

NICOLÁS DE JESÚS

A MEXICAN ARTIST FOR GLOBAL JUSTICE

EDITED BY **Patrice Giasson**



HIRMER

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Neuberger Museum of Art
Purchase College, SUNY

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Introduction: A Mexican Artist for Global Justice

Patrice Giasson

*Tlin Neshtlaawilohua nechijlia:
Kenoon patlaaniz in tlapaltatoojli, kan
kiteemachistiizquia ken ikzan tlayowilo.
Iwan teshyolkukua ika shtikmatin kamanoon tlamiz in tlayoowiliztli?*
*Mi desafío es el siguiente: ¿cómo expresar, a través del arte, la
situación de incertidumbre, de dolor, y desesperación del pueblo?*
*My challenge is the following: how to translate through art the
situation of uncertainty, pain, and desperation of the people?*¹

Nicolás de Jesús

These are the words of Nicolás de Jesús, whose art and life have always been driven by a commitment to social justice. His empathy and dedication to address in his work questions of human rights, immigration, and environmental instability surpass the boundaries of his native Mexico, as the artist draws attention to the pain and disorder experienced throughout the world. When looking at his most recent large-scale colorful paintings, all from 2020, we understand that the suffering of *his* people is equivalent to the suffering of families fleeing from the war in Syria and of blue-eyed subjects digging for food in the trashcans of US cities (*Una luz en el infierno*), of individuals who have been dying of Covid-19 worldwide (*Pandemia criminal*), and of African Americans dying at the hands of the authorities, as seen in his painting *Shwelnimiyootiaa*, the Nahuatl translation of *I Can't Breathe*.

1. Nicolás de Jesús in conversation with the author, June 2016, in preparation for the exhibition *Destination Latin America: Modern and Contemporary Latin American Art from the Collection of the Neuberger Museum of Art*, Neuberger Museum of Art, September 23, 2016–January 22, 2017.

Along with his recent paintings, De Jesús is internationally recognized for the hundreds of etchings on *amate* paper² that he has been creating since the early 1990s, filled with satirical skeletons or featuring joyful rural scenes inhabited by the living. Additionally, his strong commitment to social progress has led him to paint, with the support of community members, monumental banners that were carried during public demonstrations or installed in public spaces. Since 2001 he has also created some twenty mural paintings across the state of Guerrero and abroad, including in Indonesia, many of which are still visible today. Finally, he has founded print workshops in Chicago and Mexico to allow local communities to create art. Attesting to his desire to conserve the legacy of the Nahuas of Guerrero and to share it with the world, De Jesús has also documented life in local communities, taking on the role of an ethnographer and interviewing people in Nahuatl, the language they have in common.³

Over the years, De Jesús has developed his own figurative language, creating a sort of iconographical vocabulary by accumulating motifs and characters that reappear across his works: Dazzling skeletons and curvy trees. Anthropomorphic moons and suns that oversee human activities. Pre-Hispanic tiger-warriors and the *voladores*⁴ who still perform in local festivities, dragons on poles that he has seen in celebrations in Indonesia, musicians with large trumpets. Dogs and vultures, repressive policemen assisted by helicopters. Fallen icons—crucified Zapatistas, the Statue of Liberty under siege, and the crying Virgin of Guadalupe. Subways and buses—symbols of the city. The US-Mexico border wall—impassible frontiers that people try to cross. Vicious red devils fighting with Colonial Mexican-style angels. And most recently, spiky balls emblematic of Covid-19.

Ontologically, De Jesús's work can be divided into two apparently opposite poles. On the one hand, it is a celebration of rural life and a humorous depiction of city life. On the other, the tone in many works is darker, offering a blunt image of the miseries and challenges of the present, both local and global. Rather than contradictory, these two poles are in fact complementary, and sometimes are reflected simultaneously in a single work.

With this book and exhibition project, we hope to honor the wishes of Felipe Ehrenberg,⁵ and to reveal the multiple aspects of Nicolás de Jesús's art and social commitment, and the significance of his work as that of a true, singular contemporary artist. This book is the first to cover the last three decades of his artistic creation and is organized to map the seven sections

2. *Amate* is traditional bark paper made from the timber tree *Ficus glabrata* and was used in Pre-Columbian times by Mesoamericans for their painted manuscripts (codex).

3. These interviews are available at De Jesús's YouTube channel, Aztec Tlapajlotiketl: https://www.youtube.com/channel/UC2AN28cEeloQr_28ysE5_yg.

4. A ritual consisting of flying, feathered men attached to a rope who launch themselves headfirst from a thirty-foot pole, gradually rotating until they reach the ground to the rhythm of a drum and flute played by another volador who remains on the top.

5. See the essay by Felipe Ehrenberg Enríquez in this volume.

of the exhibition: Large-Scale Paintings; Pueblo; the Chicago Series; Humor; Día de los Muertos; Repression and Environmental Crisis; and Banners and Murals.

The Artist as Synthesizer

Nicolás de Jesús was born in 1960 in Ameyaltepec, a Nahuatl-speaking community in the Río Balsas region in the mountains of Guerrero. Its people depend on agriculture for their livelihoods and are famous for their pottery and, since the 1960s, for their paintings on *amate*.⁶ Though he attended preparatory (pre-college) school—first studying agronomic engineering and then completing a diploma in health science⁷—De Jesús's first encounter with art making was not in an art school but within his own community.⁸ It was with his parents, at a very young age, that he learned to draw and discovered a sense of color.⁹ As a youth he continued to draw and paint, and subsequently began to sell his work in the streets of Acapulco. Gradually developing his own style, De Jesús later learned the art of printmaking and created his first etchings on *amate*, a support that became emblematic of his future work.¹⁰

6. In the 1960s, contemporary artist Felipe Ehrenberg and art collector Max Kerlow, who owned a craft shop in Mexico, encouraged the young potters of Río Balsas to paint on different media including *amate*, which turned out to produce the most interesting results. Among the artists were Nicolás de Jesús's father, Pablo De Jesús, and his uncle Pedro De Jesús, who popularized the genre. See Jonathan D. Amith, *La tradición del amate: Innovación y protesta del arte Mexicano / The Amate Tradition: Innovation and Dissent in Mexican Art* (Chicago: Mexican Fine Arts Center Museum; Mexico City: La Casa de las Imágenes, 1995), 60.

7. "Before entering [the study of] health science, I had previously studied agronomy in Huitzuco, Guerrero, as I wanted to become an agronomic engineer. I was thinking of how I could help my people. But my father had been assassinated the previous year, when I was still in high school, and when I entered preparatory school for the first time, I was still affected by the assassination. And after a year and a half of studying agronomy, I completely lost faith and interrupted my studies. I dedicated myself to painting, which I had never stopped. Two years later, I decided to reenter the preparatory school and complete my preparatory diploma in health science. I did it mostly to fulfill the wishes of my mother and my deceased father, because I knew by then that I wanted to dedicate my life to art." De Jesús, email communication to the author, September 17, 2021.

8. As Aline Hémond explains, an entire family may be involved in the making of *amate* paintings, participating in the drawing or the painting process. Hémond, *Peindre la révolte: Esthétique et résistance culturelle au Mexique* (Paris: CNRS Editions, 2003). The community itself thus acts as a point of departure for young artists who, as in medieval guilds, acquire a knowledge that they will eventually—and we must emphasize this aspect—reinvent by approaching their work from a personal perspective. That said, collaboration is central to the creation. In the case of his etchings on *amate*, De Jesús acknowledges that, while he executes the drawing (incision) on the plate and hand paints the colors on the paper after it is printed, his wife, Eliud, and his four daughters—Mar Celinda, Zitlalin, Xochitl, and Noyoltzin—have always participated by undertaking most of the printing in the last twenty years. De Jesús, video interview with the author, spring 2021.

9. He started painting at the age of six, assisting his parents, who were also painters, either filling their drawings with colors or creating his own drawings. De Jesús, email communication to the author, September 21, 2021.

10. He studied etching with his godfather Felipe Ehrenberg in the print workshop Artegrafías Limitadas in Mexico

De Jesús's experience in the United States has also been fundamental to his artistic development. In 1988 he crossed the US-Mexico border and made his way to Chicago, where he lived for four full years (1989–93), creating some of his most iconic images, and where his wife gave birth to three of their four daughters. This life in Chicago gave De Jesús the opportunity to engage with the local arts community, working, for example, in a print workshop alongside artists who were not used to seeing someone from a rural Mexican background creating contemporary art, but who quickly recognized the originality of his work.¹¹ As Julian Kreimer succinctly observes in his essay, "when De Jesús arrived in Chicago, his work brought together Leopoldo Méndez's radical Taller de Gráfica Popular, Felipe Ehrenberg's *Iudic Fluxus*, and the Nahua painting of Ameyaltepec." De Jesús's quick brushstrokes and splashed paint have also been inspired by action painting. Splashing paint on a wall, he has alluded to his knowledge of twentieth-century art, sardonically remarking, "This is a technique I borrowed from a certain Jackson Pollock."¹² His art eventually led him to France, Italy, Canada, and Indonesia, where he was able to work with local artists and engage with scholars, art gallerists, collectors, and members of the local community.

Though he did not study art history, over the years De Jesús has acquired an important knowledge of American and European art, and many people have made analogies between his work and those of artists such as Pieter Bruegel the Elder and Francisco Goya. Many of his motifs recall Albrecht Dürer's allegories, angels, and beasts, as well as Hieronymus Bosch's malevolent creatures and scenes of judgment. De Jesús's work also contains references to Colonial Mexican artists, whose sixteenth- and seventeenth-century frescoes can be found in the most remote churches and convents across Mexico, and whose iconography he reclaims and subverts: "My angels do come from these churches, and I even had a priest who once asked me if I wanted to paint religious scenes in his church. But my angels are rebellious, half pornographic, disobedient and combative, and I don't want that image of submission [associated with Catholic religion]. . . . "[An example is] my image of Jesus—I want him revolutionary. In Tlapa I once painted a banner with Christ holding a rifle."¹³ De Jesús's confrontational monumental banners and murals should also be understood in the spirit and in light of the work of post-revolutionary Mexican artists and the Mexican mural painting tradition.¹⁴ His political activism, however, is

City. See Aline Hémond's essay in this publication.

11. The print workshop was Expression Graphics, Oak Park, Illinois. De Jesús explains: "The artists working there would ask me if I was here to do the cleaning. I said no, that I was here to create art, like them. Many remained there to see me while I worked and were eventually impressed with my work." Video interview with the author, spring 2021.

12. While working on the mural *Guadalupe artesana* (2020) in Xalitla (Guerrero). See "El arte es inmortal," <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=02dUL9g57j4>.

13. De Jesús, video interview with the author, spring 2021.

14. The Mexican Revolution (1910–20) was followed by important artistic initiatives that have resonated in Mexico

central to his artistic strategy and derives from a political awakening acquired in his home state. As Pablo Piccato notes in his essay, Guerrero has a complex, and at times costly, history of resistance and political militancy. A central figure is Lucio Cabañas, a rural teacher who fought for the poor, but facing repression by the military eventually became a revolutionary community leader and was killed in combat in 1974. “Lucio Cabañas is fundamental,” says De Jesús. “He is the one who triggered in me as a child a sense of social consciousness.”¹⁵ Cabañas’s father had been assassinated when he was just a teenager, and De Jesús’s father was killed by a local cacique when he was just fifteen. Though De Jesús has always privileged peace and nonviolence, his devotion to social justice and the political dimensions of some of his images are certainly inspired by figures like Cabañas.

De Jesús is thus a synthesizer, capable of juggling between different registers. His rural and Indigenous background should never be seen as a disadvantage, but rather as a privileged position. Deeply attached to the life and language of a Nahuatl-speaking community, while having experienced many of the world’s most important cities—Mexico City, Paris, New York, Chicago, Montreal, Jakarta—De Jesús has gained a truly panoptic vision of the present world. And his refusal to adhere to a single artistic style explains his singularity and the freedom of his compositions:

My style comes from the natural way in which we live in the villages. The space, the composition, all come from that reality. . . . I did not go to art school, and when people talk to me about depth, or perspective, I say that I do this by intuition, in a very natural and free manner. . . . I feel free when I draw. I fly, like a bird.¹⁶

Recent Large-Scale Paintings

De Jesús’s large paintings from 2020 explore, and explicitly denounce, the violence suffered by migrants and Blacks in the United States. The tone in these works is ironic and close to that in the Chicago series. But the new scenes are more combative, featuring apparent resistance. In *Sueño migrante* (2020), Donald Trump and the border patrols are shown as aggressors confronted by an army of angels, *calaveras*-ancestors, and ancient tiger-warriors. These heroic figures, borrowed from the collective Mexican imaginary, descend in helicopters and demolish

and abroad, including the emergence of the Mexican Muralist movement, which beginning in 1921 took art to the streets; the birth of printmaking groups such as the Taller de Gráfica Popular, which included figures like Leopoldo Méndez, whose etchings circulated widely among the populace and have similarities with De Jesús’s work, as attested in his linocut *Persecución a Ecologistas* (2009); and the birth of a new literary genre called the Novel of the Mexican Revolution, which brought to life ordinary people, their ways and language, and their struggles.

15. De Jesús, phone conversation with the author, September 6, 2021.

16. De Jesús, video interview with the author, spring 2021.

the border wall. *Pandemia Criminal* (2020) features a similar army of small angels and skeletons combating an army of red devils producing the Covid-19 virus. People are liberated, chains are broken, and wounded icons—the Virgin of Guadalupe, the Statue of Liberty—are comforted. *Wounded Eagle* (2021), his most recent painting, explores injuries to one of the best-known images of the United States, the American eagle, and expresses the blow to democracy with the assault on the nation’s capitol on January 6, 2021. The title of *Shwelnimiyoottaa* (2020), Nahuatl for “I can’t breathe,” not only refers to the social movement born as a result of police brutality in the United States, but also relates to the loss of breath suffered by victims of the pandemic. At the top of the painting, Trump strangles a Black man, while at the bottom a patient on a respirator appears to be dying from Covid-19, assisted by a Black Statue of Liberty. But here again, close looking reveals that in the background there is a struggle in which enchained Black subjects break free. In sum, the work of De Jesús is never fatalistic or apocalyptic, as he always seems to leave a door open for hope—as in *Etnocidio*, where not everyone perishes and there is a path to survival, emblemized by a man at the bottom who leads a group of women and children and points toward a safer place.

While most of De Jesús’s recent large-scale paintings are of a combative nature and politically charged, *Gusto es vida* (2020) stands out as an elegy to life, similar to the Pueblo series. As one of my colleagues noted, it is a “tasty painting, with bubble gum pink, and electric purple, where the earth seems more alive than the trees or the skin of the people.”¹⁷ Works of this kind counterbalance the chaotic and incendiary world that De Jesús depicts elsewhere. They attest to his need to express a faithfulness to life that he has cultivated throughout his career.

The Pueblo: Existential Optimism

The works that the exhibition brings together as a celebration of life are a series of ten large etchings on *amate*—surprisingly large when we know the challenges of printing on an irregular material like the bark sheets of *amate*. Featuring village scenes, these works from 1992 are gathered under the rubric “Pueblo” and have titles such as *Fiesta San Lucas*, *El maíz*, *Mercado de Chamula*, *Carnaval*, *Pintores*, *El funeral*, or *Pescadores*. The artist depicts people joyfully interacting, working, dancing, eating, fishing and swimming, preparing altars to mourn their dead, making music, and harvesting. They appear under dramatic skies, with rising orange suns and glowing nighttime moons. We see women breastfeeding, children playing, and elders offering advice, surrounded by abundant vegetation and animals. De Jesús recalls, and invites the viewer to enter, a bucolic and hopeful world. Describing these works, he explains: “Everything is alive in these gatherings that we used to have in my village. . . . You could feel

17. Gabriela Rosen, visual artist and curatorial intern at the Neuberger Museum of Art, in conversation with the author, May 1, 2021.

the energy of all these people together, with their happiness, their thoughts. . . . This joy is enough for me, it's what really keeps me going and make me want to be grateful."¹⁸ These themes seem to act as catalysts to his creativity, providing the artist with points of reference to which he often returns.

De Jesús illustrates with precision the nature of his community's festivities and activities, comfortable with conflating time, as in *El maíz*, where different moments of the corn's preparation and storage appear in the same image. He is as detailed as an ethnographer, but with the desire for the viewer to be part of the scene, to share these lives and rituals. In *El funeral*, for example, he illustrates the close-knit solidarity existing among the people in his community.¹⁹ As Caroline Perrée explains in her essay: "De Jesús's universe is filled with figures because his vision of the world is a collective one. Uninterested in the individualism generated by capitalism, the artist focuses instead on humanity in its social context." When looking at these works, it is easy to recall Bruegel, and De Jesús confirms that some people have made this analogy. "Ehrenberg, for instance, once after looking at my prints showed me a book on Bruegel," says De Jesús. But he also cautions, "My work does not come from there." However, he does suggest that the resemblances are "perhaps because Bruegel lived in a world that was similar to the one I grew up in."²⁰ While that may be true, the similarities may relate to De Jesús's capacity to understand the people in his community from the inside, to observe his contemporaries with empathy, as Bruegel did.²¹

18. Ibid.

19. Many examples illustrate this social cohesion. As I wrote these lines, De Jesús informed me of an elder in his village named Arnulfo García, who had been a close friend of the artist's deceased father and lived alone, having recently lost his wife and youngest son to COVID-19. The man had lost his way in the nearby mountains while searching for his runaway mule. In an episode evocative of Hemingway's narratives, after finding the mule and struggling to bring her back home, García was pushed by the animal into a canyon, injured, immobilized, cold, and fearful of being devoured by animals or bitten by a snake. When the village heard that the man had not returned in the evening, the whole community began searching in the mountains. The hunt continued for two full days and involved canceling the community's traditional trip to a fair in the neighboring town of Tixtla. Thanks to their collective effort, however, they finally found the man in the canyon, and through voice communication between the mountains, combined with cellphone calls (when a signal was available), they brought him home on another mule and put him to rest in his bed so he could recover. "In a great uproar," De Jesús concluded, "the people gathered at his house, and a simple meal that the people had brought was shared, in celebration of this great collective feat, having rescued this heroic survivor from a situation that could have been very regrettable. He was saved from dying." De Jesús, email communication with the author, September 20, 2021.

20. De Jesús, video interview with the author, spring 2021.

21. When Bruegel paints, according to art historian Elie Faure, "He places himself in the center of the plains, it is the plain itself that lives, the man who walks through it does not live another life than that, he participates in all its changes, in all its dramas, he has its habits and its desires and its needs." Faure, *Histoire de l'art: L'art renaissant* (Paris: Denoël, 1992), 277 (my translation).

Though celebratory of village life, in some cases the Pueblo works also include subtle comments on the challenges of society. In *Mercado Chamula* (1990), for example, a local cacique holds a piggy bank, and a truck driver transports people to work as if they were livestock. These scenes reaffirm the contemporaneity of his imagery: like Bruegel's images, they are located in the present, not in an idyllic and utopian world.²²

The Chicago Series

Interestingly, De Jesús's large *amates* featuring village scenes were not created in the mountains of Guerrero, but in the United States during his long and prolific stay in Chicago. One might imagine that these rural compositions were driven by a certain nostalgia, and insist that his gaze was toward the past, but they were made in the same years that the artist worked on a series that focused on the life of the city. These images are inhabited by frenzied skeleton characters traveling in the subways and walking the streets. Their outfits contrast with the *huipiles* (traditional dresses), long-sleeved shirts, *sombreros*, and sandals worn by the peasants who appear in the village scenes. In this series, we see urban styles: the *chicano* with sneakers and baseball cap, the uniformed bus driver, policeman, and art dealer (*Calle 18*, 1993), the Rasta with dreadlocks (*En el tren*, 1990), the businessman with briefcase, and sensual women with short skirts (*Chicago*, 1990).

Most of the works from the Chicago series, as Aline Hémond discusses in her essay, take us to Pilsen, the Mexican neighborhood in Chicago. Through these images, De Jesús observes and transmits the vitality of people in the city, but he also questions their social conditions, shedding light on alcoholism, AIDS, consumerism, and other themes associated with urban life, as in *Little Village* (1993), *Comierdalismo* (1993), and *Solo huevos y más huevos* (2012), which features a character whom alcohol has driven to despair. Instead of the healthy people of his village scenes, the Chicago works ironically stage skeletons, known as *calaveras* in Mexico. Rather than bucolic celebrations, the series offers a harsh judgment on the city and enters the register of satire. Historically, the *calavera* was popularized in Mexico by José Guadalupe Posada (1852–1913), a skillful etcher and caricaturist who portrayed with laughter and wit the abuses of the Porfirio regime and the Mexican aristocracy on the eve of the Mexican Revolution (1910–20). Posada generated a significant artistic legacy, both in subject matter and in the awakening of a social consciousness, and the *calaveras* quickly became emblematic of Mexican iconography.²³ De Jesús thus expands on the Mexican tragicomic tradition initiated by his an-

22. Bruegel also alluded to broader social and political themes in a painting like *The Procession to Calvary* (1564), where he included the bicephalic eagle of the Habsburgs on the flag held by the soldiers leading Christ to Golgotha, symbolizing the repressive power that the Spanish Habsburgs had over the Dutch. Michael Gibson, *Le portement de croix* (Paris: Noësis, 1996), 18.

23. We find the *calaveras* in Sergei Eisenstein's unfinished *Viva México*, filmed in 1930, using the motif to critique pa-

cestor Posada—although De Jesús only discovered the earlier artist long after he had integrated this aspect in his compositions. “Laughter is, above all, a corrective,” Henri Bergson commented in his classic essay on the comic.²⁴ It may be argued that by offering a humorous spectacle of society’s malfunctions and vices, De Jesús—like Posada—not only challenges authority but also offers the possibility of a remedy. The cure begins by bringing attention to the problems while engaging the viewer through humor.

These skeletons have followed the artist in his journey across the world. In addition to the Chicago series, other works use humor to tackle a variety of subjects. In *Paris* (2003), a horde of *calaveras*, some pointing their cameras, climb the Eiffel tower in a parody of tourism. Vanity is on view in *Exposición* (2003), where a stylishly dressed art critic appears in the foreground. This last work, with its phylactery-garlands, references De Jesús’s exhibition celebrating the Day of the Dead in Paris. The humorous tone of this hand-painted etching can be read as a gesture of self-derision to diminish any sense of personal flattery. As Bergson argued, “Vanity, though it is a natural product of social life, is an inconvenience to society. . . . It might be said that the specific remedy for vanity is laughter, and that the one failing that is essentially laughable is vanity.”²⁵ The glamour of the celebration in *Exposición* is also counterbalanced by a character urinating in the men’s room. This prosaic element, as Julian Kreimer notes in his essay, is “an earthy rejoinder to the haughty French art world and one of De Jesús’s frequent reminders of the bodily reality that unites us all.”

Día de los Muertos

The fact that people around the world are familiar with the Mexican celebration of the Day of the Dead, also known as Día de los Muertos and held on November 1 and 2, may explain the initial

triarchal oligarchy in Mexico by linking it to death: when the villagers remove their masks we see smiling faces, but when the oligarchs remove theirs, we see skulls. See Harry M. Benshoff, “Homoerotic Iconography and Anti-Catholic Marxism: Proto-Feminist Discourse in Sergei M. Eisenstein’s *Qué Viva México!*,” *Spectator* 11, no. 1 (fall 1990): 7–17. In addition, at the center of Diego Rivera’s mural *A Dream in the Alameda* (1947) is Posada’s emblematic *Calavera Catrina*—representing an old woman elegantly dressed as a mockery of the nineteenth-century Francophilia of the Mexican bourgeoisie—holding with one hand that of Posada, its creator, and with the other the hand of a childlike Rivera in a scene that can be read as a tribute to the master’s legacy. Posada’s smiling *calavera* has also served as a literary figure, such as the image of the old man in his coffin described by Carlos Fuentes in the first pages of his novel *Old Gringo* (1985). At the same time, the *calavera* has penetrated the spectrum of mass art in Mexico and has long been emblematic of the Day of the Dead celebration, when sugar or chocolate skulls, each inscribed with the name of one of the deceased, are eaten by children, and *papel picado* (cut paper) images featuring Posada-like carnivalesque scenes are hung in garlands.

24. See Henri Bergson, *Laughter: An Essay on the Meaning of the Comic* (New York: MacMillan, 1928), 197.

25. *Ibid.*, 174.

attraction of De Jesús's work in the United States.²⁶ Several of his etchings take that celebration as their subject and feature *calaveras*-ancestors returning to earth from the sky, attracted by rich offerings prepared by the living. One particularly striking example is *El regreso* (1990), which displays a combination of perspectives, asking the eye of the viewer to travel from top to bottom and back, with one vanishing point leading vertically up to a full moon, from where a horde of happy *calaveras* descend with musical instruments, and a second at eye level that points back to an altar. Another emblematic work from the same year is *Fiesta de Muertos*, featuring hundreds of characters celebrating in front of a colonial-era church, and an external arch at the center of the scene above which a skeleton—possibly the artist himself—is painting over the words “Día de Muertos.” In *El olvidado*, also from 1990, the skeleton-ancestors walk toward the cemetery to meet the living. As in a Renaissance painting, one of the subjects turns his gaze toward the viewer to engage us in the scene behind him: a skeleton peeking inside a house where a living couple is making love. While one might read this image as a simple contrast between death and life, the title—which translates as *The Forgotten One*—points to another meaning: the skeleton is that of a dead relative forgotten by his wife, who is now with another man and failed to make the altar that would have allowed his return home. He is thus condemned to oblivion as the observer of a situation he cannot change.

For many Mexicans, the Day of the Dead is a sacred moment to pay tribute to ancestors and deceased love ones. De Jesús has explained that the *calaveras* he draws are not phantoms, but rather savvy ancestors who return to advise the living.²⁷ In fact, when the artist chose to address the ritual aspects of the celebration, instead of using ironic skeletons, he opted for fully fleshed-out characters similar to those in his large village scenes. He created a small series composed of eight etchings, all from 1990, where the characters diligently prepare and perform the ritual: we follow them from the market where they purchase candles (*El mercado*) to the ovens where the *pan de muertos*²⁸ is baked (*El pan*), to the houses where the altars are built (*A su memoria*), and eventually to the night of the event, in *Ofrenda en la iglesia*, *Ofrenda en la casa*, and *Para esperarlos*. It is only in those latter cases that the skeletons reappear to meet the living. De Jesús's artistic-ethnographic approach in these works has inspired artist Kristin Meller, from the Association pour l'Estampe et l'Art Populaire in Paris, to create an illuminating documentary titled *Nicolás de Jesús: The Day of the Dead* (2004) that was made to accompany the artist's exhibitions around the world.²⁹ The video, which was recorded in

26. The listing of De Jesús's exhibition history in this volume reveals that much of his exposure was, for good or bad, through exhibitions organized around the Day of the Dead. The Chicago Museum of Art, the first museum to open its doors to De Jesús, has presented his work for several sequential years in exhibitions organized around that celebration.

27. De Jesús, video interview with the author, spring 2021.

28. Sweet buns, either round and topped with a ball and stripes, signifying the skull and bones, or anthropomorphically shaped, in both cases recalling the deceased.

29. While traveling through his etchings, you hear the soft, musical voice in Nahuatl of De Jesús describing the

Nahuatl and later translated into five different languages, attests to the global interest in his work and its universal themes.

Repression and Environmental Crisis

The other pole of Nicolás de Jesús's work leaves less room for joy, irony, or laughter, and denounces the abuses and crimes that he has witnessed throughout his life. These images condemn arbitrary imprisonment and torture, and a dysfunctional justice system where impunity prevails. As Pablo Piccato observes in his essay, "The dominant aspect of De Jesús's visual discourse about violence is the imperative to bear witness." De Jesús's work thus relates closely to that of the contemporary artist Teresa Margolles, who explores the results of violence in Mexico and around the world, making it explicit and disturbing.³⁰ Among the vivid examples of De Jesús's images of violence are the monochromatic aquatint prints from 2011, including *El infierno*, *Los verdugos*, and *Morir para vivir*, all of which stage the torture of community leaders. *El infierno* and *Los verdugos*, which translate as *Hell* and *The Executioners*, feature uniformed men with monstrous forms inflicting pain on naked victims. Their humiliating positions, with arms in the air, along with the use of chiaroscuro, bring to mind the powerful scenes of Goya's series *Disasters of War*, created between 1810 and 1820 and depicting the assassination of Spanish civilians by Napoleon's soldiers. Like Goya, who portrayed the abuses he witnessed during the French invasion of Spain, De Jesús powerfully addresses the cycle of violence into which contemporary Mexico has fallen. Alas, this emphasis is not exclusive to Guerrero but also reflects the reality in many other parts of Mexico. At the 2009 Venice Biennale, Margolles presented a powerful exhibition titled *What else can we talk about?*, which condemned the violence she had seen in her hometown of Ciudad Juárez—a city dominated by drug lords who have destroyed the city and traumatized the society—and included real blood taken from the sites where people had been assassinated. Similarly, De Jesús sheds light on the horrific situation lived in Native communities across the Americas. In the earlier *Etnocidio* (1992)—which De Jesús says is not a depiction specific to Mexico but a generic scene of the massacres of Native people conducted

preparation for and celebration of the Day of the Dead. The Nahuatl language carries the viewer into another world, ancient and young at the same time, like the Nahua culture itself, which exists in the present time while being rooted in a world before the Conquest, when the Nahuas also made tortillas and paid tribute to the earth, the rain, the sun, the moon, and their ancestors, as De Jesús depicts in his work. Remarkably, the narration in this video has also been translated into English, German, French, Spanish, and even Japanese. It is phonetically engaging to hear the Nahuatl language followed by the Japanese, for example, two languages that, though historically unrelated, have a common tenderness to the ear, and seem to carry something familiar and profoundly human, as everlasting testimonies of the human spirit.

30. See, for example, Patrice Giasson, *Teresa Margolles: We Have a Common Thread* (Purchase, NY: Neuberger Museum of Art, 2015).

by military forces across the globe—one sees Native people assassinated, women raped, and babies indiscriminately murdered in scenes recalling the Massacre of the Innocents as recounted by Matthew’s Gospel. *Etnocidio* was created at the same moment as De Jesús’s idyllic village scenes from 1992 and deploys a similar compositional scheme, but instead of featuring people living peacefully, the artist overwhelms the viewer with a scene of carnage and people fleeing for their lives. Like Margolles in her series *Score Settlings* (2008)—which displays jewelry whose flashy diamonds are in fact pieces of car windshield taken from the site where someone had been shot—De Jesús seduces the viewer with the illusion of a traditional scene, but in fact depicts the horrors that have been committed against Native communities.

De Jesús has also tackled issues of migration and environmental instability, as in *Migración* of 2003, and *Ecocidio* and *Maicidio*, both from 2009. While the first work seems to narrate his personal experience as a border crosser, and the repression against migrants that he has witnessed, the other two assess the rural environmental degradation he has observed in his own community and abroad.³¹ The questions De Jesús raises place him in the same sphere as contemporary creators such as Mexican director Alejandro González Iñárritu, who in his film *Carne y arena* (2017) takes the viewer into the experience of migrants crossing the Mexico-US border. Similarly, a number of artists from Thailand—Supmanee Chaisansuk, Sukonthip Pimparian, Salahwarin Jaijuntuck, Sudaporn Teja, and Supamas Taveechotipart—considered the pollution crisis through their exhibition *NIMBY: Not in My Backyard*.³²

Murals and Banners: Taking Collective Discontent to the Street

Another body of work by De Jesús that addresses repression is found in the exterior murals and banners that he has been creating since 2000. Like the Mexican Muralist painters who emerged after the Mexican Revolution, De Jesús believes in public art and the importance of using streets and buildings as a material support to express sociopolitical opinions and encourage social engagement. In 2001, during the “Marcha del Color de la Tierra,” when thousands of people marched from Chiapas to Mexico City in support of the cause of the Zapatista uprising in Chiapas,³³ De Jesús voiced his support for the movement by spontaneously creating a series of murals in cities across Guerrero to welcome the marchers.

31. De Jesús has frequently noted that the waters around his village are extremely polluted. Video interview with the author, spring 2021.

32. Palette Art Space, Bangkok, February 7–March 15, 2020; <https://www.palettebkk.com/>.

33. The Zapatista Army of National Liberation (EZLN) made its first appearance on January 1, 1994, the day that the North American Free Trade Agreement was enacted, to bring attention to the dire social conditions in the Indigenous communities in the state of Chiapas. The EZLN had hoped to negotiate agreements with the national government that would allow greater independence and control over their territories and communal lands, many of which had been privatized over the years.

As the years went on, his murals and banners became more explicit in their denunciation of repression. In *Masacre del Charco* of 2009, a powerful painting with neither horizon line nor landscape, soldiers fire their weapons at victims who float in space. Created in memory of the El Charco Massacre,³⁴ the ambiguous space of this banner suggests a viewpoint from below, like that for Michelangelo's frescoes in the Sistine Chapel.³⁵ A few years later, in 2014, following the disappearance of forty-three students at a rural teacher's college in Ayotzinapa, De Jesús again went to the front lines to denounce the atrocity, which came to be known as the "Ayotzinapa massacre."³⁶ This attack against humble and honest young people devoted to education, who represented the future of their communities, profoundly impacted the artist. He was in Paris when he first heard about Ayotzinapa. This prompted him to give an interview to Radio France International and condemn the situation. A few weeks later, he was in Indonesia for an artist residency where he invited local artists to unite their voices to denounce the incident.³⁷ Hearing about the possible complicity of the military with the local criminal groups who apparently committed the massacre, De Jesús then wrote to the newspaper *El Sur* demanding the president's resignation.³⁸ Upon his return to Mexico, he created several powerful banners that were displayed in public spaces in the region's main village of Chilpancingo, and rushed with his brushes and scaffolds to paint a mural at the site of the college the students had attended. Once there, he expressed his anger by violently splashing red paint on the top of a wall. Dominating the scene are the figures of a mother and child whose hands are tied with barbed wire amid splatters of blood-red paint, recalling Mexican muralist José Clemente Orozco's vibrant paintings. As in *Etnocidio*, the tragic episode of the massacre is balanced by images of hope, beginning with a mother breastfeeding her child, and a skeleton-soldier from the Mexican Revolution riding his horse. The bottom of the left side of the wall features a murdered student, next to whom stands an elder showing the way to a younger man. They are surrounded by laughing *calaveras*, while a woman, probably a mother who has lost a son, holds a banner that reads "Su conciencia nos ilumina el camino" (Their conscience illuminates our path). This phrase resonates with the title of a banner created a few years earlier, in 2009, titled *Su lucha iluminará nuestras conciencias*, in memory of the assassinations of two highly respected Na' Savi (Mixteco) leaders who had been

34. These murals were painted in Acapulco, Chilpancingo, Chilapa, Iguala, and Tlapa de Comonfort; see the Exhibition History in this volume. The banner was created for the eleventh anniversary of the El Charco Massacre, when eleven Na' Savi (Mixteco) community members were assassinated by the military on June 7, 1998. It was displayed at the site where the tragic event occurred, in the village of Ayutla de los Libres, Guerrero.

35. I thank my colleague Álvaro Figueroa, who designed this book, for this observation.

36. See Pablo Piccato's essay for details about the tragedy.

37. Karla Galarce Sosa, "Se unen alumnos de Nicolás de Jesús en Indonesia al reclamo por Ayotzinapa," *El Sur* (Acapulco), November 24, 2014.

38. Karla Galarce Sosa, "Pide Nicolás de Jesús en Indonesia la renuncia de Peña Nieto por Ayotzinapa," *El Sur*, November 25, 2014.

tortured and murdered.³⁹ The idea that the victim's conscience (*conciencia*) "illuminates" their path, and that their struggle (*lucha*) "illuminates" their conscience, adds a sacrificial dimension to the tragedies, surpassing the lamentation and rendering them martyrs who can inspire continuity and courage to those who carry on the resistance.

It is hard for many of us to imagine the risks involved in creating works of this type. De Jesús's activism and the nature of his art have caused him to live in fear. Many of his friends and companions—including community leaders, journalists, lawyers, ecological activists, students, and journalists—have been assassinated by the authorities or by criminal organizations. The frontage of the headquarters of the newspaper *El Sur*, which has published several reviews on De Jesús's work,⁴⁰ has bullet holes that serve as warnings. "But these risks are necessary," states the artist. "If some of my images have that fiery tone, it's because I need to cure myself from the feelings of fear, paranoia, and impotence that the military has tried to inflict upon us through repression, and with impunity. I don't want to die of fear. I know that there is a danger with painting murals, but it liberates me to paint them."⁴¹

In spite of the dangers he faces, Nicolás de Jesús has never ceased to create. His work reflects the richness of his artistic background and his life experiences. From the intimacy of a small etching to the immersive experience of a large-scale painting, he offers a contemporary spectacle of human existence, celebrating life while fiercely condemning injustice. For De Jesús, there has never been a contradiction between life and social commitment, between creativity and political engagement.

39. The banners celebrated Raúl Lucas Lucía and Manuel Ponce Rosas and were carried along with their coffins through the center of the municipality of Ayutla (Guerrero) to request justice. They were later brought to the cemetery and eventually used inside the family homes, where the bodies were on view.

40. See the Selected Bibliography.

41. De Jesús, video interview with the author, spring 2021.

The Artist's Reception

Patrice Giasson

Though he received some exposure in Mexico, with a first solo exhibition in 1986 held in the gallery of the Alliance Francaise de Mexico,¹ Nicolás de Jesús admits that it was abroad, and not in his home country, that he first received recognition as an artist.² His four years in Chicago (1989–93) were crucial. Supported by local collectors, De Jesús created some of his most impressive etchings and began to exhibit his work in venues including Chicago's Mexican Fine Arts Center Museum,³ one of the first museums to open its doors to the young artist, with the 1992 solo exhibition *Nicolás de Jesús: A Nahua Artist in Chicago*. At the same time, he began to receive the attention of Chicago newspapers.⁴ From the 1990s on, the artist was invited to participate in exhibitions and other art events in France, Italy, Canada, and Indonesia.

In the field of academia, it was not through art critics but thanks to the attention he received from sociologists and anthropologists—who wrote about his art in the context of broader studies on art practices and political resistance in native communities—that his work became internationally known.⁵ Some of these publications were tied to exhibitions that presented De Jesús to a wide audience, including *Indiens (Chiapas, Mexico, California)* in 2002 at the Parc de la Villette in Paris, where several of his works were displayed. (It was the discovery of his work at La Villette that prompted me to organize an exhibition at the Neuberger Museum of Art and to acquire his work for the museum's permanent collection.⁶) In its coverage of the La Villette exhibition, *Geo* magazine featured a full page devoted to De Jesús, illustrated by one of his etchings as well as his photograph, opposite a work and photograph of Francisco Toledo.⁷ At that time Toledo had been recognized as one Mexico's most prominent artists, a true "national figure" as important as Diego Rivera.⁸ Interestingly, Toledo is of Zapotec descent—thus he and De Jesús are both descendants of the earliest Mesoamericans and, at the same time, actors in the global arena.

Apart from the Museum of Modern Art in Mexico (MAM),⁹ which included De Jesús in the exhibition *Art of the Other Mexico* (1995), organized by the Mexican Fine Arts Center Museum in Chicago two years earlier,¹⁰ no important museum has opened its doors to De Jesús. Furthermore, even at MAM, De Jesús was not exhibited in his home country as a Mexican artist but as a Chicano artist, with reviews that situated him within “another” Mexico.¹¹

In spite of this lack of institutional support in Mexico,¹² the exposure he obtained abroad eventually prompted significant regional recognition. As attested in the Selected Bibliography and Exhibition History that follow, De Jesús has received extensive media coverage in his home state of Guerrero, with reviews in Acapulco’s *El Sur* (including nearly twenty articles and reviews), and in other newspapers around the country. The authors of these articles make note of his political activities but also recognize De Jesús as a major artist, at times as a *tlacuilo*, the term used to describe the earliest Mesoamerican painter-calligraphers.¹³

Finally, and no less significant, is the reception that De Jesús has received by local communities, who have always supported him, and by local musicians and poets, who have celebrated him.¹⁴ The poet Rafael Ortiz¹⁵ beautifully describes what De Jesús’s work embodies for him and his compatriots:

Nicolás de Jesús

is the processions of my village.

It’s the music that used to come from Guerrero for the celebration of the patron saint
[of the village].

It’s the eleven o’clock bull decorated with a flower before being ignited.¹⁶

It’s the threshing of maize in the garden of my house.

It’s a game with lizards and *moyotes* bugs.

He ennobles me with the smell of fresh baked bread
of spearmint
of basil
of the *cuachalalate* tree
of the incense of *copal* in celebrations of the Day of the Dead.

His strong and indecipherable face
safeguards the histories of solitudes
the flowers
and the taciturn glances of the Nahuas.

This is Nicolás
a modern troubadour
a whisper of the memory of the magical villages of Mexico.
It's a fusion of Bruegel the Elder and Juan Rulfo¹⁷
stamped on *amate* paper.

This is Nicolás
de Jesús
a *tlacuilo* that escaped from time and memory.¹⁸

1. *Nicolás de Jesús: Arte de la tierra*, Alliance Francaise de México (Alianza Francesa Polanco), Mexico City, 1986.

2. De Jesús, video interview with the author, spring 2021.

3. Renamed the National Museum of Mexican Art in 2006.

4. Antonio Zavala, "Nicolás de Jesús: Artista nahua realiza sus sueños en esta ciudad," *Lawndale News* (Chicago), July 1, 1993; Garrett Holg, "Ancient and Modern Mexico Come Together in Exhibit," *Chicago Sun-Times*, August 22, 1993.

5. See Jonathan D. Amith, *La tradición del amate: Innovación y protesta del arte Mexicano / The Amate Tradition: Innovation and Dissent in Mexican Art* (Chicago: Mexican Fine Arts Center Museum; Mexico City: La Casa de las Imágenes, 1995); Yvon Le Bot, *Indiens: Chiapas, Mexico, Californie; Un monde fait de tous les mondes* (Montpellier: Indigène Editions, 2002); and Aline Hémond, *Peindre la révolte: Esthétique et résistance culturelle au Mexique* (Paris: CNRS Editions, 2003). One exception to the sociological and anthropological focus is the work by independent art historian Lupita Lara Elizondo, who dedicates several pages to Nicolás de Jesús and places his work alongside major national Mexican artists of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries in her book *Visión de México y sus artistas: Paralelismos en la plástica de los siglos XIX y XXI* (Mexico: Quálitas Compañía de Seguros, 2003), 4:218–25.

6. In 2010 I had the pleasure of organizing a small solo exhibition at the Neuberger Museum of Art that earned De

Jesús a positive review in the *New York Times*; Susan Hodara, "Smiling Skeletons, with Lives to Lead and Issues to Raise," October 29, 2010. Several of his works were acquired by the Neuberger and eventually integrated in the touring exhibition *Destination Latin America* (2016), which was featured in three US venues: Neuberger Museum of Art; South Bend Museum, Indiana; and Louisiana State University Museum, Baton Rouge, where De Jesús was the artist-in residence. A fourth venue is planned at the Museum of the Shenandoah Valley, Winchester, Virginia, in fall 2022.

7. "Mexique indien," *Geo—Un nouveau monde: La terre* (France), no. 285 (November 2002): 117.

8. Cuatémoc Medina explains how Toledo's "retrospective at the Museum of Modern Art in Mexico City in 1980 . . . catapulted him to the position of new standard-bearer for art in Mexico, a position Toledo would maintain until his death, despite the various revolutions in which Latin American art played a prominent role over the last forty years." Medina, "A Southerly Gale: Francisco Toledo, 1940–2019," *e-flux Journal*, no. 103 (October 2019), <https://www.e-flux.com/journal/103/290479/a-southerly-gale-francisco-toledo-1940-2019/>.

9. Patricia Velázquez Yebra, "Veinte artistas chicanos expodrán en el MAM," *El Universal*, November 9, 1993.

10. After Chicago the exhibition had several venues. It also traveled to the Museo Regional de Oaxaca; Centro Cultural Tijuana; Palm Springs Desert Museum, California; El Museo del Barrio, New York; and Center for the Arts, San Francisco.

11. Gabriel Rodríguez Piña, "Arte del otro México: Fuentes y significados," *El Nacional* (Mexico), November 11, 1993.

12. De Jesús describes as unproductive his experience of working with the Fondo Nacional para el Fomento de las Artesanías, a government entity whose mission is to encourage regional art, and which had collected the art of his father before his death: "They purchase the work of their 'artisans,' as they call us, at a very low price. They even asked me to make my work less skillful, so that it could not be seen as real art. That's when I decided to cut [my involvement] short and promised to never approach a national entity again. The label of *artesanía* [folk art], which they use, has always been used to discriminate against the work that we do in the community." Interview with the author, spring 2021.

13. Isaías Alanís, "Nicolás de Jesús: Tlacuilo de la modernidad," *El Cazahuatl* (Mexico City), July 15, 2002; and Alanís, "Nicolás de Jesús: Tlacuilo del siglo XXI," *Américas* (OAS), 2007.

14. In 2002, in Chilpancingo, Guerrero, a group of local musicians and poets assembled in De Jesús's house. Among them were the late David Adame, who opened the gathering by performing a *corrido* (song played with guitar) he had written celebrating De Jesús; and the late Héctor Cárdenas Bello, who, at the end of the gathering, read a poem in honor of the art of De Jesús's village and its universal impact. Posted July 16, 2021, *Aztec Tlapajlotiketl*, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2__c7Ev97Sc.

15. A poet originally from the state of Morelos, close to Guerrero, and based in Chicago for several years.

16. On the evening of the feast day, a bull made of straw and papier-mâché decorated with flower patterns, filled with firecrackers and previously blessed by a priest, is lit outside and carried on the shoulders of a person who sets off charges amid the surrounding crowd, causing great excitement.

17. Juan Rulfo was a central figure of modern Mexican literature. His novel *Pedro Páramo* (1955), which unfolds in rural Mexico during the Mexican Revolution (1910–20), is written in a nonlinear manner, with a poetic and dream-like prose, and has been seen as a direct precedent to Magical Realism.

18. My translation from the Spanish as read by Rafael Ortiz in *Nicolás de Jesús: Art and Commitment* (Chicago: El Beisman Films, 2014), mins. 7:24–8:32.