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Art in America

INTERNATIONAL • REVIEW

HUGO CROSTHWAITE

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San Diego Museum of Art

By Leah Ollman



San Diego Hugo Crosthwaite was born in Tijuana, Mexico, in 1971, grew up in the nearby town of Rosarito, attended college in San Diego and now lives in Brooklyn. As a child, he taught himself to draw using Gustave Doré's illustrations of Dante and Cervantes. In this case, biography has become esthetic destiny: his gorgeously realized work is fueled by both the chaos of the border region and a deep-seated predilection for epic themes.

The contents of these two absorbing shows spanned from the late 1990s to the present, during which Crosthwaite has worked almost exclusively in charcoal and graphite (on wood, Mylar, paper and canvas), extracting a complex textural and tonal range from the monochrome palette. Space in the earlier drawings tends to be more atmospheric—ashen, smudged, sooty—while lately, flat planes of black and white are common. Crosthwaite has looked deeply at Goya, Delacroix and Böcklin; now he's incorporating comics, too. He situates figures from mythology and the Bible in the everyday, and elevates anonymous contemporaries to the status of saints.

"Brutal Beauty," the title of the museum show, captures well the tight conflation of tough and tender in Crosthwaite's work. An element of violence threads through it, whether in the bruised bodies and flayed

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skin in *Bartolomé* (2004), or the guns within reach of the protagonists in *A Tail for Two Cities*, a large drawing completed on site at the museum, pitting characters representing Tijuana and San Diego in threatening but slightly comical confrontation. As an observer of people and his native city, Crosthwaite seems almost devotional. He doesn't glamorize or idealize either, but reveres their humble familiarity, their vitality and authenticity. In many of the drawings, Tijuana appears as a cluttered sprawl of rooftops, electrical wires, billboards and other signage, its inhabitants thick-bodied and plain-faced.

Two small, stirring graphite drawings from 2006 present thoughtfully articulated views of ordinary storefront restaurants. Within the architecture defining each place are small compartments that disrupt the spatial continuity and frame the images of two women, one partially nude and the other pensively turning to the side. The drawings often read like montages, fluidly joining descriptions of physical environments with penetrating glimpses of psychological interiority and vulnerability. Crosthwaite's exquisite rendering skills and sense of graphic immediacy enable him to pull off these shifts, to conjure scenes that are part chronicle and part dream, and convincing as both.

Photo: Hugo Crosthwaite: A Tail for Two Cities, 2010, mixed mediums on wood panel, 8 by 10 feet; at the San Diego Museum of Art.