Tlatelolco University Cultural Center

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The Venue

A huge tower, once the symbol of Mexico City's modernity, rises out of the area where history has been ossified: Tlatelolco. Built in the 1960s by architect Pedro Ramírez Vázquez, the Tlatelolco tower was home to the Foreign Relations Ministry for almost 40 years. In 2006, it passed over to the National Autonomous University of Mexico, which decided to use it to create the Tlatelolco University Cultural Center (CCUT).

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Photos this page by Patricia Pérez

Xipe Tótec by Thomas Glassford

The Light of Tlatelolco

The building is still imposing, and some of the area's residents do not yet really see it as a cultural center because of its strong governmental image since its inauguration. However, that perception has been changing little by little since it was covered in November 2010 by a new shining skin of light that illuminates its dark surroundings. This is the "Xipe Tótec" installation by Thomas Glassford, a geometric structure placed over the building's façades that lights up at night. It owes its name to the Aztec deity who took off his own skin to feed human beings (Xipe Tótec, "Our Lord the Flayed"), who is at the same time symbol of the corn kernel that sheds its skin before germinating. The installation covers the building's four sides with a veil of red and blue diodes, and, like a reminder of the way the site has been profaned by the different civilizations that have gone by here, Glassford resorted to the scientific concept of quasi-crystals that uses a synthesis representing both contemporary scientific studies and old aesthetic models and that is, finally, a natural molecular network.[1] This infinitely changing atomic pattern marks the complex's historic continuity.

Thus, we could say that the CCUT's illuminated skin will nourish Tlatelolco's inhabitants with light for the next two years, and at the same time serves as a lighthouse to guide them to that other form of sustenance: culture.

Barry Domínguez/UNAM Cultural Outreach Communications Department

Courtesy of CCUT

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Francisco Díaz de León
Between Reality and Fiction

I bought myself a suit, gloves, spats, a cane, and
even a monocle. I used to stroll through
Plateros, wearing sandals and white britches,
and other times wearing tails, leading a small dog.
They used to say I was mad, but that amused me.
Francisco Díaz de León

He was part actor, part eccentric. In his self-portraits, Francisco Díaz de León (1897-1973) dresses up, seems not to take himself seriously, and at the same time respects his own role in the images he has created. They are scenes and artifice, where the wardrobe and pose is theatrical, even mocking. The titles give us a clue: *Dressed like a Painter* and *Dressed in Rough Cotton, at San Carlos* depict two different characters interpreted by Díaz de León like a kind of unaffected representation of the stereotype. Nevertheless, the artist's image does not fade; the photographs portray him and his characters.

Self-portrait, Bulmaro Guzmán and Francisco Díaz de León,
38 x 27 cm, 1922 (digital print from vintage silver).

Photos by Patricia Pérez

Swordsman, 29.5 x 17.5 cm, 1937 (watercolor on paper).

French Minstrel, 29.5 x 17.5 cm, 1937 (watercolor on paper).

So, the CCUT Blaisten Collection temporary exhibition introducing us to the artistic and intellectual world of Francisco Díaz de León begins this way, with his self-portraits. Born in Aguascalientes in 1897, Díaz de León was brought up in close contact with craftsmanship, since his father had a bookbinding workshop. He studied sketching at the local art academy, and at 19, emigrated to Mexico City to study painting in the San Carlos Academy, where he later taught. He studied engraving, watercolors, and oil painting, but his restlessness led him to also work as an editor, designer, illustrator, typographer, and photographer. In 1938, he founded the School of Book Arts, later to become the National Graphic Arts School.

All the works in the show are linked; the interconnection among them can be divined in the topics Díaz de León used to cover using different techniques.

Worker, 21.1 x 14.5 cm, 1929 (stencil).

Indians on Market Day, 100 x 122 cm, 1922 (oil on canvas).

Man from the Coast, 19.6 x 16.2 cm, 1929 (linoleum print).

All the works in the show are linked; the interconnection among them can be divined in the topics Díaz de León used to cover using different techniques. The series of self-portraits contrasts with his engravings and photographs of the indigenous world, where what is shown is no longer the montage humorously presenting a stereotype (like in *Self-portrait Disguised as the People*), but his interpretation of reality. The engravings function as small extracts of what Díaz de León perceived in the faces of the indigenous, particularly the women: their roots in the land and their traditions, hard work, and their eternal role as mothers.

Whether staged or representing reality, Díaz de León's works are also an affront to society. In the show, the portraits and engravings of indigenous people are counterposed to the engravings depicting the concept of a liberal woman. Relaxed female nudes with their backs to the viewer and some of these together with the figure of the Devil are a symbol of rebellion.

This duality in the artist's work, composed scenes and images taken from real events, can also be seen in the section called "Military Matters," a series of photographs about war and violence that let the viewer clearly know that some of them are not spontaneous shots, but posed. This is the case of *Executed by Firing Squad*, an image of a young man at the center, surrounded by rifles aiming at him, which, despite being almost cinematographic, transmits the raw nature of a practice that does have a reference point in reality. *Mourning the Dead*, on the other hand, is a spontaneous shot made of lights and shadows and looks that show the tragedy of violence.

The "Landscapes" section represents an aesthetic pleasure that also attracts the artist, the delight he found in something as simple as the shadow of trees in a forest or a town fountain.

Lights and shadows are an essential part of Díaz de León's work. In the "Landscapes" section, they are the protagonists of the engravings and photographs, which at the same time complement each other, establishing a dialogue among them. This section represents the aesthetic pleasure that also attracts the artist, the delight he found in something as simple as the shadow of trees in a forest, a town fountain, the streets in Mexico City neighborhoods (Tlalpan, Coyoacán, Chimalistac), and the way that these scenarios are transformed when inhabited.

Finally, the show includes some stencils depicting workers and others with colorful figures that tend to be caricatures. Together with these are some examples of Díaz de León's editorial design work, like bookplates, vignettes, and ornamental initials that are examples of the versatility of his work.

Vignettes and large ornamental initials.

As a whole, the exhibition brings us an artist who represented and interpreted the reality of Mexico in the first half of the twentieth century, a man who mastered the techniques he used to create his work, and who resuscitated and disseminated the technique of woodblock engraving, and the arts in general. His work is that curious mixture of reality and fiction, and in the end, the viewer discovers that most of the time one nourishes the other. Díaz de León stages and portrays, acts and represents, and even has fun, but always with a critical gaze that invites reflection. VM

Notes

[1] Leticia Hernández, "CCU Tlatelolco, iluminado como un faro," November 23, 2010, http://www.milenio.com/node/5684368.

CCU TLATELOLCO

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Open to the public:
From Tuesday to Sunday
from 11:00 a.m. to 18:00 p.m.

http://www.tlatelolco.unam.mx