

HUGO CROSTHWAITE IN CONVERSATION WITH MATT PELKEY



Born in 1971 in Tijuana, Mexico, Hugo Crosthwaite is the artist behind “Calacas de Quinn,” the cover art for this issue of the Notre Dame Review. The mural was on display at the National Museum of Mexican Art in Chicago as part of the Day-of-the-Dead-themed exhibition “La Muerte Niña,” which ended December 13, 2015.

Like other works in the show, “Calacas de Quinn” is modeled after the ofrendas, or “death altars,” erected to commemorate the deceased during Day of the Dead celebrations. Over 90 artists of Mexican descent participated in the exhibition at the museum, and for Crosthwaite’s ofrenda, the show’s curator assigned him the Mexico-born American actor Anthony Quinn.

Before beginning the project, Crosthwaite said he knew little of Quinn, who starred in a number of 20th century films and is best known for his starring roles in Zorba the Greek and Viva Zapata!, a movie about Mexican revolutionary Emiliano Zapata. Crosthwaite said that in discussions with other artists in Tijuana, he found that Quinn was generally dismissed as a Mexican engringado, or a Mexican who has become Americanized. But Crosthwaite bristled at the notion that Quinn betrayed his Mexican identity to succeed in the United States. Crosthwaite himself works and lives in the United States, and his last name is British.

“Calacas de Quinn” is based on the idea that Quinn’s career success in the United States was an “explosion” that began with his roots in Mexico. Crosthwaite styled the mural after the work of the 19th century Mexican artist José Guadalupe Posada, whose iconic depictions of calacas (skeletons) and calaveras (skulls) have become defining imagery for Mexican art. Crosthwaite completed the mural over the course of five days, improvising most of it.

The Notre Dame Review recently spoke to him about “Calacas de Quinn” over Skype, with Crosthwaite fielding questions from Tijuana.



NDR: *How would you describe the style of the piece?*

HC: It’s a figurative acrylic painting, and it explores a narrative that I improvised on the spot. I grabbed elements of the subject matter—of Anthony Quinn, and the whole notion of an explosion of Anthony Quinn inside of Mexican imagery.

NDR: *I noticed that the mural is divided into three color schemes—red, yellow, and black and white. What role do those divisions play in the piece?*

HC: Well the colors—the white and the yellow and red—they’re colors that are often used in Mexican death altars, and they’re colors that signify the transition between the living and the dead. White is the spirit world and the red is blood—that’s the world of the living. So the transition from white to yellow to red is this whole notion of the souls of the dead coming to the world of the living and partaking in food and drink on the Day of the Dead. But then there’s also, in this case, the explosion of Anthony Quinn, and it’s kind of like a mushroom cloud of explosion with different levels of radiation coming out. There’s the very hot white and then the yellow and then the red.

NDR: *Some of the figures in the mural cross from one to the next, so those divisions aren’t rigid.*

HC: Right. They’re not separate. And one of the things I had done before the mural is that I prepared all these portraits of Anthony Quinn in pencil. I would place them on the wall and I would build the whole mural around it. And so I had some idea of what I wanted to do—the idea of the explosion—but I didn’t really have any prepared sketches so then I didn’t

know how the explosion would look. In the beginning I thought of doing it as an explosion with lots of spikes coming out but then I decided it was going to be a mushroom cloud and I put all the imagery inside—the faces of Anthony Quinn, the skulls and *calaveras* and other imagery that represents José Guadalupe Posada etchings.

NDR: *That's what I was going to ask about next. The nod to José Guadalupe Posada seems to be intentional.*

HC: Yes, this is imagery that is very much about the Mexican Revolution. The reason I chose it is because if there were ever imagery that represented Mexico it would be the images of José Guadalupe Posada from the Mexican Revolution. Before the Mexican Revolution, even after the War of Independence in 1810, there was still very much a struggle for the identity of Mexico. Basically Mexican politics was divided between the conservatives and the liberals, and the conservatives were the ones who wanted to model Mexico like a European empire—like Spain, like France. The liberals wanted to model Mexico like the United States as a republic. They wanted a nation with a president and not a king. In the early 1900s, Mexico was wrestling with these two notions, and the Mexican indigenous culture was still oppressed. It wasn't until the Mexican Revolution that these two notions of the conservative and the liberal disappeared and Mexico became a new nation. And that was when it became a new nation of the *mestizo*, which is what the majority of the population is in Mexico—a mixture of Spanish and the indigenous population. Also, it was after the Mexican Revolution that the pre-Columbian images were mixed with Catholicism and Spanish contributions. José Guadalupe Posada, his genius was that he started playing with this imagery. He's one of the first artists to incorporate these two aesthetics—the pre-Columbian aesthetic and the European modern aesthetic. By combining them he became the artist who defined this new notion of Mexico.

NDR: *And what about Anthony Quinn? How does all of this relate to him?*

HC: It's precisely this idea of Anthony Quinn's past. For the opening of the exhibition, Kathy Quinn, the wife of Anthony Quinn, came by and saw the mural and she told me that Anthony Quinn's father was actually conscripted by the army during the Mexican Revolution. He was in the thick of battle and his wife followed him because back then wives followed their husbands to war. She became pregnant during the battles and was kicked

out. She returned to her hometown in Chihuahua and that was where Anthony Quinn was born. And that is what this mural is—Anthony Quinn exploding out of this Mexican imagery.

NDR: *And what is that explosion? What is the nature of it?*

HC: The whole composition of the mural starts with these drawing of shoes—these very old shoes that are on this very simple humble box. So that represents him coming from humble beginnings, from poverty, from the state of Chihuahua. And then from there the explosion happens and it becomes the mushroom cloud and it's Anthony Quinn with a sombrero playing the role of Zapata, which is one of the roles that won him an Academy Award. In this case he was the first Mexican ever to win an Academy Award in film. So it was this notion of coming from very humble origins and exploding into the scene in Hollywood and the world over.

To view more of Hugo Crosthwaite's work or contact the artist, visit his website at <http://www.hugocrosthwaite.com/>.