

# Death & Art in Culiacán

After years of horrific violence spawned by Mexico's drug war, a new generation of painters and artists is addressing the endless bloodshed—especially in Culiacán, home base of the powerful Sinaloa cartel. *Story & photos by Teun Voten*

**I**n the botanical gardens of Culiacán, a city in northwest Mexico with some 675,000 inhabitants, young girls pose for pictures in baroque purple dresses. The photos are for their *quinceañera*, or fifteenth birthday, which marks the ritual transition to adulthood. A circle of six concrete slabs has been placed in the grass nearby. At first glance, they don't seem like anything unusual—just another of the artworks on display in the park. It's only on closer inspection that you see the inscription: "Concrete mixed with water with which murdered people were washed in the morgue."

The work is by Teresa Margolles, an artist originally from Culiacán, who has incorporated into her pieces physical evidence of the widespread drug violence that has plunged Mexico into a dark circle of death. Margolles attained international recognition with her controversial installation at the Venice Biennale in 2009, in which the floor was continuously mopped with water mixed with the blood of murder victims. The evaporating water left behind a thin film of blood cells,



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which were carried away beneath the shoes of visitors.

"The morgue is my studio," Margolles once said in an interview. Her artists' collective is called SeMeFo, the Spanish abbreviation for the official Mexican Forensic Medical Service, which carries out most of the autopsies on the country's daily dead. Blood and miscellaneous objects collected at crime scenes are the stuff of Margolles's art. *De qué otra cosa podríamos hablar?*—"How can we talk about anything else?"—was the title of her piece in Venice, an unambiguous cry from the heart.

Margolles currently divides her time between Mexico City and Madrid, though she still has colleagues working in Culiacán. These include María Rosa Robles, a conceptual artist whose most famous piece used the actual blood-soaked blankets in which a number of victims were found; Lenin Marquez, a painter who specializes in meticulous portraits of the dead; and Fernando Brito, a photographer known for his haunting pictures of bullet-riddled bodies, often taken early in the day, in the soft and diffuse morning light.



**M**exico has always had an obsession with death. The most important national holiday is *Día de los Muertos*, or “Day of the Dead,” when the deceased are remembered and celebrated with appearances by La Catrina, an elegantly dressed female skeleton. There is also the cult of Santa Muerte, a mix of Catholicism and pagan symbols that has attracted a large following among the lower classes as well as drug traffickers.

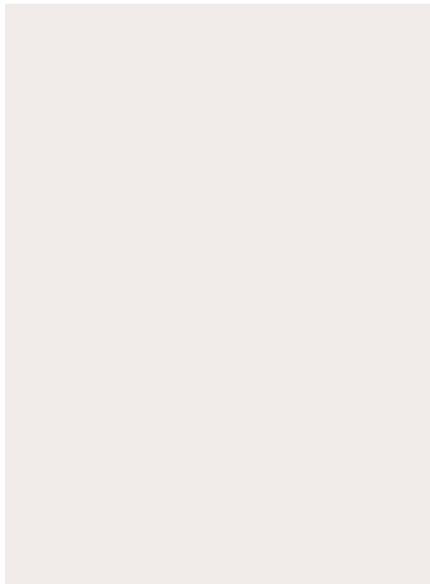
The cult of death has its roots in the country’s pre-Columbian culture. “We see death as a natural phenomenon for which we have respect,” says Robles simply. “Just as we celebrate life, we embrace death as well.”

*La Muerte* and *La Violencia* have been recurrent themes in the paintings of famed Mexican artists like Frida Kahlo and her husband Diego Rivera, who depicted the horrors of Mexico’s past in dramatic murals. They’re also present in the country’s cinema and literature, in the works of people such as the Spanish filmmaker Luis Buñuel (who later acquired Mexican citizenship) and the Nobel Prize-winning poet and writer Octavio Paz.

Western artists also share the same fascination when it comes to Mexico: The last dramatic scenes of Malcolm Lowry’s *Under the Volcano* are set in the small Mexican town of Quauhnahuac (a.k.a. Cuernavaca)—during *Día de los Muertos*, of course. More recently, the artist Damien Hirst bought a holiday home in Mexico, and one of his latest works—a skull embedded with diamonds—was inspired by the crystal skulls used in bloody Aztec rituals, during which human sacrifices were common.

Historically, death has always lurked just around the corner in Mexico, a country plagued by wars, revolutions and poverty throughout its long history. But these days, the bodies can literally be seen lying in the streets. Since Mexican President Felipe Calderón declared war on the country’s drug cartels in 2006, almost 50,000 people have been killed—more than total estimated casualties, civilian and military, in the US war in Afghanistan.

The world’s most dangerous city is now Ciudad Juárez, where 3,100 people were killed in 2010, out of a population of just over one million. Murder and mayhem in Mexico have become so common that the international media pays attention only in cases of spectacular horror, such as the firebombing of Monterrey’s Casino Royale in August of 2011, which killed 52 people, or the 35 bodies



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that were dumped on a highway in Monterrey during rush hour a month later.

But Culiacán, the capital of the Mexican state of Sinaloa, is a special case: It’s the birthplace of the most infamous Mexican drug lord as well as home base for the Sinaloa cartel, widely considered the most powerful drug-trafficking organization in the world. The cartel’s boss, Joaquín “El Chapo” Guzmán, is No. 55 on the *Forbes* list of the planet’s richest men, though he ranks No. 1 on the FBI’s “world’s most wanted” list.

Geographically, Sinaloa is a study in contrasts. To the west, there’s the long Pacific coast with its many inviting harbors; to the east, the wild Sierra Madre, the Mexican extension of the Rocky Mountains. Much like the Hindu Kush mountains of Afghanistan, the Sierra Madre are one of the most inaccessible places on Earth—which makes them ideal for marijuana plantations and illegal landing strips, and (most likely) as the hiding place for El Chapo.

Pedro Aviléz founded the Mexican drug trade in the 1960s with a marijuana business that would later become the Sinaloa cartel. It was here that El Chapo, his nephew, learned the tricks of the trade. Other successful interns included the Vicente Carrillo family, who later founded the Juárez cartel; the Arellano Félix brothers, who created the Tijuana cartel; and the Beltrán Leyva brothers, who split from El Chapo to form an organization of their own.

With just two to four murders a day, Culiacán is safer than Juárez—where, on a bad day, an average of nine people are

killed. But it ranks nonetheless as one of Mexico’s most violent cities.

“The rate of killings is down compared with a few years ago,” says journalist Javier Valdez. “But violence expresses itself not only in statistics; it also manifests itself in the climate of fear and terror that has gripped the city.” Valdez, whose best-selling *Miss Narco* chronicled the lives of the drug lords’ wives and girlfriends, is—like most journalists in the country—a cautious man. “Self-censorship has become the norm,” he admits. “We don’t mention too many names. We only write down 10 percent of what we actually know.”

And who can blame him? Every day in Mexico, mostly in the morning, the dead bodies of cartel victims are found in deserted fields, on back roads, underneath bridges, and in desolate industrial areas and vacant lots—sometimes with their hands tied behind their backs, bearing signs of torture, sometimes rolled up in blankets soaked with blood. The latter has become so common that a new expression has found its way into the rapidly growing dictionary of *narco* slang: *encobijado*, meaning “blanketed.”

In 2007, Rosa María Robles did an installation at the Sinaloa Museum of Art called *Red Carpet*, in which she covered the floor with a number of these blood-stained blankets, on which the museum-goers had to step. The exhibit gained international attention after the Culiacán public prosecutor closed it down and confiscated the blankets as official forensic evidence. “I knew I had made something powerful,” Robles says, “but it was never my intention to deliberately provoke [the authorities].”

The exhibit had begun to develop its own notoriety through word of mouth, but it was only after *El Debate*, the local newspaper, published two images—the first of a blanket around a victim, the second of the same blanket spread out in the museum—that a scandal started to develop. The authorities called in Robles and the director of the museum for some serious questioning. “They tried to scare me, told me that I could go to jail,” Robles recalls. “But I remained silent on how I obtained the blankets. That would have endangered the people that had helped me.”

In the end, Robles was released. “Even the authorities themselves realized that it was part of an artistic installation,” she says. “Later, the blankets were burnt for hygienic reasons. That was a shame.”

Asked if she worries about putting her own life in danger, given that the drug lords and their many hired killers might

consider her work a little *too* pointed, Robles replies with a shrug: “The *narcos* live in another world; they have no idea what is going on in a museum.”

Robles often collaborates with Fernando Brito, a photojournalist and *El Debate*'s photo editor. One of her pieces consists of a bed and table on which the blankets and tablecloth have been replaced by the front pages of newspapers bearing the bloody images of murder victims, meant to symbolize how mundane these crimes have become in the country. Another of her pieces is a version of the *Pietà*, with the Virgin Mary now cradling a blood-soaked blanket instead of the crucified Jesus. In front of the statue, a sequence of 365 images of dead bodies are projected, all of them photos by Brito. “I asked him how many murder images he could supply,” Robles says. Brito's answer: “Thousands.”

Brito's work for *El Debate* has received a World Press Photo Award for Foreign News—specifically his series of photos of people executed by the drug lords. Brito's pictures feature these dead bodies in unreal, beautiful and peaceful landscapes, sometimes in a soft and tender morning light reflected by thousands of dewdrops, other times under dramatic



sunsets or ominous cloud formations.

“Here in Culiacán, we are used to these kind of images, but in Europe they could not believe it,” Brito says. “Some people thought the images were manipulated compositions.” For several years now, he has been covering *la nota roja* (the “red news,” as the crime pages are called). “I try to give these images an extra aesthetic dimension so they won't have such an ephemeral character,” he explains. “Photos of the murdered are quickly forgotten here. Most think the dead must have been guilty themselves

and have only themselves to blame for their violent end. But, of course, not all victims are criminals.”

Brito now exhibits his work worldwide. “Because my images are not that hard and aggressive, they wind up in galleries and reach a completely different audience than the average newspaper reader,” he says. Even so, he declined an invitation to show his images in Culiacán. “Too dangerous,” he says. “It only takes one person who might be offended and I have problems.” And, in Culiacán, having “problems” is something of an understatement: It means you're a walking dead man.

At the moment, Brito is working on a series of portraits of the families of the dead. “I want to do something for Culiacán,” he says. Though it's a dangerous city, he swears he'll never leave it: “My wife, my friends, my family, all are from here. Culiacán is and will remain my city.”

Painter Lenin Marquez nearly became a fatality when he wound up in a firefight in which four people were killed. It would mark his life forever. “I went flat on the ground, and these bullets kept coming from all directions,” he recalls grimly. Now he paints realistic portraits of the murdered—some with scary grins, others with blank, empty faces.

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His most recent work features romantic landscapes done in a deliberately campy style—but instead of innocent shepherds frolicking or playing a flute, there are bound and blindfolded murder victims.

At the same time, Marquez insists: “My work is not a denunciation—I only observe and register.” He states clearly that he is not working in the tradition of famed Mexican muralists such as Rivera and David Siqueiros—social critics whose angry engagement was reflected in paintings that sometimes seemed over the top. Margolles, likewise, describes her work modestly as “an invitation for reflection.”

This new school of Mexican artists won’t paint caricatures of heroic workers fighting cigar-smoking capitalist bullies, as Rivera sometimes did, but instead uses more eclectic strategies to address what’s happening to their country. At the same time, Marquez becomes quite impassioned when he talks about the killing fields. “The violence has turned into a deep, dark, black subculture,” he says. “It has become a cancer that has grown and spread inside the whole country. It is a complete disaster.”

Asked if he expects any solutions, Marquez replies: “Not within five years, not in a decade—Culiacán is just a sample of



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what the future has in store for us.”

Javier Valdez agrees: “We are living under the terrorist rule of the *narcos*—a terrorism without ideology, driven only by a power-hungry greed.”

At the Jardines de Humaya, one of the cemeteries of Culiacán, you can admire another expression of *narco cultura*, this one created not by artists, but by the drug lords themselves. Massive, elaborate mausoleums—some three stories high, complete with staircases and air-conditioning—have become a status symbol for every self-respecting *narco*. Culiacán also has the highest rate of Hummers per capita in the country, though they’ve temporarily disappeared from the streets: Since the start of Calderón’s War on Drugs, most traffickers prefer to keep a lower profile. But the Hummers

undoubtedly still shine in the garages of the grandiose villas in the Bellavista neighborhood, where some of the palatial homes are adorned with half a dozen gaudy domes. This uninhibited display of wealth results in some remarkable examples of *narco arquitectura*.

In the meantime, at the chapel of Jesús Malverde, visitors come and go: petty criminals, tourists from Los Angeles, mariachi bands and some *narco* heavy hitters. Malverde is said to have been a street bandit who was hung in the early 20th century; the authorities refused to allow a burial, instead leaving his body to decompose on the gallows. After it fell to the earth, passersby tossed small stones onto it as a silent protest, resulting in a kind of burial mound. Later, a chapel was built on that very spot.

Jesús Malverde has now become a cult hero with Robin Hood status, the patron saint of criminals, outlaws and underdogs in general. With granite plaques, some people express gratitude to him for miraculous healings, while others ask the *narco* saint to bless their latest drug shipment.

Margolles also has her own plaque here. “*Gracias por Todo*,” it says wryly: “Thanks for Everything.” 🌿

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