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ARTIST'S QUESTIONNAIRE

I'm Finished When I Start Looking at the World in a Different Way'

The photographer Pieter Hugo, who has captured scenes from Nigeria to Mexico, takes T inside his studio.

By Osman Can Yerebakan | JANUARY 9, 2020



The artist Pieter Hugo, photographed in his studio in Cape Town, South Africa, alongside a human anatomy model. Credit: Stephanie Veldman

In 2018, the curator Francisco Berzunza invited the South African artist [Pieter Hugo](#) to Mexico to create a body of work that would engage with themes of sexuality and death for an exhibition at the [Centro Fotográfico Manuel Álvarez Bravo](#). During his monthlong stay, Hugo searched for a response to this prompt, and inspiration came when he chanced upon a platter of desiccated fruits in Oaxaca. “Making Pigments. San Agustin Etlea” (2018), which shows a spread of dying crops in bold hues, was the first image Hugo captured in Mexico. But “something shifted” during that first visit, Hugo says. “I don’t know why, but I’m not done here,” he remembers thinking; he has since visited Mexico four more times, traveling between the bustling border city of Tijuana in the north, the colonial town of San Cristóbal de las Casas in the Central Highlands and the indigenous Zapotec town of Juchitán in the southern state of Oaxaca. “From the Day of the Dead to narco-politics, death is strongly felt there,” he says of the country, but it was its people’s day-to-day understanding of life’s fragility that inspired his new photography series, “La Cucaracha,” which will go on display at [Yossi Milo Gallery](#) in New York this month. Hugo named the series after the popular folk song about an injured cockroach whose lyrics are often rewritten in Mexico as political satire.

The project depicts people from different walks of life across Mexico, capturing them within their social habitats, in emotionally, and often physically, stripped-down states. In “[The Snake Charmer, Hermosillo](#)” (2019), for example, a naked man holds an albino snake that curls around his leg; his expression is piercing, his posture stoic. “[The Advocate at Home, Mexico City](#)” (2019), shows a moment of intimacy, in which a man Hugo met at a photography course wears nothing but white socks and reclines over the couch in his living room. A similar degree of trust is felt in “[The Sex Worker, Oaxaca de Juárez](#)” (2018), a shot of a nude sex worker photographed against a pastel pink wall in her home. “The dynamic must feel equal for subjects to feel comfortable,” Hugo says about shooting people in their personal spaces. He cast his subjects at bars and gas stations, or even from social media, where he found the two musician friends who appear in “[Gabrielle and One of Her Sisters, Mexico City](#)” (2019), which shows two nude women standing in front a wall, while one pinches the other’s nipple, in homage to the anonymous 16th-century French painting “[Gabrielle d’Estrées and One of Her Sisters](#).” “I am interested in bodies that tell stories and capture the surrounding environments that shape those narratives,” Hugo says over the phone from his [Cape Town](#) studio, a 2,150-square-foot space where he

shoots, edits and prints his images when he's not traveling for an editorial or art project. "I don't get ideas by sitting at my studio — traveling and being outside feed me as an artist," he says.

Hugo, 43, grew up at the tail end of apartheid, witnessing South Africa's sweeping sociopolitical changes in the early 1990s. "Transition from one system to another left an impression and transformed me," he says. "Everything I saw was mediated by some power, so I wanted to see for myself, and photography was the perfect tool for my wanderlust." For more than a decade, he has been traveling the world, from China to Ghana to Nigeria, capturing images that illustrate the disorder and humility of life everywhere. He presents the results in series such as "Nollywood" (2009), for which he staged surreal versions of typical scenes from Nigerian movies, and "1994" (2016), for which he photographed children born after 1994, the year that signified the end of apartheid in South Africa and the genocide in Rwanda. He also shoots for magazines including T. He acknowledges that being a photographer grants him unique access to his subjects' lives but, he adds, "it's about what we do with that access." He references Diane Arbus's view that an artist must allow herself to be an outsider, a status he identifies with whether he's in Cape Town or in the bedroom of a stranger in Juárez. Below, Hugo answers T's Artist's Questionnaire.

**What is your day like? How much do you sleep?
What's your work schedule?**

I try to sleep nine hours every night. I wake up at 6 a.m. to drop off my kids at school, and I'm at the studio by 7:30 a.m. At some point, I go to the gym, but I try not to do the same thing at the same time, so I mix things up a little bit. If I'm not traveling, I try to spend time with the kids. I'm home at 4:30 p.m. — we have an early dinner, and by 8:30 p.m., I'm in bed.

How many hours of creative work do you think you do in a day?

Four. I feel so guilty when I read these interviews and see people say 24 hours! I might go surfing or read a book. I find that doing things that are not directly related to my practice actually feeds into being an artist. I like to keep things jazzed up — it's good for my mind.

What's the first piece of art you ever made?

The first photograph I took and printed was of a homeless woman lying on the street. Ironically, it was right on this street where I have my studio right now. Today, I am still seeing the same subjects here on these streets and making the same direct portraits of people.

What's the worst studio you ever had?

It was during a yearlong residency in Italy. I was not allowed to hang anything on the walls because it was a historic [Tadao Ando](#)-designed building. The architecture was amazing, but it was the most counterproductive space I've ever had. I just couldn't make it my own. I was allowed to be there and breathe it, but nothing else. Otherwise, I can be resourceful and turn anything into a studio.

What's the first work you ever sold? For how much?

I sold a portrait of a boy that I had photographed in Cape Town. His name was Tam Vleksi, and he had albinism. I sold it for \$150 in 2003.



When you start a new piece, where do you begin?

I start when I have an intuitive response to something that piques my interest. If I have the conviction that it's worth pursuing, I pack my bags and go to make the work. This often results out of a response to something I see on the media, which could be a newspaper article or something from a literary journal, anything that has visual stimuli. It's about having my eyes open — there is no formula for when that spark may find me. I cultivate a receptive eye.

How do you know when you're done?

I'm usually done when I'm three-quarters of the way through a project, when I realize that I have started seeing the world in a different way. There's still the labor part and finishing the work, but mentally and spiritually, I'm finished when I start looking at the world in a different way.

How many assistants do you have?

I usually have one full-time assistant. I recently decided to give him some time off from the studio to enjoy having personal space. I find it hard to work with someone sitting next to me. He comes in for a couple of days a week, and I'll brief him on some administrative work related to galleries, printing or shipping. That's where an assistant comes in handy. Otherwise I have two people working full time in the printing department, next door.



What music do you play when you're making art?

If I'm writing emails or writing for a catalog, which takes up a lot of time, I don't listen to music. I have an eclectic taste for when I'm editing, ranging from Beethoven to Katy Perry. I love Katy Perry. I actually once reached out to her agent to shoot a music video for her.

When did you first feel comfortable saying you're a professional artist?

I still don't feel comfortable saying that. I've oscillated between being a photographer, artist and photographic artist. The question comes up at customs when I land in a country. If I have to fill in my profession, I usually just write what I think is going to make it easiest for me to get through with the least hassle. I like to switch between journalist, photographer, photojournalist, artist, father and husband.

Is there a meal you eat while you're working?

There's a sushi place right around the corner — I go there and quickly eat something, because I often forget to eat.

Are you bingeing on any shows right now?

No. But I sometimes binge on New York Review of Books, which calms me down.

What's the weirdest object in your studio?

A collection of human skulls and bones from Tibet that function as spiritual Tantric Buddhist objects. I have a human skull which is also a drinking cup, and a human skull from Amsterdam.

How often do you talk to other artists?



I have a large library at my studio, which attracts a lot of young photographers. The selection is a mix of photography monographs and other art books. This is the only time I communicate with other artists, because I don't go to openings. When I started, looking at photography monographs in Cape Town was a totally alien idea. I learned photography through visiting university libraries, which can be hard to access, and I've built a strong relationship with books. I invite young artists to look at them and talk about their projects.

What's the last thing that made you cry?

I was going through a particularly intense period in which I was traveling a lot. One night, I was very tired and I couldn't help weeping while watching "Mamma Mia" with my daughter.

What does your studio window look out on?

One side of my studio looks at Table Mountain, which is a spectacular view, but the other side looks at a hotel.

What do you usually wear when you're working?

It really depends on what's happening that day. Today, I'm wearing running shorts and a vest with Birkenstocks. If I have a curator or another guest coming by, I make an effort. The older I get, the more I feel like moving toward wearing a uniform.

What's your worst habit?

Smoking.

What embarrasses you?

Decisions I occasionally make and knowing they're out in the world somewhere.

Do you exercise?

Once a week, I go surfing, spearfishing or running, or I go to the gym.

What are you reading right now?

A catalog published by Camera Austria International for an exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art in Salzburg. It's fascinating.

What's your favorite artwork by someone else?

[Helmar Lerski](#)'s "Metamorphosis" series, which he made on his balcony in 1936 in Palestine. They're just so seductive, but at the same time, they raise such interesting questions about the possibility of portraiture. Lerski made the series to question the veracity of the medium, but he also breathes new life and energy into the genre.

"Pieter Hugo: La Cucaracha" is on view from Jan. 10 through Feb. 21, at Yossi Milo Gallery, 245 10th Avenue, New York, yossimilo.com.