ART REVIEWS
What to See Right Now in New York Art Galleries
Feb. 12, 2020

Daniel Rios Rodriguez’s spiral assemblages; Hannah Levy’s perspective-altering sculptures; Anne Minich’s enigmatic paintings; Pieter Hugo’s portraits from the edge.

Pieter Hugo

Through Feb. 29. Yossi Milo Gallery, 245 Tenth Avenue, Manhattan, 212-414-0370, yossimilo.com

The South African photographer Pieter Hugo made multiple visits to Mexico during the past two years, first prompted by an invitation to contribute to an exhibition there, then by an urge to roam farther throughout the country. Soaked in sunlight and working the edges of allegory and voyeurism, the images in his show La Cucaracha, at Yossi Milo Gallery, were made from the southern state of Chiapas to the border city of Tijuana in the north. They are mostly portraits, and, as usual for Mr. Hugo, present people on society’s margins: three older muxes, third-gender people in Zapotec culture; a dwarf couple dressed as Emiliano Zapata and an Adelita, a female soldier in the Mexican Revolution; and a bride cradling an iguana.

From images of men handling hyenas in Lagos to his duo portraits of victims and perpetrators of the Rwanda genocide, Mr. Hugo has often drawn criticism for his exoticizing gaze. Still, he designs his portraits collaboratively with his subjects, and the strong color and crisp shooting mostly honor them, especially the close-up frames that dispense with dreamlike stagings. (The three muxes are particularly moving.) There are art-history winks – one image refers to the famous 16th-century French painting, Gabrielle d’Estrees and One of Her Sisters, which shows a woman pinching the other’s nipple; in another, a Oaxaca theater troupe recreates a pose from a David Alfaro Siqueiros mural. But its Mr. Hugo’s digressions from portraiture, like the 2018 still-life Making Pigments, San Agustin Etla that suggest an alternative sensibility; more of this would offer a searching look at Mexico, rather than indulge in its purported mysteries.

SIDDHARTHA MITTER
In 2018, the curator Francisco Berzunza invited the South African artist Pieter Hugo to Mexico to create a body of work that would engage with themes of sexuality and death for an exhibition at the Centro Fotográfico Manuel Álvarez Bravo. During his monthlong stay, Hugo searched for a response to this prompt, and inspiration came when he chanced upon a platter of desiccated fruits in Oaxaca. “Making Pigments. San Agustin Etla” (2018), which shows a spread of dying crops in bold hues, was the first image Hugo captured in Mexico. But “something shifted” during that first visit, Hugo says. “I don’t know why, but I’m not done here,” he remembers thinking; he has since visited Mexico four more times, traveling between the bustling border city of Tijuana in the north, the colonial town of San Cristóbal de las Casas in the Central Highlands and the indigenous Zapotec town of Juchitán in the southern state of Oaxaca. “From the Day of the Dead to narco-politics, death is strongly felt there,” he says of the country, but it was its people’s day-to-day understanding of life’s fragility that inspired his new photography series, “La Cucaracha,” which will go on display at Yossi Milo Gallery in New York this month. Hugo named the series after the popular folk song about an injured cockroach whose lyrics are often rewritten in Mexico as political satire.

The project depicts people from different walks of life across Mexico, capturing them within their social habitats, in emotionally, and often physically, stripped-down states. In “The Snake Charmer, Hermosillo” (2019), for example, a naked man holds an albino snake that curls around his leg; his expression is piercing, his posture stoic. “The Advocate at Home, Mexico City” (2019), shows a moment of intimacy, in which a man Hugo met at a photography course wears nothing but white socks and reclines over the couch in his living room. A similar degree of trust is felt in “The Sex Worker, Oaxaca de Juárez” (2018), a shot of a nude sex worker photographed against a pastel pink wall in her home. “The dynamic must feel equal for subjects to feel comfortable,” Hugo says about shooting people in their personal spaces. He cast his subjects at bars and gas stations, or even from social media, where he found the two musician friends who appear in “Gabrielle and One of Her Sisters, Mexico City” (2019), which shows two nude women standing in front a wall, while one pinches the other’s nipple, in homage to the anonymous 16th-century French painting “Gabrielle d’Estrées and One of Her Sisters.” “I am interested in bodies that tell stories and capture the surrounding environments that shape those narratives,” Hugo says over the phone from his Cape Town studio, a 2,150-square-foot space where he
shoots, edits and prints his images when he’s not traveling for an editorial or art project. “I don’t get ideas by sitting at my studio — traveling and being outside feed me as an artist,” he says.

Hugo, 43, grew up at the tail end of apartheid, witnessing South Africa’s sweeping sociopolitical changes in the early 1990s. “Transition from one system to another left an impression and transformed me,” he says. “Everything I saw was mediated by some power, so I wanted to see for myself, and photography was the perfect tool for my wanderlust.” For more than a decade, he has been traveling the world, from China to Ghana to Nigeria, capturing images that illustrate the disorder and humility of life everywhere. He presents the results in series such as “Nollywood” (2009), for which he staged surreal versions of typical scenes from Nigerian movies, and “1994” (2016), for which he photographed children born after 1994, the year that signified the end of apartheid in South Africa and the genocide in Rwanda. He also shoots for magazines including T. He acknowledges that being a photographer grants him unique access to his subjects’ lives but, he adds, “it’s about what we do with that access.” He references Diane Arbus’s view that an artist must allow herself to be an outsider, a status he identifies with whether he’s in Cape Town or in the bedroom of a stranger in Juárez. Below, Hugo answers T’s Artist’s Questionnaire.

What is your day like? How much do you sleep? What’s your work schedule?

I try to sleep nine hours every night. I wake up at 6 a.m. to drop off my kids at school, and I’m at the studio by 7:30 a.m. At some point, I go to the gym, but I try not to do the same thing at the same time, so I mix things up a little bit. If I’m not traveling, I try to spend time with the kids. I’m home at 4:30 p.m. — we have an early dinner, and by 8:30 p.m., I’m in bed.

How many hours of creative work do you think you do in a day?

Four. I feel so guilty when I read these interviews and see people say 24 hours! I might go surfing or read a book. I find that doing things that are not directly related to my practice actually feeds into being an artist. I like to keep things jazzed up — it’s good for my mind.

What’s the first piece of art you ever made?

The first photograph I took and printed was of a homeless woman lying on the street. Ironically, it was right on this street where I have my studio right now. Today, I am still seeing the same subjects here on these streets and making the same direct portraits of people.

What’s the worst studio you ever had?

It was during a yearlong residency in Italy. I was not allowed to hang anything on the walls because it was a historic Tadao Ando-designed building. The architecture was amazing, but it was the most counterproductive space I’ve ever had. I just couldn’t make it my own. I was allowed to be there and breathe it, but nothing else. Otherwise, I can be resourceful and turn anything into a studio.

What’s the first work you ever sold? For how much?

I sold a portrait of a boy that I had photographed in Cape Town. His name was Tam Vleksi, and he had albinism. I sold it for $150 in 2003.
When you start a new piece, where do you begin?

I start when I have an intuitive response to something that piques my interest. If I have the conviction that it’s worth pursuing, I pack my bags and go to make the work. This often results out of a response to something I see on the media, which could be a newspaper article or something from a literary journal, anything that has visual stimuli. It’s about having my eyes open — there is no formula for when that spark may find me. I cultivate a receptive eye.

How do you know when you’re done?

I’m usually done when I’m three-quarters of the way through a project, when I realize that I have started seeing the world in a different way. There’s still the labor part and finishing the work, but mentally and spiritually, I’m finished when I start looking at the world in a different way.

How many assistants do you have?

I usually have one full-time assistant. I recently decided to give him some time off from the studio to enjoy having personal space. I find it hard to work with someone sitting next to me. He comes in for a couple of days a week, and I’ll brief him on some administrative work related to galleries, printing or shipping. That’s where an assistant comes in handy. Otherwise I have two people working full time in the printing department, next door.

What music do you play when you’re making art?

If I’m writing emails or writing for a catalog, which takes up a lot of time, I don’t listen to music. I have an eclectic taste for when I’m editing, ranging from Beethoven to Katy Perry. I love Katy Perry. I actually once reached out to her agent to shoot a music video for her.

When did you first feel comfortable saying you’re a professional artist?

I still don’t feel comfortable saying that. I’ve oscillated between being a photographer, artist and photographic artist. The question comes up at customs when I land in a country. If I have to fill in my profession, I usually just write what I think is going to make it easiest for me to get through with the least hassle. I like to switch between journalist, photographer, photojournalist, artist, father and husband.

Is there a meal you eat while you’re working?

There’s a sushi place right around the corner — I go there and quickly eat something, because I often forget to eat.

Are you bingeing on any shows right now?

No. But I sometimes binge on New York Review of Books, which calms me down.

What’s the weirdest object in your studio?

A collection of human skulls and bones from Tibet that function as spiritual Tantric Buddhist objects. I have a human skull which is also a drinking cup, and a human skull from Amsterdam.
How often do you talk to other artists?

I have a large library at my studio, which attracts a lot of young photographers. The selection is a mix of photography monographs and other art books. This is the only time I communicate with other artists, because I don’t go to openings. When I started, looking at photography monographs in Cape Town was a totally alien idea. I learned photography through visiting university libraries, which can be hard to access, and I’ve built a strong relationship with books. I invite young artists to look at them and talk about their projects.

What’s the last thing that made you cry?

I was going through a particularly intense period in which I was traveling a lot. One night, I was very tired and I couldn’t help weeping while watching “Mamma Mia” with my daughter.

What does your studio window look out on?

One side of my studio looks at Table Mountain, which is a spectacular view, but the other side looks at a hotel.

What do you usually wear when you’re working?

It really depends on what’s happening that day. Today, I’m wearing running shorts and a vest with Birkenstocks. If I have a curator or another guest coming by, I make an effort. The older I get, the more I feel like moving toward wearing a uniform.

What’s your worst habit?

Smoking.

What embarrasses you?

Decisions I occasionally make and knowing they’re out in the world somewhere.

Do you exercise?

Once a week, I go surfing, spearfishing or running, or I go to the gym.

What are you reading right now?

A catalog published by Camera Austria International for an exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art in Salzburg. It’s fascinating.

What’s your favorite artwork by someone else?

Helmar Lerski’s “Metamorphosis” series, which he made on his balcony in 1936 in Palestine. They’re just so seductive, but at the same time, they raise such interesting questions about the possibility of portraiture. Lerski made the series to question the veracity of the medium, but he also breathes new life and energy into the genre.

“Pieter Hugo: La Cucaracha” is on view from Jan. 10 through Feb. 21, at Yossi Milo Gallery, 245 10th Avenue, New York, yossimilo.com.

Surreal shots of sex, death and mysticism in Mexico

Enter the cucaracha

Posted Monday 27th January 2020 /
Text By Miss Rosen
Photography © Pieter Hugo

In his latest project, La Cucaracha, photographer Pieter Hugo attempts to unravel the country’s most compelling mysteries.

At the invitation of curator Francisco Berzunza, South African photographer Pieter Hugo arrived in Mexico to work on a new exhibition. The project, originally titled Hacer Noche (‘Crossing Night’), was set to be a visual exploration of sex and death in the country.

The commission quickly became an obsession for the artist. Between 2018-19, Hugo made four month-long trips to Mexico to create a collection of captivating portraits that combine mysticism, beauty, humour and horror. The result was La Cucaracha, an exhibition which is now on view at New York’s Yossi Milo Gallery.

“I wanted the work to stay true to a Mexican aesthetic and make pictures that have an original and authentic voice,” Hugo says. Drawing upon the understanding that tragedy is a pervasive fact of life, Hugo embraces the anarchic and surreal sides of Mexican life.

Here, subjects appear as Don Quixote, a snake charmer, a blood-soaked pugilist and an undercover police officer disguised as a sex worker. Tender images of a girl on her First Communion appear alongside sensitive portraits of ‘Muxes’ – the Zapotec culture’s term for transgender women.

Hugo handles the subject of death with equal reverence. “The narco-state is a dark current that permeates all aspects of Mexican culture,” Hugo says. “Google ‘narco murders’ and you’ll get a sense of the vulgar morbidity and performative rituals committed – the signals these murders try and send to society. If one juxtaposes this with the beauty of Oaxaca’s death rituals, marigolds, graveyard wakes and the life and ancestor honouring, the contradictions are very apparent.”

The exhibition title, La Cucaracha – which translates to ‘the cockroach’ – comes from a song that gained prominence during the Mexican Revolution, when rebel and government forces alike invented lyrics to comment on major political figures, the events of war, and effects on civilians.

Throughout the series, Hugo explores the paradoxes of Mexican life, examining the tensions between tradition and revolution, and the cycle of life and death.

Pieter Hugo: La Cucaracha is on view at Yossi Milo Gallery in New York through February 29, 2020.
Pieter Hugo: Live from Mexico

JAN 23, 2020
by Laurence Cornet

A book published by Editorial RM and an exhibition at the Yossi Milo Gallery in New York show Pieter Hugo’s seminal encounter with Mexico.

Invited by the curator Francisco Berzunza to do a series of photographs in Mexico on the themes of sexuality and death, Pieter Hugo found his vocabulary. “While I was there, something shifted in my process; the way I make work, the way I look. It got its claws into me and I felt I needed to go back and continue the series,” he explained in an interview for Another Man on the occasion of his exhibition in Cologne last November.

While the intensity of his portraits has not changed, his references and the explosion of color and violence set his latest series apart from earlier work. Permeated with the atmosphere of the land—vibrant, full of joy and pain—these photos must be interpreted one by one. Even if Hugo rejects the idea of a global narrative, the work as a whole is grounded in a reaction to a complex sociocultural paradigm.

Escalating over the past fifteen years, and increasingly normalized, violence has fundamentally reshaped Mexican society. There isn’t a single person unaffected by the rampant murders; the cartels have made death a part of the daily life and opened the door to other forms of violence, such as organ trafficking and black magic rituals. A few of Pieter Hugo’s photos make this violence explicit: corpses set aflame, severed heads, battered bodies, bodies covered in blood or with a shroud. Even a plush toy was disemboweled and pinned to a pole as if it had been the victim of reprisals.

An aesthetics of violence

Revolutionary symbols and references abound, reminding the viewer of the country’s history: from Emiliano Zapata, the great revolutionary of 1910, to David Alfaro Siqueiros, the painter and Communist militant whose murals denouncing the dictatorship are reflected in Hugo’s compositions. In one photograph, garbage pickers and manual workers are hoisting a dead body they way Siqueiros’s revolutionaries once did. They look proud and unyielding, emanating iron will. “It is no accident that it is the cockroach to which Hugo has turned, a creature one loathes as much as one envies, the scavenger and pest that is also the great survivor of any man-made or natural disaster,” noted Ashraf
Jamal in his introduction. Alluding to a popular Spanish song picked up in Mexico during the Revolution, *La Cucaracha*, meaning cockroach in Spanish, lends the title to the series.

“A soft answer turns away wrath,” says the caption to an image of a naked woman, blood streaming down her face and body. Are these images a form of protest, an expression of admiration for the Mexicans steeling themselves to survive political infighting at the local and international levels, which threatens to engulf them? Beneath the photo of a lifeless man stretched on top of a utility cart and covered with a damp white sheet, we read, as if in confirmation: “Sacrifice to the gods of society.” Sacrifice or self-sacrifice? Or yet, acceptance, as the young bride seems to suggest, cradling an iguana in her the immaculate whiteness of her lap? Hugo is aware of the fact that in Mexican culture iguanas represent contentment and the importance of being satisfied with what one has.

**Portraying resistance**

More radically, says the writer Mario Bellatin, whose text precedes the images in the book: “Pieter Hugo, who in his images seems to have found the key to the appalling desperation of the inhabitants to escape, through the evidence of the liquid quality of their souls, the horror in which their existence is mired.”

To complete his aesthetic study of violence and its tangible impact on people and bodies, Hugo adds an innovative touch by foregrounding the nude. Bodies stripped of any artificial attributes seem free to express themselves. They emanate tenderness and joy when they are not opportunities to amass new art and literary references. The latter are present throughout the series: Hugo thus photographed a nude Don Quixote riding his donkey; reproduced a sixteenth-century painting of the Fontainbleau school; and captured modern day odalisques. There is no erotic tension in these images, but rather an expression of complex, disconcerting ambivalence which Hugo is trying to puzzle out. The same ambivalence hovers over the flower which concludes the series: its soft pink petals contrast with the prickly thorns framing the buds.

**Pieter Hugo, *La Cucaracha***

January 10 – February 29, 2020

Yossi Milo Gallery

245 10th Ave, New York, NY 10001, United State

Pieter Hugo’s latest series, “La Cucaracha,” looks at sexuality and death across Mexico. Created during several month-long trips over the last two years to Mexico City, Hermosillo, Oaxaca de Juárez and Juchitán, the photographs will be on display at Yossi Milo Gallery beginning January 10.

Known for photographing communities on the periphery of society in Africa, the South African artist didn’t depart from this tendency in Mexico. In this series, however, his photos are deliberately staged, and vibrantly colorful. Diverse subjects including a young bride holding an iguana in front of a chain link fence, a dwarf couple dressed as revolutionaries, a naked snake charmer, nude sisters, a pot-bellied representation of a Don Quixote—disrobed and slumped atop a donkey, and older Muxes (Zapotec culture’s “third gender”), are captured in unexpected and intimate tableaux.

“One could say, albeit reductively, that my work has always been about the outsider,” Hugo writes – “and in the Trump era, Mexico is definitely the outsider.”

Hugo first traveled to Mexico at the invitation of curator Francisco Berzunza, who prompted the photographer to make work in the country for an exhibition on the theme of sex and death. A unique relationship with death exists in Mexico, explains Hugo: “If one looks beyond the clichés of dancing skeletons and sugar skulls, there’s a deeply complicated connection with mortality.”

The series embraces cliché symbols of Mexico, but interprets them through optics of sex and mortality: Burning cacti, religious effigies and first communion dresses, flowery headware à la Frida Kahlo atop a fleshy woman dripping from the heat, a bloodied wrestler, and cowboys both drunk and mirthful. “La Cucaracha” marks the first series in which Hugo has chosen to use descriptive titles, highlighting the literary and art history references that are a standard part of his practice. Examples include “After Siqueiros” and “Zapata and Adelita.”

The title of the series is a metaphor for Mexico’s “ethos in which extremes of life and death reside comfortably,” writes Yossi Milo Gallery in the press release. Named after the Spanish folk song, La Cucaracha, about a cockroach who must learn to walk without its two hind legs, the photographs reflect Hugo’s take on Mexico and its people. “There is an acceptance that life has no glorious victory, no happy ending,” observes Hugo. “Humor, ritual, a strong sense of community and an embrace of the inevitable make it possible to live with tragic and often unacceptable conditions.”

Though working far from familiar African land, Hugo’s admiration and appreciation for Mexico are evident in the photographs’ bold colors and surprising frankness. “Mexico’s anarchic, visceral energy got under my skin and sucked me in,” writes Hugo.

Pieter Hugo: Sex and Mortality in Mexico

The South African artist's latest body of work, La Cucaracha, explores death, sexuality, and spirituality across Mexico, from the industrialized areas of Mexico City and the desert of Hermosillo to the mountains of Ixtepec and San Cristóbal.

Words by Charlotte Jansen

“La cucaracha, la cucaracha, ya no puede caminar, por que no tiene, porque le faltan, las dos patitas de atrás...”

The refrain is unmistakable: La Cucaracha, the Spanish folk song about a disabled cockroach, was popularised by Villist soldiers during the Mexican Revolution, though the original meaning of the song is unknown. The verses have been improvised ever since, depending on the politics of the performer, but the chorus has remained the same: the cockroach struggling to walk with its two hind legs missing—a metaphor, or simply a darkly humorous image of a stumbling, much-loathed pest.

For the South African artist Pieter Hugo, La Cucaracha is emblematic of Mexico’s “humour, ritual, a strong sense of community and an embrace of the inevitable”—characteristics that “make it possible to live with tragic and often unacceptable situations.” La Cucaracha was the perfect title for Hugo’s homage to Mexico—a book of photographs, portraits, landscapes and still life vignettes inspired by Mexico’s “particular ethos and aesthetic” taken during multiple trips across the country over the last two years.

“I first came to Mexico at the invitation of [the Mexican curator] Francisco Berzunza”, says Hugo, who is known for his portraits of peripheral communities. Berzunza was curating an exhibition on South African art in Oaxaca. Titled Hacer Noche the show explored the liminal space after death. “His only brief to me was that the work be about sex and mortality,” Hugo recalls.

Hugo doesn’t avoid the stereotypical images of Mexico—Frida Kahlo flower crowns, cacti, religious effigies and rancheros all appear—but when he confronts them with his camera, they don’t look the way we expect. This is a series about sex, and death—interpreted explicitly: naked flesh and
blood, burning and cut-up corpses, fallen fruit and blooming flowers. Nature and humanity perform a strange and beguiling dance across the pages—La Cucaracha playing faintly in the background.

“There is a very different relationship with death here to what I am used to”

While some of these images—such as spoliation of evidence, in which a body appears to be on fire in the desert in Hermosillo—might shock the western viewer, in Mexico it’s not uncommon to see gruesome and graphic photographs of death on the front page of newspapers displayed at kiosks, juxtaposed with seductive pictures of nude models. Images of the extremes of life and death reside comfortably with the ordinary and the everyday, with little hierarchy between them. “There is a very different relationship with death here to what I am used to.” Hugo explains. “If one looks beyond the clichés of dancing skeletons and sugar skulls, there’s a deeply complicated connection with mortality. This necropolitical dynamic is most visible in contradictory expressions of honouring the afterlife, in the Day of the Dead celebrations and the brutal dismemberment of bodies by narco-traffickers.”

Hugo’s vision of Mexico also references the rich visual culture there: images such as After Siqueiros, Zapata and Adelita, and the sequence of Muxe portraits in particular, refer to its art history and culture. Hues of pinks, blues and greens throughout the photographs also create a vividly Mexican atmosphere, jubilant and feverish. “Alongside the flamboyance and high-pitched register of this series, there is the ordinariness of the everyday. I am drawn to the fabulousness of the banal and the banality of the exotic.”

“I am drawn to the fabulousness of the banal and the banality of the exotic”

The most surprising works, perhaps, are the male nudes—cowboys, politicians and labourers who have posed for Hugo without clothes. The Advocate at Home, shot in Mexico City, shows a heavy-set hirsute man draped on a sofa in a classical pose, naked but for his white socks. Vulnerable and proud, exposed and intimate, the naked advocate represents sex as much as death. Underpinning these portraits is the pervasive sense of acceptance “that life has no glorious victory, no happy ending”—as Hugo puts it.

Although Hugo views Mexico as a foreigner, La Cucaracha is intensely emotional. Hugo finds a connection with Mexico, revealing self-reflexive truths as he attempts to understand a place that he doesn’t belong to, but nonetheless can relate to. “Given the disparate nature of my interests, I’ve always struggled to situate myself. One could say, albeit reductively, that my work has always been about the outsider—and, in the Trump era, Mexico is definitely the outsider.”

https://elephant.art/pieter-hugo-sex-mortality-mexico/
A round-up of things to do in the first year of the 2020s: from a must-see eerie horror film to an exhibition of artworks by Virgil Abloh.

*La Cucaracha* by Pieter Hugo at Yossi Milo, New York

See Pieter Hugo’s latest series *La Cucaracha* in New York from January 10. Shot in Mexico, the striking photographs explore sex and death in the country via portraits of people found in “community theatre groups, photography schools, people on the sides of highways, friends of friends, Instagram, and Grindr”, Hugo told *Another Man* last year. “I spent a month [in Mexico] making work,” the photographer explained. “While I was there something shifted in my process; the way I make work, the way I look. It got its claws into me and I felt I needed to go back and continue the series. I went back four times and that’s where we are at now.”