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A sideways look at revolution

By Elda Silva - Express-News

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With the centennial of the Mexican Revolution and the bicentennial of the Mexican War of Independence looming, Michael Mehl sent out a call for entries to Mexican photographers asking for images examining the watershed movements from a modern perspective.

The idea was to create a counterpoint for the inevitable historical exhibitions, says Mehl, founder and director of Fotoseptiembre USA, the annual month-long photography festival.

"Of all the work that I was sent, I chose a good amount of it which in my mind reflected different, if you will, idiosyncratic ways of looking at these notions of independence and revolution," he says.

"Slanted Glances" features work by a dozen photographers including Mehl. It is one of three signature exhibits currently on view at Instituto Cultural de M xico.

The work in the show varies in format, technique and subject matter. But — theme aside — the images are linked by a common thread.

"Irony is the main thing," Mehl says. "Because for most people in Mexico, the notion of revolution and independence is an unrealized ideal, and that is just across the board, whatever age group we talk to."

At first glance, Arturo Betancourt's "Reminiscencias De Un Pasado Revolucionario" ("Memories of a Revolutionary Past"), a suite of three sepia-tone pinhole photographs, appears to offer a romantic view of the revolution. Two are images of statues of revolutionary heroes on horseback. The figures in silhouette are surrounded by a fuzzy halo of light. The third image, however, is of the word "Revolution" in English painted in curling, fish-tailed script on a shop's roll-down metal gate.

"The only vestige of revolution — what he's saying by this — is what you can see painted on a sign somewhere," Mehl says.

The message behind Alejandro Jurado Prieto's trio of photo-based works, meanwhile is a tad more obscure. The artist superimposed hand-drawn illustrations over appropriated images of two nude figures — one male, one female — standing side by side. He pairs the Virgin of Guadalupe with the wrestler El Santo; the curandera Mar a Sabina with the revolutionary hero Emiliano Zapata; and two grinning calaveras (skulls) — one labeled "aqui estas t " ("you are here") and "aqui estoy yo" ("I am here"). The title of the series is "De Mil H eros La Patria Aqu  Fue," or, roughly, "This Was Once the Nation of a Thousand Heroes."

"In my mind he's using these archetypes that he scanned, photocopied and then illustrated on top of to create these mythical heroes that no longer exist," Mehl says.

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