

# Día de los Muertos

## Celebrating Day of the Dead

For the 11th consecutive year, the Maude Kerns Art Center is honoring the Mexican tradition of *Día de los Muertos* (Day of the Dead) with a series of altars and a juried exhibition of artworks by a dozen artists spanning the country from New York City to the West Coast.

If the range of media and styles is wide, so is the span of moods evoked by the various pieces shown.

The Mexican celebration of Nov. 1-2 has ancient, complex roots. Combining pre-Hispanic and Catholic customs, it is distinctive for its festive and playful atmosphere, without a trace of morbidity. Death is accepted without fear as one of the natural cycles of life. Rituals shared by the culture at large help mediate one's encounter with death and channel personal feelings into a communal experience with family members, friends and neighbors. Importantly, no age is excluded so children may acquire a healthy attitude toward death.

This celebratory mood, at once earthy and spiritual, playful and reflective, is present at MKAC.

Appropriately, the venue is a church building — the oldest standing in Eugene, now decorated for the occasion with garlands of brightly colored *calveras* (skulls) created by the Jefferson Middle School Spanish-1 class and a variety of *papeles picados* (cut paper), including some the colors of marigolds by Eugene artist Jill Cardinal.

Cardinal's other displayed works depart in form from traditional Mexican models but retain much of their spirit. Of her two altars, the one dedicated to her mother is personal and intimate. The other, created in 2002, is a community altar: a large papier-mâché church replica painted pink with blue and yellow accents. People are invited to pin on it messages or names of departed loved ones.

"My mother had never talked about my father after he died," Cardinal said. "When I lost my second husband and father of my children, I started making informal altars or shrines. This gave me a way to continue talking about him and relating to him. Then I realized there was a whole tradition of doing altars. I called MKAC and made an altar for my husband and sister. It had an interactive part, a tree where people could hang tags on. It got hundreds

and hundreds of tags! I realized there was a need because death is so unritualized in our society. So the following year, I made the community altar."

Gaily painted in bright pastel hues, Cardinal's tiny wooden boxes and her miniature papier-mâché altars, which she calls "home altars," almost always feature folksy, earthy, idiosyncratic representations of the Virgin Mary, as does her lovely gouache icon, *Our Lady of the Dandelions*.

"The archetypal mother is a recurring theme of mine," Cardinal said. "I had an intense Catholic childhood. Now I'm striving to provide an earthy grounding to that spiritual image. I think the Virgin Mary needs earthiness."

Michael Gonzalez' (Trinidad, Calif.) three delightful wall pieces, all entitled *Personal Power Place*, similarly unite earthiness — in execution and choice of materials — and spiritual intent. In both form and function they are a combination of miniature church and bird's house, created out of redwood or mahogany and recycled copper.

All comprise three parts. "Above is a bird's house that symbolizes the ethereal, the mind, the future," Gonzalez said. "The middle part is the most important because it represents the present. At the bottom, a box for mementos represents the past. I always put a little copper something in there with

my signature on it." For each compartment door, Gonzalez devises a different, ingenious copper latch.

A very different mood prevails in Kurt Brian Webb's (Palatine, Ill.) three woodcuts collectively entitled *War: Dance of Death*, the strongest artwork in the show. A perfect economy of bold, precise cuts endows the pieces with a quality of expressiveness that greatly enhances the satirical content. In these black and red stylistic parodies of war propaganda, red Death, lithe and supple, flirts with a stiff, none-too-bright Soldier. She teases, dances seductively, wraps herself around him, clearly enjoying herself. Webb sharpens his general message about the true purpose of war by reproducing in the background news articles about the current war in Iraq.

Webb's piece is powerfully complemented by Tina Schragger's altar, which is dedicated to the people killed in the war in Iraq. Inspired by the Normandy graveyards from World War II, with their endless rows of simple white stones, Schragger (MKAC exhibitions coordinator) used a thousand empty bullet casings to represent the dead American soldiers.

Schragger's installation is extremely striking in its sobriety and directness. The symmetry of its overall composition, the starkness on the top tier of row upon row of bullet casings erected on black cloth over a white altar structure, the simplicity of the lower tier with its simple bowl containing the remaining bullet casings flanked by red votive candles, the general economy of means — all contribute to give the piece a

formal classicism that befits the tragedy of lost lives.

Above the altar, Schragger placed one of the most expressive of Picasso's numerous versions of *The Weeping Woman* (*La Femme qui pleure*), painted in 1937 following the surprise German bombing of the Basque city of Guernica that killed much of its civilian population. Hanging from the ceiling, streamers of origami cranes provide a message of peace.

Two more altars deserve to be mentioned. Los Amigos de los Sobrevivientes, a local organization that provides materials and psychological support to victims of torture, built an altar dedicated to immigrants who lost their lives crossing the US-Mexican border. The altar conveys its social and political message with an elaborate, traditional display of *ofrendas* (offerings) of squashes, corn, fruit, bread loaves, tortillas, sugar skulls, drinks, flowers and votive candles spread over a three-tiered altar surmounted by paintings and flanked by smaller side-altars. Arches of bamboo entwined with flowers surround the altar.

For a personal, traditional Mexican altar, turn to Rocio Kimberley's sumptuous display dedicated to her two brothers. Brightly colored, woven cloth cover the tall three-tiered altar and side altar. Offerings include religious symbols, personal mementos and photographs. The traditional *calaca* (skeleton figure) appears as a lady in elegant hat and dress.

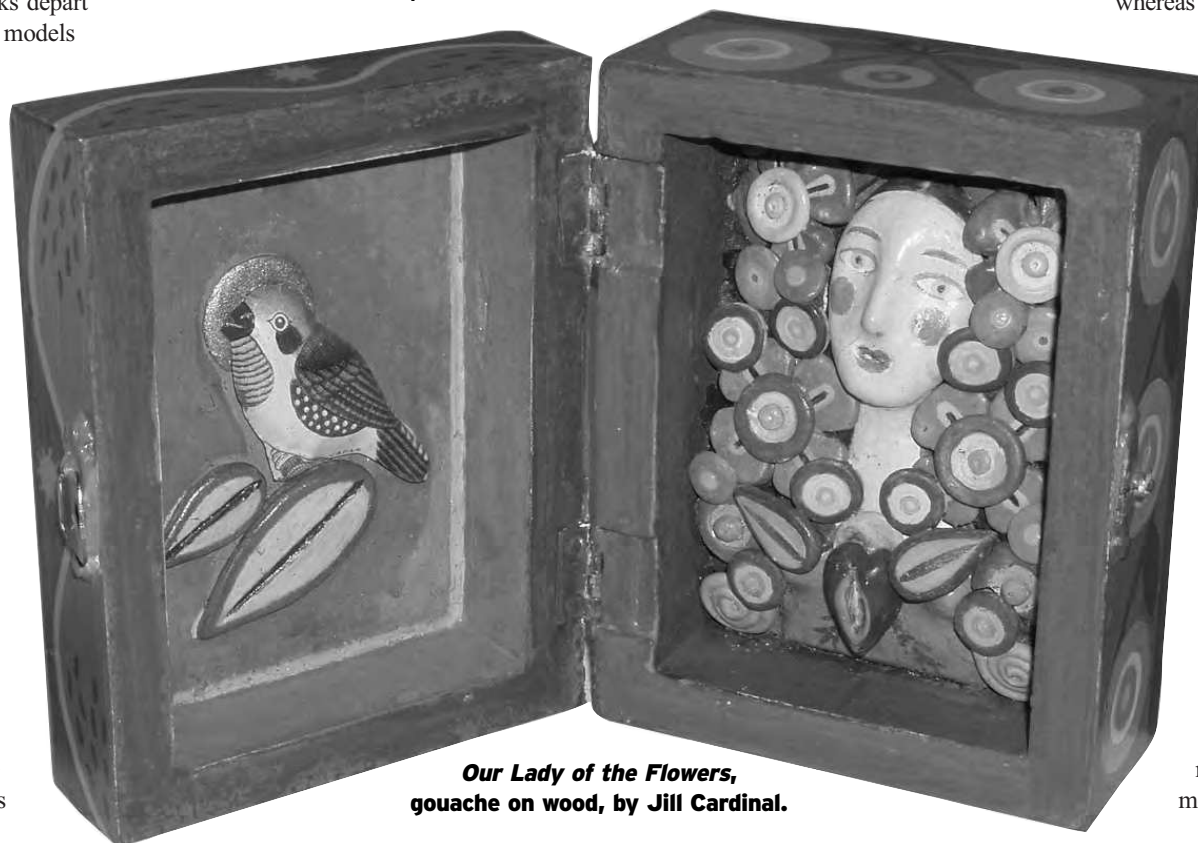
For a take on traditional playful Day-of-the-Dead imagery, you may look to Eugenean Erin Wilson's woodcut, *Sweet*, with its two skeletons dressed for a wedding, whereas Dottie Korn-Davis' (La Mesa,

Calif.) mixed media pieces give the purely playful a new twist. In *Sheepskate*, a roller skate is surmounted by a shoe fitted with cranium and vertebrae sprayed with festive pastel colors. Antennae give the assemblage a crustacean look.

Faithful to its own tradition, MKAC opened the exhibit on Friday with a family-friendly fiesta that included music by John Crider & Friends, dance by Ballet Juvenil Azteca, beer from Steelhead Brewery and delicious food — Schragger's own Cuban-style black beans and Mexican rice, as well as dishes contributed by Café Yumm! and Chapala Restaurant.

Docent-led tours for school children will be available for the next three weeks. I highly recommend a visit for all age groups. **EW**

### DÍA DE LOS MUERTOS, AT MAUDE KERNS ART CENTER OCT. 22-NOV. 12.



*Our Lady of the Flowers*, gouache on wood, by Jill Cardinal.

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