

It's not 'Mexican Halloween'

UNA Gallery is taking back Día de Muertos with performance art and celebration on Nov. 2

BY EMILY GREEN
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Having grown up in Mexico City, Portland gallery owner Mercedes Orozco fondly remembers celebrating Día de Muertos with her family and neighbors at the beginning of each November.

"It is the moment when those who have died in your life come back and commune with you," she explained recently as she sat in the front of her showroom on Northwest Broadway. She opened UNA Gallery one year ago to serve as an art space that highlights people of color, queer and femme voices.

Día de Muertos holds a special place in Orozco's heart. Her mother often organized the traditional holiday celebration in her capacity as a cultural liaison working with exchange students at the University of Mexico. When Orozco's family moved to San Diego, her mother assisted the Mexican Consulate in throwing a Día de Muertos event.

"The San Diego-Tijuana border has its own flavor when it comes to these traditions," Orozco said. San Diego's Old Town is well known for the city's annual Día de Muertos celebration.

But when Orozco moved to Portland as an adult, she was disheartened to find that representations of her beloved holiday were incorporated into Halloween: skeleton-like figurines and brightly painted skulls used as decoration without meaning. On Halloween, girls dressed as sexy señoritas with the iconic black and white face paint.

"I would call it the commodifying of our tradition," she said. "Halloween is an incredibly capitalist party in my eyes. They start advertising and selling Halloween stuff way before it's even October, and Day of the Dead, in contrast, to me, is so much about ritual and tradition and family and

unity and communion."

About four years ago, Orozco was living in an artists community on Northeast 81st Avenue, called Milepost 5, when her housemates decided to throw a Halloween event.

"They didn't want to be so cliché as to do a Halloween thing, so they were like 'Day of the Dead!' Which was infuriating to me because I feel like they are not related," she said. "I was like, no. This isn't like Mexican Halloween."

Now that Orozco owns and directs her own gallery, she wants to use it to reclaim the holiday and create a space where people of color can come together and celebrate it authentically.

The holiday began as a two-month-long celebration in ancient Aztec culture, but with Spanish colonialism, it was shortened to coincide with the Catholic holidays, All Saints' Day and All Souls' Day, falling on Nov. 1 and 2.

On the first night of the celebration, Orozco said, the souls of children return. This is known as Día de los Inocentes (Day of the Innocents) or Día de los Angelitos (Day of the Little Angels). Then on the second night, everyone else who has died joins the celebration for Día de Muertos (Day of the Dead) or Día de los Muertos in English-speaking countries).

"Your dead are coming into your realm and sharing dinner with you, so you invite people over, you talk about the people that you're celebrating — it's all with this sort of celebratory vibe. You are happy that they're here.

It's not like this scary death," Orozco said. Families prepare dishes their loved ones enjoyed when they were alive, and they create altars with trinkets and photos that remind them of the people they're celebrating. Each altar incorporates the four elements and has a series of ascending steps with an image or figurine of the Virgin or a saint at its crest. Along with



Mercedes Orozco, left, and Dinorah Santana, right, are organizing a Day of the Dead celebration at Orozco's Portland art gallery, UNA Gallery.

candles and sugar skulls, flowers are popular decorations for the holiday — especially marigolds, laid out to guide the spirits back to the physical world.

A special bread with a bone-like shape baked on top of it, called pan de muertos, is cut up for all to eat, with a slice for the altar, too, Orozco said. Poetry dedicated to death is read, and music is played.

During First Thursday, on Nov. 2, UNA

Gallery will throw its Day of the Dead celebration, called Día de Muertx, with poetry, music, tarot readings, energy cleansing and healing rituals, and live performance art from 6 to 10 p.m. It will also serve pan de muertos, hot chocolate and possibly dinner if additional resources can be secured. The suggested donation for attending the celebration is \$5 to \$10 at the door, but no one will be turned away

due to inability to contribute.

The gallery will feature three altars: one that's traditional, for loved ones lost; one to honor victims of social injustice, such as those who died as a result of police brutality or war; and one that honors artists. It's Orozco's way of keeping alive the tradition that is close to people's hearts and connecting the altars with the gallery's mission of social justice.

"If you want to do face painting and party and have some cocktail named after a sugar skull, that's for elsewhere," Dinorah Santana said. She's been helping Orozco organize the Nov. 2 event.

While Santana remembers the celebrations in Old Town, San Diego, the city where she grew up, she didn't really begin to celebrate Día de Muertos until her son was about 3 or 4.

"I started because it was a way for me to reclaim some of my culture that I have lost," she said.

Santana said the appropriation of the holiday, especially in Portland, has been a shock to her, as well.

"You see a lot of culture appropriation with Halloween — bringing in this art that's significant, and has symbolism, and bringing it in as a decoration," she said. "It's not an alternative (to Halloween). It's not the second choice or anything like that, and it's not to be edgy or hip. This is a real holiday. People celebrate it, and it's really important for other PoC in Portland to understand that we want to honor it so that they can come to our space and they can take away this magical night."

From noon to 5 p.m. Oct. 29, 30 and 31, UNA Gallery will open its doors to artists and collaborators as it assembles the show to receive art. Santana and Orozco want the set-up to be as communal as the celebration itself. Those who want to participate can bring photos or trinkets related to their lost loved ones to incorporate into one of the three altars or stop by to help with decorations and displays while learning more about the traditions behind the holiday. All personal items will be listed and cared for in order to ensure their safe return to participants.

UNA Gallery events prioritize people of color, and organizers encourage white allies to participate by helping out during the construction phase of the project or by contributing financially to the event. You can visit their Facebook event page to find out more. Search for "Día de Muertx at UNA."

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A woman has her face painted to look like the popular Mexican figure Catrina during Mexico City's 2015 Catrina Fest, which coincides with Day of the Dead. Catrina, or "The Elegant Death," was created by Guadalupe Posada in the early 1900s.



An altar is set up at Hollywood Forever Cemetery in Los Angeles for the 2013 Day of the Dead festival. People pay homage to their deceased relatives by decorating their graves and creating altars with trinkets and photos that remind them of their loved ones.