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## PIETER HUGO

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### CONSTRUCTED REALITIES

Studio photos: Karl Rogers

Cape Town. Looking at Pieter Hugo's photographs often makes you feel uncomfortable. You do not really want to look at them, but feel attracted none the less. This fascination extends to every one of his famous series of works, such as *Looking Aside*, *Permanent Error*, *The Hyena & Other Men* or *La Cucaracha*, his current project. What is so captivating about these pictures? During our conversation I am trying to find out. We meet in his in Cape Town studio.



f.l.t.r.: Thami Mawe, Johannesburg, 2003, from the Series *Looking Aside*, 2004-2005, ©Pieter Hugo; David Akore, Agbogbloshie Market, Accra, Ghana 2010, from the Series *Permanent Error*, 2010, ©Pieter Hugo; Abdullahi Mohammed with Mainasara, Lagos, Nigeria, 2007, from the series *The Hyena & Other Men*, ©Pieter Hugo (all images: courtesy, PRISKA PASQUER, Cologne)

At first glance, because of his height and build, Pieter Hugo appears intimidating. But, with his wide, welcoming smile and the inviting gesture, asking me inside, he quickly dispels my initial apprehension. To get to the studio, we walk through his own printing workshop which is extremely busy. When we get to his studio, I am able to take a first look around during the initial small talk. In particular the three photographs in my field of vision impose themselves on me. They show a cactus on fire, the portrait of a haggard, furrow-faced man, who stares boldly out of the picture, and a killed animal at the side of the road. As usual – not exactly scenes that strike you as optimistic. I ask him if these are motifs from his recently completed *La Cucaracha* project.



Views of the studio



Hugo: *Only the one with cactus on fire. We are currently busy preparing for the imminent exhibitions in Cape Town [Stevenson Gallery], Cologne [Priska Pasquer] and New York [Yossi Milo Gallery]. This means making choices and determining the dimensions.*

What does this involve?

*The project was preceded by the Crossing Night group exhibition in Mexico. At the invitation of the curator Francisco Berzunza I developed a series of works for the show. His only brief to me was that the work be about sex and mortality. I was immediately captivated by the country. I wanted to explore it further, which ultimately resulted in another four trips within a space of two years. La Cucaracha is the result.*

How did you approach this assignment? Normally, you follow your own intuition.

Hugo: *Yes, that is correct. I usually get inspiration for a new project from pictures which I come across in magazine articles or documentation. But the approach is always similar. I travel to the place of action and get a first, largely visual impression; I look at the surroundings, the people and their living conditions. This leads me to an analysis of content. In Mexico, it was different. There, I first had a closer look at muralism, the monumental murals which were created for public spaces in the nineteen twenties after the Mexican revolution. I looked at famous works by Diego Rivera and David Alfaro Siqueiros and thought about them.*

And what was the outcome?

Hugo: *There were various aspects which fascinated me about this art form. One was that it was developed by revolutionaries, who also completed it. The other was that the picture tells several stories simultaneously, for which purpose a meta level was specifically created. I became aware that it is exactly the opposite of photography, which usually reflects only one single moment. The fact that Siqueiros in particular motivated me to once again reverse the process. This picture is the result.*



Picture above top right: Scene from the painting by David Alfaro Siqueiros; Picture bottom right: *After Siqueiros*, Oaxaca de Juárez, 2018, ©Pieter Hugo, courtesy PRISKA PASQUER, Cologne

The reference image and its new interpretation appear on his screen. Protest and action on the faces of the workers in the mural of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, more resignation on the faces of the workers in the photograph of Mexico today.

Are they actors, as so often in your pictures?

Hugo: *No, in this case they are street sweepers who I approached at a market. What was good about that was that I did not need to explain anything. Every Mexican knows the painting. In nine cases out of ten the attempt to work with amateurs fails. Fortunately, in this case it worked extremely well,* he replied laughing.

Every Mexican also knows the Spanish folk song *La Cucaracha*. Was that reason for the title?

Hugo: *The song reflects in many ways the conditions of the country. Just like muralism, it is associated with the Mexican revolution, because both rebel troops and government troops invented lyrics, in which important political figures, the events of the war and its effects were expressed in the music. New, caricaturing text variations still keep popping up. Against this background, I felt this title to be most appropriate.*

We look at more pictures. As is typical of Pieter Hugo, there are portraits, landscape photographs and still lifes. The reduced and clear structure of the picture is also typical, but the exuberant colours are not.



Examples from the *La Cucaracha* series: Images above f.l.t.r.: *The advocate at home*, Mexico City, 2019, ©Pieter Hugo, *Making pigments*, San Agustín Etla, 2018, ©Pieter Hugo, Images bottom f.l.t.r.: *El gato*, Hermosillo, 2019, ©Pieter Hugo, *Black Friday*, Oaxaca de Juárez, 2018, ©Pieter Hugo, *To have and to hold*, Oaxaca de Juárez, 2018, ©Pieter Hugo, *The wedding gift*, Juchitán de Zaragoza, 2018, ©Pieter Hugo (all images: courtesy PRISKA PASQUER, Cologne)



What significance do the surrounding space, an accessory or the colourfulness of a particular scenery have?

Hugo: *A great significance. I use those elements to compose the information for the picture, I create a context. My approach can be compared to that of a sculptor during the creative process. I add something, take it away again, experiment ....*

In these examples, do the particular persons or rather the typical features one associates with Mexico, as for instance the Frida Kalo floral wreath, exoticism, dogmatic Catholicism or drug-related crime, take centre stage?

Hugo: *It is more the play with clichés.*

In order to ultimately construct an unadorned picture of society?

Hugo: *That too. But not in the traditional sense. The depicted persons represent a role predefined by me in a reality constructed by me. Initially, each individual picture is self-explanatory. But the central aspect of this as well as all my other projects is the representation of the other, the outsider. In this series, the outsider existence – since Trump – comprises the whole country.*



Examples from the *La Cucaracha* series, f.l.t.r.: *Spoliation of Evidence*, Hermosillo, 2019, ©Pieter Hugo, *The snake charmer*, Hermosillo, 2019, ©Pieter Hugo (all images: courtesy PRISKA PASQUER, Cologne)

At the sight of the body on fire I feel more than uneasy. Nor is the snake, which appears to slowly strangle the naked man standing forlornly at the edge, particularly comforting. Of comfort is only the fact, that these are staged scenes. But it is the method of Pieter Hugo's staging which keeps engendering loud criticism.

How do you deal with this criticism?

Hugo: *It is exactly what I want. I don't create pictures which please, but pictures which want to provoke. Everything else bores me, is mere decoration and not art.*

Final question: What does beauty mean to you?



Hugo: *Features which do not reveal themselves as such at first glance. In Mexico, for instance, many people live under unacceptable conditions. But it is their particular ethos, which allows them to accept these conditions with humour, by adhering to traditions and with a well developed sense of community. This includes their specific relationship with death and an after-life. To me, all this encompasses a beauty that hides in the ugliness of everyday life.*

Is this what the viewer feels instinctively when looking at photographs by Pieter Hugo? Does the wish to look away, yet being voyeuristically glued to it, trace back to this hidden beauty? Or does it trace back to the search for the truth in the photograph? Often his pictures create the impression of being a documentary. I just managed to stop myself from asking *Is this genuine?* at the sight of the body on fire. It is a known fact that this truth is not even contained in documentary photography, because every picture is influenced by the view and the intention of its photographer. Where Pieter Hugo is concerned, it is not just the image detail or the perspective that tells his story, but the entire content of the picture. The circumstance that his interpretations of outsiders is based on researched realities, complicates a correlation. It is a mixture. What is relevant is that, by using the stylistic devices of staged photography, he succeeds in challenging the viewer to discover hidden beauty. Or put differently, he constructs realities which cause emotional reactions and therefore motivates us to deal with inconvenient topics to which we would much rather close our eyes.

#### FURTHER INFORMATION

... on the artist: <http://www.pieterhugo.com>

... on the exhibition *La Cucaracha* at Priska Pasquier in Cologne: <https://priskapasquer.art/pieter-hugo-la-cucaracha/>

... on his gallery in Cape Town: <https://www.stevenson.info/artist/pieter-hugo>

... on his gallery in New York: <https://yossimilo.com/artists/pieter-hugo/works>

TAGS: Cape Town, La Cucaracha