, 7:00 p.m.
Museum of Contemporary Art, San Diego
1001 Kettner Boulevard, Downtown
Free (\$3 donation welcome)
Info: 619-234-1001 or
www.mcasd.org

Local Events
page 83

Classical Music
page 94

Art Museums & Galleries
page 97

Theater
page 98

Pop Music
page 103

Restaurants
page 140

Movies
page 152