

Artists' Biographies

José Jesus Chán grew up in Palenque, Chiapas, when it was a small town on the edge of the jungle. His vivid childhood recollections surface in most of his work, which often recreates the tropical fauna and vegetation that continues to fascinate him. The magic, myth and surrealism in his work are tools he uses to explain and understand where he comes from and the way he sees the world. He has received many awards for his prints and paintings. He has never traveled outside of Mexico yet his work is in private collections in the USA and Europe. He lives in Xalapa, Veracruz.

Alec Dempster, visual artist and musician, was born in Mexico City and grew up in Toronto where he received his formal art training. It is in Veracruz, Mexico, however, that his work became synonymous with *Son Jarocho* folk music and other aspects of local popular culture. Over a period of twelve years, his printmaking has been part of a multidisciplinary project combining research of local oral history; field recordings with elderly musicians; creating educational games; and performing professionally with established *Son Jarocho* groups. His priority has been to find ways for the prints to function beyond the walls of a conventional gallery. He recently returned to Toronto, where he now lives.

Daniel González began his art training in East Los Angeles at the age of twelve, as an apprentice of muralist George Yepes. Much of his imagery draws on his own family history as well as stories that have been passed on to him through an oral family tradition. Through his work he strives to preserve, remember and honour his cultural identity. He makes parallels between old stories and current issues such as politics, social inequality and race. He also tells his own stories through his prints in order to give meaning to his existence. He resides in Los Angeles but maintains strong ties with his family in Teul, Zacatecas, where he often went during vacations while growing up, to spend time with his grandmother.

Writer's Biography

Paul Gallant is a Toronto-based writer; he writes regularly on the arts for *Eye Weekly*.

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Mexico Inside Out

José Chán, Alec Dempster & Daniel González



Alec Dempster, *Izote*, linocut & woodblock print, image size 44 cm x 64 cm.

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Mexico Inside Out

by Paul Gallant

In his oft-quoted 1950 book of essays *The Labyrinth of Solitude*, Mexican writer Octavio Paz described his nation's temperament in direct opposition to its continental neighbours:

*The North Americans are credulous and we are believers; they love fairy tales and detective stories and we love myths and legends.... They believe in hygiene, health, work and contentment, but perhaps they have never experienced true joy, which is an intoxication, a whirlwind. In the hubbub of a fiesta night our voices explode into brilliant lights, and life and death mingle together, while their vitality becomes a fixed smile that denies old age and death but that changes life to motionless stone.*¹

Any scheme that claims to nail down the Mexican character as something quaintly festive is as wrongheaded as one that treats the Canadian and American characters as one in the same. The three countries are composites, admittedly composed of different ingredients and cooked according to different methods. No matter what Paz says, each country has its own detective stories and mythologies seeping out from inside: melting pot, mosaic and *mestizo*. In *Mexico Inside Out*, José Chán, Alec Dempster and Daniel González aren't necessarily asking what it means to be Mexican, although viewers will want to ask themselves just that question. With their different artistic temperaments and life experiences, the three printmakers explode the notion of an idealized Mexico defined by geography or a singular cultural narrative.

All three artists draw from a quintessentially Mexican style whose roots can be traced back to (at least) the 1800s. In his aesthetically and politically influential editorial cartoons, 19th century illustrator José Guadalupe Posada rendered the rich and powerful as *calaveras* ("skeletons") to mock their self-aggrandizements. In his lithographs and engravings, the otherworldly and the all-too-worldly came to occupy the same extraordinary visual space. Posada's image of *La Calavera de la Catrina* ("the skeleton of the female dandy") is still strongly associated with Day of the Dead celebrations both inside and outside the country.

Forgotten in his own lifetime, Posada's work was rediscovered in the 1920s and influenced Leopoldo Méndez, who in 1937 founded the renowned *El Taller de Gráfica Popular* ("The People's Printmaking Workshop") in Mexico City. Méndez was not content to merely tweak the powerful. His relief prints, simultaneously realistic and allegorical, were meant to fuel social revolution. It is hard not to see his dramatically charged treatment of the ordinary in the work of Chán, Dempster and González. In a post-NAFTA world, Mexican artists have not grown numb to injustice or war, or the power of the people to overcome them.

But to draw a line from Posada through Méndez to the artists of *Mexico Inside Out* would be too simple. There are too many detours. For González and Dempster, these are most obviously geographical. González grew up in the Mexican community of East Los Angeles; his childhood trips to visit family in El Teúl in Zacatecas state gave substance to the Mexico on the other side of the border. As European-looking as they come, Dempster was born in Mexico City, educated in Canada, then lived in Xalapa in Veracruz state, until he recently moved back to Toronto. González "looks and sounds" Mexican but has never lived there. Dempster has spent a good chunk of his life in Mexico, but gets double-takes when he says he's from there. (It's worth noting that music was a major factor in how the two artists made their first connection. Dempster was in L.A. playing with his Toronto-based band Café Con Pan, which plays the *Son Jarocho* style of music of Veracruz. González, who had just discovered the genre, which mixes Spanish, Indigenous and African sounds and rhythms, wanted to find out more, a curiosity which led to a creative friendship.)



Of Mexico and of elsewhere, Dempster and González produce work where the "elsewhere" permeates like light. In González's *Calaveras Maromeras*, spry skeletons tumble between two landscapes—one dry and rural, the other densely urban—but occupy neither. When they die, where will their descendants go to honour their souls on the Day of the Dead? The hip-hop graffiti of Los Angeles inhabits his forms as comfortably as German Expressionism. His lifetime may not have included a revolution in the traditional sense, but his *Bueno/Malo* series taps into the same defiant spirit that fuelled Méndez: The hard-working "Good" Indian must keep his head down and his back to the whip, while the Indian fighting for his land is labelled "Bad." The irony is as pointed as the admonition, but the humour contains, if not a solution, then a way forward.

Dempster brings an outsider's eye to traditional Mexican subject matter. In his *Lotería Huasteca* project, he produced a series of 54 woodblock print images for a *lotería* deck—a traditional Mexican game that's similar to bingo without the numbers. Everyday images become iconic on the *lotería* cards—a woman baking, a parrot, a shrimp, a front yard filled with farm animals. The hybrid nature of Dempster's cultural experience dissolves the veil our eyes drape over quotidian things. There's also a modern clarity and an unsentimental idealism in Dempster's work that one likes to imagine

comes from his Canadian-ness. In *Izote*, a young man ascends a yucca tree toward an izote flower. It could be a scene captured at a festival, but in the dizzying surreality of the tree's height, in the whirl of the surrounding structure and from the guitar in the man's hand, we realize it's a dream-like self-portrait, an attempt to reinvent identity by reinventing the landscape itself.

Raised in Palenque, Chiapas, and now living in Xalapa, Chán has never lived outside Mexico. His detour is by way of memory and botany, the images of his childhood and nature densely populating his work. In an artistic form where flatness is often seen as a necessity, Chán breathes depth into his beautifully framed



landscapes. We realize that traversing cultures is molecular and personal, not just geographic and political. By capturing precise emotional moments in time and space (the rain forest, the sea, the mountains) Chán taps into something universal—a childhood that lasts forever, a dance that never ends. The jungle can be the entire world. In *Los Días Difíciles*, the foliage envelops the women without overwhelming them; if there is a threat, as in *Expulsión del Paraíso*, which shows the abuses the Mexican army has heaped on the people of Chiapas, it most certainly comes from other humans, usually those with power. Chán and Dempster met in Xalapa, but with their shared sense of the possibility of utopia, of a harmony between humans and their environment, you suspect they might have also met in their dreams.

The fiestas which for Paz are emblematic of Mexican culture are not simply good times. "Social structures break down and new relationships, unexpected rules, capricious hierarchies are created. In the general disorder, everybody forgets himself and enters into otherwise forbidden situations and places. The bounds between audience and actors, officials and servants are erased."² With *Mexico Inside Out*, the arbitrary borders which scar North America are also rubbed out.

¹Paz, Octavio. *The Labyrinth of Solitude and Other Writings*. Trans. Lysander Kemp, Yara Milos, and Rachel Phillips Belash. (New York: Grove, 1985) 23-24.

²Ibid. 52.

Images: L: Daniel González, *Indio Bueno* (*Good Indian*), part of the *Bueno/Malo* (*Good/Bad*) Series, linocut, 3.5" x 3.5". R: José Chán, *Expulsión del Paraíso* (*Expulsion from Paradise*), linocut, 36 cm x 27 cm.