

TEN YEARS OF

# DÍA DE LOS MUERTOS

Maude Kerns Art Center hosts exhibit.

by Sylvie Pederson



PENSANDO EN LA MUERTE, ALTAR BY MITZI LINN.

after a Frida Kahlo painting. The altar incorporates most elements commonly found on altars in Oaxaca, where Linn lives part-time, as well as distinctive additions such as a photograph of the Dalai Lama. Linn's rich, colorful display is dedicated to Mexican friends and artists — some of them represented by a photograph or art sample.

Most personal is Rebecca Easton's altar to her mother, Norma Elizabeth Pineda. Beyond the traditional offerings, it is the deceased's handful of seashells, her beautiful collection of Spanish-language poetry books, and above all the poem she wrote, which was found in a drawer after her death, that move us deeply. The poem's injunction spells out the very spirit of the commemoration:

*Remember me with smiles and laughter  
For that's how I'll remember you all  
If you can only remember me with tears  
Don't remember me at all.*

The altar by Courageous Kids, a grief support program for children and teens, is also poignant. The altar and wall are filled with colorful artwork, photographs, poems and messages addressed to lost ones. Decorated disks dedicated to the deceased carry streamers with messages from family and friends. In one low-relief clay tile, a family van rides through a bright countryside landscape, evoking family outings with a lost husband.

The altar *In Memory of Martha Yamasaki* by Hannah Goldrich (best known as a jewelry-maker), Carol van Houten, Yayoe Kuramitsu and Irwin Noparstak honors their friend and fellow community activist. Yamasaki dedicated herself to the struggle for peace and justice after being interned as a young adult in a camp for Japanese Americans. "She was a woman of high simplicity and incredible elegance, very serene, with strong principles," Goldrich said. Though structurally faithful to the Mexican tradition, the altar is aesthetically Japanese in its sobriety and use of muted colors. Instead of marigolds, we find a bonsai and ikebana flower arrangement. Against the wall, a kimono in a delicate pink replaces Mexican textiles.

*Radunitsa* by Yuri Pantioukhin and

The Mexican celebration of *Día de los Muertos* (Day of the Dead) combines pre-Hispanic and Catholic customs and rituals to commemorate the departed. The celebration has a complex history and varies widely in style and form according to region, ethnic roots, social class, urban or rural setting, even from village to village. However, all versions share a similar spirit — not morbid, macabre or mournful but festive and playful, at times reflective. Death is confronted squarely, humorously and without dread.

As the two-day holiday has become more celebrated across the U.S., the grassroots art that accompanies the festivities has also attracted the interest of many artists outside the Mexican tradition.

This diversity is reflected at Maude Kerns Art Center's 10th annual *Día de los Muertos* juried exhibit. With artists from eight states participating and additional influences from Russia and Japan, "It's the most geographically diverse and most international show we've ever had," Exhibitions Coordinator Tina Schragger said.

## Altars

Mexican families create home altars to remember and honor their deceased with *ofrendas* (offerings), during their annual return as spirits. A table and crates are stacked in tiers, covered with cloth and surmounted with an arch of reed or other vegetation, through which the spirits return to find beautiful displays. The spirits are greeted with photographs of themselves; images of saints; candles; a profusion of

fresh flowers, particularly *cempazuchitles* (marigolds, whose fragrance leads them home and whose orange color symbolizes their joyful return) and *barro de Obispo* (deep red cockscomb); burning *copal* (a pine resin incense formerly used by the Aztec); their favorite foods (*tamales*, the spicy chocolate sauce *molé*, chocolate, tortillas, beans, corn, chili peppers, all kinds of fruit, and *pan de muertos* or bread of the dead); beverages (from water to *mezcal*); and any item of significance such as an

instrument for a musician or toys for a child. *Calacas*, skeleton figures, are often part of the decoration, sometimes involved in miniature party scenes that replicate the larger setting.

Eight altars created by local people, five of them collective endeavors, are on display at MKAC. Mitzi Linn's (see cover for detail) is entitled *Pensando en la Muerte* (Thinking about Death),

