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Arts and Culture

Artist explores truth through piece that will wear away at Mia

Jonathan Herrera Soto aims to honor murdered Mexican journalists

Euan Kerr Minneapolis, MN July 19, 2019 9:00 a.m.



Jonathan Herrera Soto stands in a gallery on Tuesday at the Minneapolis Institute of Art, where he has stenciled the faces of 200 Mexican journalists who have been either murdered or gone missing over the last 100 years. Herrera Soto used mud as the print medium and intended for the images to slowly wear away under the feet of visitors. Euan Kerr | MPR News

A show of portraits of a host of murdered journalists opens at the Minneapolis Institute of Art on Friday. However, the artist who created the pictures plans for them to fade away in coming months.

Jonathan Herrera Soto is a thoughtful man with a gentle smile. Standing at the entrance of his show called ["In Between/Underneath,"](#) he looks out at the 200 faces he's printed on the floor of this large gallery.

Looking carefully, it's possible to see he's not used paint or ink, but mud.

"Every single image represents the likeness of a Mexican journalist who had been murdered or made to disappear," said Herrera Soto. "Mexico as a state is one of the most dangerous places to be a journalist on this side of the hemisphere, second only to Honduras."

He described Mexico as having "a 'narco-government' where there are very clear ties to the drug cartel and local and state government officials." Herrera Soto said his research found that the majority of the deaths and disappearances recorded in this artwork were the result of trying to expose the truth behind what was going on.



Artist Jonathan Herrera Soto says while the names of the victims are listed in the gallery, he deliberately made it hard for visitors to work out who each person is to emphasize how ephemeral a life can be despite terrible trauma. Euan Kerr | MPR News

Some of these people died in the 1920s. Most were killed much more recently. Herrera said there are actually many faces missing. The complete list of murdered and disappeared journalists is much longer. He showed off a large pile of stencils. They are numbered chronologically, but he pointed out there are many gaps. He only printed images of people he could find on the internet.

"They start off as stencils," he said. "They start off as sheets of Mylar." He cut them all by hand over the past year. He then used a sponge to massage into the stencil to print the portrait on the floor

Mud is such a simple thing, but it's loaded with metaphoric weight, and perfect for this project. You can make it into bricks and build things. But you can also throw it at people, and bury them in it too. It can last for centuries, or it can dry out and blow away in the wind.

Herrera Soto wants to explore truth and history through this artwork.

Herrera Soto wants to explore truth, and why people would be prepared to put themselves in danger, or maybe even get killed to tell the truth. He also wants to explore the impact of that on people far away in distance and in time. People, say, in a museum, in Minnesota. Walking across a floor.

“Simply by walking and interacting with the faces they slowly wear away under our shoes and we carry them away with us,” he said. “And it’s a good visualization of how, I feel, we as U.S. citizens or audience members visiting a museum of how we live and occupy space.”



Visitors are encouraged to walk across the piece and as the mud wears off on their shoes maybe, as artist Jonathan Herrera Soto puts it, they take a little with them as they leave. On that final day the artist will ritually wash the floor to remove the remnants of the journalists' faces. Euan Kerr | MPR News

The artist said after working with these portraits for a year, working with them every day, tracing and cutting out their stencils, it is good to see them out on the floor. He likened it to meeting up again with an old friend.

“Someone who I have spent time with, who I have to some extent caressed their face for periods of time,” he said. “It’s a very joyful thing.”

["In Between/Underneath"](#) runs through November, and will end with a performance. Herrera Soto will ritually wash the floor by hand, erasing whatever is left of the 200 journalists faces, removing them, and their truth, once again from the face of the earth.

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