



MEXICO, ACCORDING TO MR HUGO

Like all his other exhibitions, you can be sure that photographer Pieter Hugo's latest will both exhilarate and exasperate, writes **Sean O'Toole**

Pieter Hugo is currently exhibiting 38 photos he made during four mescal-fuelled trips to Mexico over the last two years. One of these photos, from his exhibition, *La Cucaracha*, at Stevenson Gallery in Cape Town, depicts a group of garbage collectors re-enacting a scene from a famous painting in Mexico City. Hugo met the eight men at a market in the southern state of Oaxaca. The painting

they mimic has an oblique South African connection.

Produced by Communist artist David Alfaro Siqueiros, *From the Dictatorship of Porfirio Díaz to the Revolution* (1957-65) depicts the mass struggle against Mexican dictator Porfirio Díaz. Hugo's 2018 photo, *After Siqueiros*, quotes a scene from the painting in which a throng of moustached men, some wearing hats, hold aloft a dead revolutionary.

Porfirio Díaz's corrupt government was toppled in 1911, in part due to a northern rebellion led by reformist politician

Francisco I Madero. One of Madero's key advisers was the former Boer general, Ben Viljoen, who settled in Chihuahua on the fluid Mexico-US border.

But this fragment of Afrikaner history is not what attracted Hugo to the painting, or indeed Mexico.

In 2016, Hugo met Francisco Berzunza, a former Mexican cultural attaché to SA, who invited him to make new work in Mexico. On his first visit, Berzunza took Hugo to various museums in Mexico City, including Chapultepec Castle, where the Siqueiros painting is installed.

"We spent hours looking at the museums and chatting," recalls Berzunza. "He was intrigued at how the Mexican state had such a strong role at creating an image of the country after the revolution."

Later, in Oaxaca de Juarez, where artist Francisco Toledo's activism has created an extraordinary network of museums, libraries and indigenous gardens, Hugo spent entire days browsing books. Hugo's exhibition evidences his over-the-top enthusiasm for Mexico. This relish was visceral as much as intellectual.

Like Hollywood rebel Dennis Hopper during his wilderness years in Mexico, Hugo fully immersed himself into Mexican culture. His body now even carries a mark of remembrance, courtesy of celebrated tattooist Dr Lakra. But it is Hugo's photography – not his brawny, inked-up body – that is currently on display.

Hugo's vivid portraits and still lifes were made in three locations: the northern desert of Hermosillo and the nation's capital, Mexico City, and the mountainous southern states of Oaxaca and Chiapas, where precolonial customs and revolutionary ideas intermingle.

While geographically roaming, Hugo's

His exhibition includes a portrait of a tattooed sex worker who plies her trade away from the picturesque tourist district of Oaxaca de Juárez. The three portraits of elderly men wearing elaborate female dress describe members of a local non-binary gender originating within Zapotec culture known as muxe.

Local photographer Jalil Olmedo, a kindred spirit in photography as well as hell raising, enabled many of these encounters.

Hugo's photography has always been characterised by its remarkable access – most famously into a community of Nigerian herbalists who use wild animals (hyenas, baboons, snakes) to enhance their sales pitch. Wed with a superlative technique and loose fidelity to the truth, his photographs of Nollywood actors, Beijing hipsters and Los Angeles ruffraff have proven exhilarating to some, exasperating to others.

Tamar Garb, a London-based South African art historian and curator who has tracked Hugo's work for nearly a decade, has written how his ostensibly documentary photos reject the understated mode of reportage in favour of "confrontational and declarative statements".

"Hugo never looks surreptitiously," Garb wrote in 2011. "Photographing people, for him, involves elaborate negotiation, contract and collaboration. It is a social transaction – often fraught and requiring intermediaries and interlocutors – that prefigures the setting up of the shot."

One of the first portraits Hugo made in Mexico depicts a man with chiselled features wearing a crown of thorns. He is not named. At a public conversation in Oaxaca last November, Hugo told Garb that the man was an actor. He was performing in



Above, from left: Muxe Portrait, Mexico; Muxe Portrait blue ribbon; Muxe Portrait hoop earrings.

Top left: Black Friday. Left: The Snake Charmer. Photographs © Pieter Hugo. Courtesy of Stevenson, Cape Town and Johannesburg/ Yossi Milo, New York/ Priska Pasquer, Cologne

subject matter obliges its patron – Berzunza requested the photographer make work about "sex and mortality".

In Hermosillo, Hugo posed a man naked in the sun with a yellow Burmese python. He also portrayed a shirtless man in front of a flowering bougainvillea. This young man is offered as an asylum seeker, although Hugo's captions often play games with the truth. A man pictured naked astride a donkey in the town of Oaxaca de Juárez is offered as Don Quixote. Hugo met his chivalric knight-errant in a local mescal bar.

Hugo's beguiling photos are saturated with historical art references.

His series include a portrait of a naked lawyer from Mexico City reclining on a settee beneath a knock-off of a rococo tapestry by French artist François Boucher. A portrait of two naked women, one of them tweaking the other's nipple, quotes *Gabrielle D'estrees and one of her Sisters*, a French painting from 1594 by an unknown artist of the Fontainebleau School.

Death gets some airtime too. In Oaxaca, he photographed a grisly scene of a corpse at a medical school, while in Hermosillo earlier this year he staged the burning of a corpse. It resembles a narco-murder.

The violent energy of fire courses through Hugo's exhibition. There is a photo of a burning cactus. The image is utterly compelling but also a form of cheap theatrics. Hugo is at his best looking at strangers.

a passion play – a Catholic re-enactment of Christ's last days – in an Oaxaca prison.

During this talk, which prefaced a joyous festival of South African art organised by Berzunza, Hugo stated: "I want the work to speak to its environment." He went on to describe Mexico as "flamboyant, garish and loud".

This spur-of-the moment description is clarified in his new exhibition.

"Mexico has a particular ethos and aesthetic; there is an acceptance that life has no glorious victory, no happy ending," writes Hugo in an exhibition statement.

"Humour, ritual, a strong sense of community and an embrace of the inevitable make it possible to live with tragic and often unacceptable situations."

Alongside humour and ritual, Hugo's new photos contain ample cliché.

"I am drawn to the fabulousness of the banal and the banality of the exotic," says Hugo.

So he photographed dwarves and a naked woman wearing a floral garland, also an unsmiling man with painted, sad-clown face. Clowns, like naked women, are a cliché.

Hugo's ability to mobilise formula, to creatively weaponise exhausted poses and hackneyed subjects, makes his work unavoidable, compelling too.

Pieter Hugo's exhibition, *La Cucaracha*, is on at Stevenson Gallery, Cape Town, until October 5