

## ARTS | WESTCHESTER

## *Smiling Skeletons, With Lives to Lead and Issues to Raise*

By Susan Hodara

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THEIR limbs crisscrossed at wild angles, their mouths puckered around toothless gums, their eyes deep black pools the grinning skeletons in Nicolás De Jesús's etchings are busy. Some are riding the subway, some are meeting in a cafe or attending an art opening, and others, throngs of them, are gathered to partake in Día de los Muertos, the Mexican celebration of the Day of the Dead.

Visitors to the Neuberger Museum of Art can see these bony characters, along with their fleshy counterparts, in "The Irony of the Skeletons: Nicolás De Jesús' Amates," an exhibition of prints by the contemporary Mexican painter and printmaker. Assembled by Patrice Giasson, the Alex Gordon associate curator of art of the Americas at the Neuberger, the show presents a selection of the artist's work from 1990 through 2009.

All of the pieces are etchings printed on amate, a fibrous, taupe-colored paper made from tree bark that was used by indigenous societies in the pre-Columbian period to produce sacred manuscripts. Mr. De Jesús was introduced to his craft by his father, an artisan, in the Nahua village of Ameyaltepec, in the state of Guerrero, where he was born in 1960. "To know that my ancestors painted on amate during the pre-Hispanic era has made me value it," he wrote in an e-mail that was translated from the Spanish.



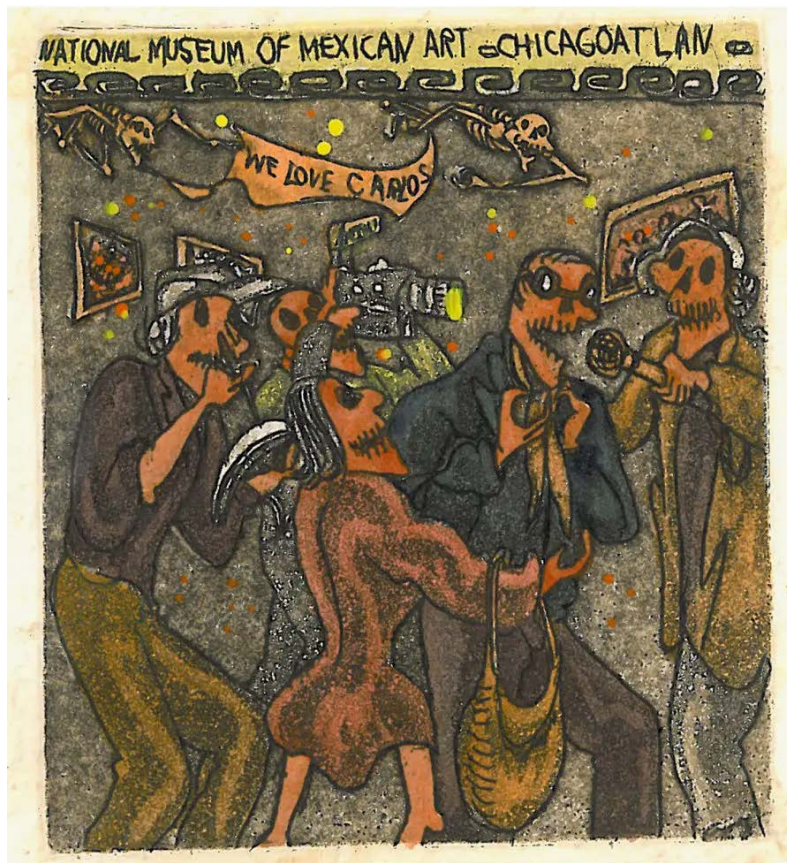
**DEAD AND ALIVE** “En el Tren,” etching and aquatint on amate paper, is among the works by Nicolás De Jesús in his show, “The Irony of the Skeletons,” at the Neuberger Museum of Art. Neuberger Museum of Art

Besides reveling in daily life and rituals, some of Mr. De Jesús’s skeletons address more troubling issues, like illegal immigration and the corrupting power of money. These exemplify the influence of José Guadalupe Posada, a 19th-century Mexican political illustrator who used animated skeletons to convey his messages. Five works displayed in a vitrine were created in 1990, when Mr. De Jesús was living in Chicago. A second vitrine holds eight small etchings from 2008 that include a few intimate images of skeletal lust. Seven framed prints on the wall depict scenes ranging from a Balinese wedding to a genetically modified ear of corn swarming with rats and worms.

No matter what their subject, Mr. De Jesús's images teem with activity. Comparing him to Pieter Brueghel the Elder, Mr. Giasson said, "Wherever you look, there's another detail. Nicolás is always able to make you see more."

In "El Olvidado (The Forgotten One)," for example, dozens of skeletons, including a few dogs, crowd the foreground on their way to a Day of the Dead celebration. In the distance, humans playing musical instruments await them in a graveyard. One skeleton, separated from the rest, crouches beside a hut where he espies a couple engaged in lovemaking behind a slatted gate.

The commuters in "En el Tren (In the Subway)" are an urban mix of skeletons. All are fully clothed, some sporting hats and glasses, others with dreadlocks reaching down their backs. They read newspapers whose type is nearly legible; they listen to music and engage in conversation. There's a bit of graffiti on this train, reflections of skeletons in the car's windows, and, barely discernible through the rear door, the city of Chicago.



"Entrevista," etching and aquatint on amate paper, by Nicolás De Jesús. Neuberger Museum of Art

The village of Ameyaltepec is the focus of "Pintores (The Painters)" and "Procesión al Cielo (Procession to the Sky)," two from a series of 10 large-scale works that illustrate life

in Mr. De Jesús's childhood home. Here there are no skeletons. Both prints depict multiple situations, stacked one on top of another, using what Mr. Giasson, who also teaches in the art history department at Purchase College, called indigenous perspective. "Western perspective is from a single point of view, with objects either closer or farther away," he explained. "The indigenous perspective works in layers, which is a very different way of conceiving space."

In the lowest layer of "Pintores," a child (Mr. De Jesús, perhaps?) sits with his parents painting traditional motifs on amate. Moving up, there are women cooking, children playing games, men building huts in landscapes strewn with dogs, cats, chickens and a huge cactus. In "Procesión al Cielo," hordes of villagers participating in a rain ceremony carry flowers, candles and religious icons up an endless mountain path.

Mr. De Jesús, whose work has been exhibited in Chicago, Paris, Singapore and Montreal, will join Mr. Giasson to lead a tour of "The Irony of the Skeletons" as part of "Día de los Muertos/The Day of the Dead," a First Wednesdays @ the Neu event. Guests are invited to bring an object that expresses their concept of life, death and remembrance to add to an art altar. The event will include mambo music and a large pot of posole, a chunky corn soup, to be shared by all.

Mr. Giasson noted that Mr. De Jesús's skeletons deliver a more optimistic message than the ominous vanitas, with its skulls and hourglasses. "The vanitas is a warning," he said, "but Nicolás's skeletons are having a ball. He is showing that life can be victorious. Death doesn't always win."

And the irony in the title of the exhibition? "A mocking and laughing skeleton," said Mr. Giasson, "who imitates the living, who challenges vanity, is indeed very ironic. It makes relative the importance of life, because in death, everybody is equal."

"The Irony of the Skeletons," through Nov. 14 in the Café Gallery at the Neuberger Museum of Art, 735 Anderson Hill Road, Purchase. "Día de los Muertos/The Day of the Dead" is on Wednesday, 4 to 8 p.m.; admission is free. Information: [neuberger.org](http://neuberger.org) or (914) 251-6100.

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