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Tijuana artist Hugo Crosthwaite literally breaks outside of the box in new exhibition at Mesa College gallery



“The Rupture of the White Cube: an installation by Hugo Crosthwaite” is an exhibition on display at the Mesa College Art Gallery through Sept. 12. Pictured here is “The Rupture of the White Cube, 2024,” is an acrylic paint mural, site-specific performance/ installation where a panoramic window shows Crosthwaite’s “Línea a Tijuacolor, 2024,” a polyptych of 16 acrylic paint and color pencil drawings on cotton paper. (Photo courtesy of Hugo Crosthwaite and Luis de Jesus Gallery, Los Angeles.)



By **LISA DEADERICK** | lisa.deaderick@sduniontribune.com | The San Diego Union-Tribune

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Contemporary artist [Hugo Crosthwaite](#) has spent his career disrupting conventions, which includes his latest exhibition at the Mesa College Art Gallery. For two weeks, he's been engaged in muralism as performance, complete with a costume and opportunities for visitors (or, the audience) to interact with him while he works/performs.

["The Rupture of the White Cube: an installation by Hugo Crosthwaite"](#) features the Tijuana-born figurative artist's work in painting, stop-motion animation, and drawings centered around the beauty and personality he sees in his hometown (it's on display through Sept. 12). Another element of this exhibition features the narratives of the U.S.-Mexico border in his work, presented in a nontraditional way from what is typically experienced in a gallery space. A literal, 12-foot white cube was built inside the gallery, recreating the design of most current galleries that have been built as white cube structures, with a panoramic window allowing people to watch Crosthwaite at work during his live painting sessions. It's intended to disrupt the traditional exhibition experience, along with his stop-motion animation film, "Tia Juana, Mi Amor," and his series of works on paper that depict the people of Tijuana and their lives, entitled "Linea a Tijuacolor." On Sept. 9, Crosthwaite and exhibition curator and designer Smadar Samson, will be at the gallery for a special viewing and conversation from 5 to 7 p.m. Here, they each took some time to talk about the desire to challenge tradition and convention, and how empowering it can be. (These conversations have been edited for length and clarity.)

Q: How did this exhibition come together? Why did you want to do this?

Crosthwaite: I was approached by the curator, Smadar Samson, to do this project. She had this project, which is this notion of presenting a white cube in a gallery space, and she wanted somebody who could be inside of the cube and do a performance. She saw my work and saw that I have done these notions of muralism as a performance, something that I've been doing for the last 20 years. I've done this kind of project in the

Cuenca Biennial in Ecuador in 2014, and I've done it in New York, as part of my body of work, where I present these murals as a performance instead of just a mural. I go into a space and, in two to three weeks, improvise imagery on the walls without any pre-planning or any preparatory sketches. It's just me going into the space with a brush and a little can of paint, just improvising imagery in the space. She thought it was perfect for her idea of presenting art inside a cube, especially the idea that the artwork would rush out of the cube, would break away from the cube because Smadar Samson's concept for this idea of the cube was this idea of how art, for the last, I don't know, 50 years, has been presented in this notion of a cube. The gallery is presented as this white cube and how the artwork just adorns, or is presented, in this kind of sterile environment. She wanted somebody to kind of break away from that, someone who could do art inside of this cube, but then break away from this idea of this space being very sterile and kind of elitist. It fit really perfectly for me where I came into the space and I'm projecting this stop-motion animation on one side of the wall inside the cube. Then, throughout the walls of the cube, I'm improvising the city of Tijuana, this kind of make-believe world of what my idea of home is. I'm painting a bit outside of the cube, presenting this idea that, yeah, it's breaking the cube and it's breaking this idea of sterilization inside this cube.

Q: The gallery's description of this exhibition calls it "part love letter to his city and part challenge to the traditional gallery experience." First, how would you describe a traditional gallery experience? And in what ways does "The Rupture of the White Cube" depart from that traditional experience?

Crosthwaite: I think Smadar, the curator, referenced this idea of the cube as this very elitist space, so how we think about the presentation of art happening in a white space, in a white gallery, is a sterile place where it isolates the individual artworks inside this white space. It's like a convention of how we show art, but then this installation of "The Rupture of the White Cube" is breaking that by the mere fact that it's a performance inside the cube. I'm painting these murals here in the space, it's open to the public, so people can come in and they're looking at me working and they're interacting with me and they're seeing something that's being created on site. Then, I wear this shirt while I'm working here that has lettering on the back that says, "Hugo, Rótulos," which means "sign painter." I'm inside the space wearing this shirt, so the viewer doesn't know if I'm an artist or a craftsman, or somebody hired by the artist to do this mural. Even there, the concept of an artist inside of the gallery is in question because I'm a character, I'm not really an artist. You don't know if I'm an artist or I'm just some craftsman that was hired to do this because my shirt says, "Local sign painter," like somebody who was hired to. Even the concept of the artist is up in the air, and then I'm improvising this mural inside the space, which, at the end of the show, is all going to be destroyed. Even this idea

that artwork is immortal, this immortality that we're trying to give to painting a mural, specifically traditional muralism like Michaelangelo or Diego Rivera, the muralism in Mexico. Muralism has always been attributed to this idea of immortality. We paint these paintings to be there forever, for it to be enjoyed for generations. In this case, I'm improvising this mural in this space, but at the end of the show, it's all going to be painted over and taken down and destroyed. It's an ephemeral experience of people seeing me work here, but it's a performance. In that respect, it breaks this convention of the immortality of art.

Samson: To understand the context of this exhibition, I will just need to talk a little bit about the idea of the white cube gallery origination. Every city in the world has got a white cube gallery. Most contemporary art galleries have the same architectural design, what we call "traditional design," that was developed more than 100 years ago. It was a critical response to the 19th century salon in Europe, where heavily framed masterpieces were densely hung at different heights, with different heavy frames from floor to ceiling, in galleries. The new notion was that artwork needs breathing space in order to speak for itself. With the emergence of abstract art and the influence of the Bauhaus style architecture at the beginning of the 20th century (the Bauhaus architecture has got tremendous influence on the design of the white cube gallery), the principle that took hold both in Europe and the United States were neutral, white walls with no ornamentation, preferably no windows at all, to create a pure, minimalist void in which works of art can be viewed without any distraction from the outside world. A timeless space with no social or political references; that was the original idea.

Critics started to voice their objections to the idea in the '70s. A very renowned critical essay by Irish critic and artist Brian O'Doherty. He compared the strictness of the white cube rules to those used for building a medieval church. Critics had been questioning not only the physical purity of this space, but its ideological concept claiming this timeless state, turning the gallery into a "limbo." Therefore, anything displayed inside the white cube gallery is being elevated with an aura of sanctity, just like in a sacred place, just like in a church. In such a limbo, other voices suffocate and many visitors feel alienated. Subsequently, many brilliant and provocative and innovative exhibitions started to take place in the '70s in non-traditional spaces, like warehouses and lofts and factories, and in nature, even. At the same time, artist groups started to challenge the power structures of the art world that obscured their political and economic dependencies that drive the art world. These critical views and exhibitions are continuing to take place today, but while the content of the art became less isolated and more receptive to social commentary, the design, the framework of the white cube gallery is still the default mode of exhibiting contemporary art throughout the world. It

is truly a powerful design paradigm, so I invited Hugo to rupture this paradigm, literally, in front of our eyes.

Q: How did you come up with this concept? What kinds of conversations did you and Hugo have?

Samson: Well, first of all, let me say that Hugo's prolific work is such a potent testimony to the culture of life at the border and his work defies any structural frame. I mean, he paints on walls, he paints on fences, on pillars, on ceramic sculptures, anything that could bear witness to his very evocative narratives. The idea was that Hugo would, over the last week, he was meticulously painting, first inside the white cube structure, the architectural landscape of his beloved hometown, Tijuana. He improvises fluently and his improvised painting resonates perfectly with the dynamics of the construction of makeshift dwellings and building in Tijuana, which is constantly fluctuating in response to the transient life at the border. With every new wave of immigrants and migrants and asylum seekers, a new room is added to another precarious hut that rests on another extension of another temporary house, and so forth. In the video projection inside the cube, we could hear the hammering of the lone construction worker, accompanied by the sound of music bands from different states that all congregate with joyful and traditional instruments. Like the city itself, the painting sprawls beyond its border, onto the pristine, clean, outside walls of the white cube. So, what we're experiencing is that the inside becomes the outside, and the outside can peer inside.

Q: Can you talk about the pieces featured in the show?

Crosthwaite: I have two pieces in this show—there's the cube, this concept of the cube inside the middle of the gallery where I'm showing a projection of a stop-motion animation that I did, entitled "Tia Juana, Mi Amor," which means "my love." It's playing with this idea of those, it's kind of like a riff on those films like "Paris, Je T'Aime" or "New York, I love you." It's a film that plays with this idea of Tijuana, the city I was born in and the city I came from. There's kind of like this love letter to the chaos and architecture and improvised aesthetic of the city of Tijuana. That's the primary piece that's inside the cube, which is this projection of this three minutes of stop-motion animation that's in a loop. Then, for the last two weeks, I've been improvising these murals around the cube. Outside of the cube, I'm presenting another piece that's entitled, "Línea a Tijuacolor," which is a series of paintings that are all lined up as a line that's on the opposite corner of the gallery. The city of Tijuana, also, is this idea of a city that's very much defined by

this geographical borderline that's there. So then, it presents the city of Tijuana with its people and color and cityscape inside this very distinct line that breaks the corner of the other end of the gallery.

The piece is 30 inches-by-40 feet that cuts across the corner of the gallery. It's kind of in response to what's happening in the cube, which is that all the imagery inside the cube is in black and white.

Q: What did you want to convey by having this line of drawings, this border in color, versus what the cube represents in black and white?

Crosthwaite: It was kind of like a visual response to it because when I first came into the space, originally it was just going to be this installation of the cube with my mural performance, but then, as part of the cube, we decided to build this panoramic window, like this line that also comes into a corner of the cube. As an aesthetic choice, I wanted to do something that would echo that panoramic kind of window that's in the cube, but on the opposite side of the gallery. Also, something that would be like a response to the cube, would be this work that would be in color, as opposed to what's happening inside the cube, which is all in black and white. Those were the main concepts of why I decided to do this "Línea a Tijuacolor," in response to what's happening in the cube. It also deals with this idea of concepts of the city of Tijuana, my personal ideas of how Tijuana is defined. Tijuana is a very young city, in a way. Very much defined by this borderline, geographical line of the United States and Mexico. Even my name, Crosthwaite, is a name that settled here in the Californias back in the 1840s, even before there was this borderline. Even for me, in my personal experience, my family is just a family that's been very much separated by when this geographical line suddenly came up, during the Mexican-American War. Also, this idea of, "What's your identity?" I was here first and never asked to be either Mexican or American. Then, it plays with this idea of that line of imagery that's very much restricted into this geographical line. Everything takes place inside this very strict line, the whole chaos and liveliness of the city of Tijuana with its people and streets and its signage and all of this. It's all happening very intensely limited by this very distinct line. It's also definitely referencing this idea that Tijuana is a city that very much has been defined by this borderline, especially after 9/11 where it became militarized, in a way. I remember the city being described as a wave of people that break that very distinct line of the border. Those concepts of how the city of Tijuana is very much defined by this geographical line.

Inside the cube there's also this window that reflects that line and how the imagery is breaking away from that line, breaking away from the cube. This idea that, yeah, we can

try to put geographical lines and places, but people will move. It's kind of like this basic right where we don't stay in one place, no? We like to spread around, to move and find greener pastures. You're never going to stop the movement of people, as much as you try. That's also one of the things that the line represents, the immigration concept of people moving. Americans themselves were moving from different places, from Europe and from other places, and came to this country; there's this fundamental freedom of movement, but in Tijuana and San Diego they're trying to stop that movement. It's kind of like a futile experiment, a futile endeavor.

Q: Can you talk a bit about the live painting sessions?

Crosthwaite: Basically, the mural that I'm doing inside the cube is referencing the stop-motion animation that I'm presenting inside the cube also. The whole film, and the whole concept of all of these murals, is this idea of the title of the film, which is like the "I Love You" films of a particular city. They were kind of commenting on these great cities, but the film is my version of those films, with me commemorating Tijuana. Nobody ever thinks about Tijuana as this great, universal, immortal city. It's a very young city, it's a very impoverished city, it's a very chaotic city. It's a city that's very much defined by the border. It's a very violent city, right now, very high murder rate. It's all of these things that you wouldn't think about putting in a film that commemorates this city as great.

In the film, what you see is this stop-motion drawing animation where I'm drawing and improvising the city of Tijuana-the different buildings and how they come about, how they're built. In the story, it references gentrification that's happening in Tijuana. It questions the notion of home, which is, for me, Tijuana is a home where I was born and grew up. At the end of the film, it shows the building of adobe structures, which references the architecture that was here before the city of Tijuana, back when the Kumeyaay settled here and were building structures in adobe. It's kind of like this love letter to the architecture of the city, like an architectural essay on the city of Tijuana. Of course, the mural is about all of this, about the city of Tijuana, the structures of windows and doors and signage and junkyards and tires. It's all around the space, like if the imagery in the video is just pouring out into the wall and now it's also pouring outside of the cube.

Q: From your perspective, how does challenging these traditional ways of displaying art empower you as an artist, serve the narrative of the art, and give power to the voices of others?

Crosthwaite: The thing is, I never intended to be an artist. I've always been drawing, all throughout my life. Drawing has always been the main motivation for me to create anything, so the practice of drawing that's being presented here is this celebration of this practice of drawing through stop-motion drawing animation, through the performance of the murals, to what's being shown on the line of imagery on the wall. It's all this practice that all comes down to my sketchbook, which is this daily practice of just drawing from life-drawing people, drawing environments, creating imagery. In a way, I feel empowered by this idea that through practice, I have a skill, like a musician. You practice the piano for five hours a day and in 10 years you master the instrument, so I mastered drawing, I mastered creating imagery, no? In a way, it's kind of in direct opposition with this idea of the artist as a conceptual guru, somebody who has the ideas and somebody else builds them. Here, I'm just a guy who's motivated to create imagery from my very own hand, from my skill, like a pianist or a violinist who masters an instrument and what you're hearing is the personal touch and technique that somebody has developed throughout the years of practice and practice. That's what you're seeing here, in this particular artwork, you're seeing somebody who draws, loves to draw, and is creating imagery from the city where they come from, Tijuana, and reinventing the city through my practice of drawing. Like I mentioned earlier, it's like a celebration of techniques, a celebration of the simple act of drawing. From there, I deal with concepts from the city where I come from-concepts of immigration, concepts of the violence in the city, this transculturalization and these issues of living on the border-but it's all being filtered through the artist, through technique, through the practice of drawing.

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