

The big picture  
Pieter Hugo



Sean O'Hagan

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## The big picture: Pieter Hugo turns his camera on Mexico



The Wedding Gift, Juchitán de Zaragoza, 2018 by Pieter Hugo. Photograph: Pieter Hugo

**Pieter Hugo's** new series, *La Cucaracha* (The Cockroach), named after a traditional song made popular during the Mexican revolution, grew out of a visit to the country in 2018. He was invited there by a curator whose stipulation was that he make work on the theme of sex and mortality.

"Mexico's anarchic, visceral energy got under my skin and sucked me in," he recalls. "There is an acceptance that life has no glorious victory, no happy ending. Humour, ritual, a strong sense of community and an embrace of the inevitable make it possible to live with tragic and often unacceptable situations."

Hugo's approach shifted accordingly to reflect the flamboyance and gritty ordinariness of life there, his images filled with vibrant colours and often mysterious symbolism. This portrait is a case in point. Entitled *The Wedding Gift*, it shows a young bride in Juchitán de Zaragoza cradling an iguana, a creature considered a symbol of patience, understanding and kindness in Mexico. Conversely, the elaborately competitive mating rituals performed by the male of the species – head-bobbing, nudging, biting and even changing colour – have been mimicked in local song and dance, including a famous traditional ballet, La Iguana de Guerrero.

Whatever the symbolism, the young woman seems perfectly at ease holding a lizard in her lap, her direct-to-camera gaze giving little away. Hugo is also noncommittal, refusing to reveal her age or comment on what he calls “the iguana tableau”. From the start, Hugo's work has been characterised by degrees of ambiguity: his most famous series, *The Hyena and Other Men*, shot with an itinerant troupe of street performers and their captive beasts in Nigeria. His approach, which merges documentary, street photography and staged portraiture, has led to accusations that he exoticises, even exploits, his subjects, though his photographs are often created through sustained creative collaboration with his sitters.

In his Mexican portraits and landscapes, about to go on show at a London gallery, the mood moves between the heightened everyday and the grotesque: weatherbeaten peasants in work clothes, a woman dressed like Frida Kahlo, corpulent nudes, blood-covered faces and a man wearing a crown of thorns. Nothing is ever entirely what it seems, the complex nature of Mexican culture reflected through an outsider's eyes as a mixture of ritual, role-playing and various degrees of exaggerated reality. “I am drawn,” says Hugo, “to the fabulousness of the banal and the banality of the exotic.” In Mexico, he found his perfect location.

*Pieter Hugo: La Cucaracha* is at Huxley-Parlour Gallery, London, W1 from 19 Feb to 14 Mar

[https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2020/feb/02/pieter-hugo-la-cucaracha-mexico-the-big-picture?CMP=share\\_btn\\_fb&fbclid=IwAR2IHLmzhs0KmbDxnb2-9lFjwXb5rP7F7t5tM9vFjPjqNn4i85E\\_QyqqQJc](https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2020/feb/02/pieter-hugo-la-cucaracha-mexico-the-big-picture?CMP=share_btn_fb&fbclid=IwAR2IHLmzhs0KmbDxnb2-9lFjwXb5rP7F7t5tM9vFjPjqNn4i85E_QyqqQJc)