

# Artnotes

## Letter from Mexico City

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Art fairs can be a time-effective way of taking the artistic temperature of a city. Mexico's ZONA MACO, only in its seventh year, is already regarded as the most significant in Latin America. Monterrey-born founder/director Zélika García and a quartet of galleries form a de facto selection committee, ensuring that standards remain high, while a curated component, ZONA MACO SUR, features individual artists. As always, Mexico's three major art centres predominated – DF, Guadalajara and Monterrey – anchored by the established galleries, with an ambitious new generation of gallerists and collectives yapping at their heels in the *Nuevos Propuestas* (New Proposals) section. Argentina, Brazil, Colombia, Peru and Venezuela all had strong representation, while edgy Madrid galleries dominated the European presence.

With around 100 exhibitors, this is not a huge fair by world standards, even so there is a lot to take in. The hothouse effect of so much art, so many superlatives, so many personable young assistants, and so much Veuve Cliquot in such a confined space leaves one enervated after just a few hours. We spread our visit over two days to mitigate the overload, allowing for thoughtful revisitation and conversation, often with the artists themselves. The challenge in writing about such events is to provide more than just a list of names. In the end one must pick winners – the work that resonates most powerfully, stands out from the crowd, or exemplifies a significant trend.

Daniel Lezama is one such artist ([www.daniellezama.net](http://www.daniellezama.net)). Much admired at home yet little known abroad, the ironic and bespectacled forty-something painter is represented by visionary architect/gallerist Hilario Galguera. Lezama's often huge canvasses are broadly in the Mexican realist/narrative tradition, but plumb the shadowy depths of the national psyche and identity in disturbing and sometimes confronting ways. Recent works show highly stylised encounters between colonial/literary and archetypal Mexican figures, combining beautiful facture with potent symbolism. Characters such as Malcolm Lowry's fictional Geoffrey Firmin (from *Under the Volcano*), explorer/artist J.M. Rugendas and other 'nomads' are depicted in complex allegorical tableaux.

Galguera also represents Briton Damien Hirst, who has lived and worked in Mexico on and off for years, and we attended the launch of his exhibition *Dark Trees*. The artist spent less than ten minutes at the opening, but the queues to get in caused a minor traffic jam. Hirst excites a high degree of cynicism, but these large 2007 oil paintings are rather good, and his recurrent skulls and shark's jaws seemed appropriate to Mexico. The stratospheric prices seemed no impediment to willing buyers, a reminder that the wealthy in Mexico are indeed stratospherically so.

Death is not an especially surprising topic in Mexico. Teresa Margolles, represented by edgy DF gallery Labor, was Mexico's representative at the 2009 Venice Biennale, and her art explores many aspects of death, from the morgue to the dissecting room to the violence-ridden streets. Her concern is 'not so much directly with the remains of bodies but rather with the traces of



life, with shrouds, burial and memory, and with the way a violent act shatters human networks and affects them at various levels'. At MACO she exhibited photographic documentation from her Venice installation *What Else Could We Talk About?*, inspired by the narco-slaughter in the country's north, where Margolles grew up. She sent volunteers to execution sites to mop up the blood of victims with various fabrics including national flags, then displayed them in the elegant Venetian salons, floated the cloths into the ocean at the Lido, and in another action draped them on the exterior of the US pavilion in the Giardini.

An earlier work, *Escombro* (Rubble) commemorates those killed in the 2008 earthquake in Sechuan, China. A fragment of wood, picked up by the artist there, is mounted on a golden pyramid on which is engraved the number of displaced, missing and dead people. Margolles's highly political practice delivers work of elegiac delicacy.

The global resurgence of drawing is a widely-noted phenomenon, however this seems less evident in Mexico. At the well-heeled Gallery Luis Adelantado (branches in Spain and Mexico), the work of young Mexican Emilio Valdés stood out for just this reason. Valdés's large monochromatic mixed-media drawings of hybrid coyote/men were arresting for their graphic confidence, simplicity and beautiful quality of line. His past practice appears to be very much drawing-based, with echoes of Raymond Pettibon, but an intriguing new series of video works explores the man/beast relationship in another medium, with mixed success.

Art fairs are primarily sales vehicles, so who can blame galleries for dragging out the entire stock room for display? A few galleries resisted this tendency, but it was the curated ZONA MACO SUR section which provided the most satisfaction, featuring one artist per exhibit. Standouts were Adrián Rojas (Ruth Benzacar Gallery, Buenos Aires), Yonamine (Cristina Guerra Gallery, Lisbon), and Venezuelan Luis Romero's installation *Night* consisting of just the celestial elements of numerous national flags, with all colour and other symbols removed.

Also worth noting were Nicolás Bacal (Alberto Sendrós Gallery, Buenos Aires), Félix Curto (OMR Gallery, DF), Reinaldo Sanguino (Dean Project, NY), Jimmy Durham, Dr Lakra, Gabriel Orozco, Damián Ortega (Kurimanzutto, DF), and quirky Canadians Neil Farber and Michael Dumontier (Perugi, Padova). Two brave Japanese galleries were the only representatives from the entire Asia Pacific region, and Director Zélika García has a simple message for



1/ Daniel Lezama, *Autoretrato como J. M. Rugendas (Self portrait as J.M. Rugendas)*, 2008, oil on linen, 150 x 100cm. Image courtesy Galería Hilario Galguera.

2/ Teresa Serrano, *Mulato*, 2009, neon, variable dimensions. Image courtesy EDS Galería.

3/ Teresa Margolles, *What Else Could We Talk About?*, 2009, floating flag, C-print, 80 x 56cm. Image courtesy Labor.

4/ Luis Romero, *Noche (Night)*, embroidered textiles, dimensions variable. Photograph by Suwon Lee.

Australian gallerists: 'Come, see, exhibit.'

Mexico City also has some very fine public museums, and its incomparable Museo Nacional de Antropología, covering ten or so millennia of Mesoamerican culture, is an awe-inspiring reminder of the depth of the Mexican visual legacy. The Palacio de Bellas Artes, the Museo de Arte Moderno, the recently re-opened Museo Rufino Tamayo and the Museo Universitario Arte Contemporáneo (MUAC) constitute a foursome of contemporary art institutions with extensive collections, all hosting major temporary exhibitions, with a special mention for MUAC's current Felix Gonzalez-Torres (Cuba/USA) retrospective *Somewhere/Nowhere*. Arguably the most impressive work of all can be seen for free in the many public buildings adorned by the great muralists Diego Rivera, David Siqueiros and José Orozco. And above it all floats Saint Frida, her likeness as ubiquitous and iconic as the Mona Lisa, a *Virgen* for our times, to millions of people an embodiment of all that is essentially Mexican in art. A sentimental visit to her Casa Azúl (the Blue House, now the Frida Kahlo Museum in the bohemian southern suburb of Coyoacán) left me musing at the mystery of why some art resonates in this way across time and culture.

Looking at her little bed (with mirror), her kitchen, her studio, I reflected that this modest and obsessive woman would never in her wildest dreams have imagined that she would come to define the art of a nation.

David Corbet is an artist and writer with a particular interest in 'southern' art, particularly from Latin America, South Africa and Indigenous Australian art.