

La Calavera, El Gran Ambar,
2017. Glass and metal.
H 44, W 16, D 12 in.

Something Borrowed

Tracing the fine line between inspiration and appropriation in new work by
Martin Janecký

BY ALLISON ADLER

The front windows of New York City's Heller Gallery this spring were taken over by works inspired by Mexico's Día de Muertos rituals, depicting what the gallery deemed "one of history's most potent images": the human skull. Anatomically accurate renderings of the human skull—most adorned around the eyes, mouth and forehead with spheres mimicking the beads that decorate *calaveras* traditionally made of sugar or clay—were arranged on beds of glass flowers and leaves. Lit from overhead like sacred objects, they shone on pedestals. Other, flatter renderings of traditional *calaveras* were also on view, three of which were backlit like candleholders, perhaps evoking the candlelit *ofrendas*, or altars, made to celebrate and welcome the souls of deceased ancestors.

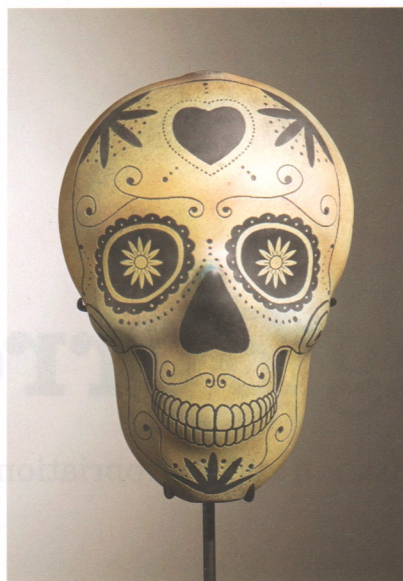
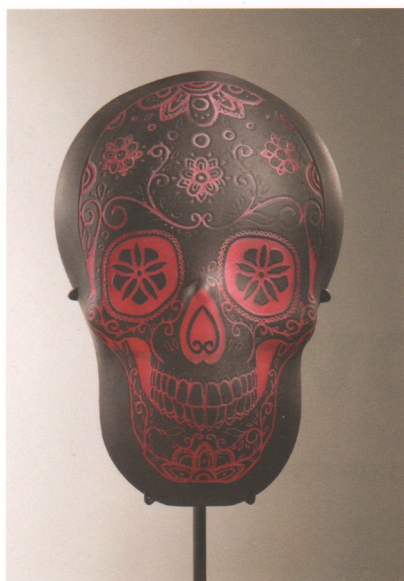
A visitor to the gallery might understandably be surprised to discover that these are not from Mexico, but rather works by Martin Janecký, the famed Czech glassblower known for his skills sculpting inside the bubble. One could say this exhibition, titled "Día de Muertos," is a natural progression for Janecký's work, delving below the surface of his lifelike portraits to understand and recreate the structure that lies beneath the flesh. It also demonstrates the continuing influence of his travels on his work, something John Drury predicted in his cover article in the Summer 2016 issue of *Glass* (#143).

"Día de Muertos" was inspired by a visit to Mexico in 2013 when Janecký was invited to participate in Día de Muertos celebrations. Humbled and amazed, he said, "I wanted to use my traditional craft to show the Día de Muertos through my eyes and to share it with all people. My plan was to recreate iconic examples of this culture in glass, which has never been done in this scale. I do so with humility and a huge respect for Mexico's history and culture."

Despite this sincerity, Janecký's potent images have evoked an equally potent question: Is this appropriation? On the surface, we have an artist not from Mexico and not of Mexican descent who has created a body of work that incorporates elements of a traditional Mexican holiday. However, appropriation entails more than simply taking or incorporating elements of a culture that is not one's own. It is also defined by how this is done—and to what end. Essentially, cultural appropriation is the act of taking something from a culture not your own—often it is one that has been historically underprivileged—and using it in a way that shows a lack of understanding of its original meaning and disrespects its originating culture. But this body of work, the language used to describe it, and its display do not, I think, offer an easy answer to the question of appropriation. What it does offer is a means for reflecting, alongside the work of other culture-crossing glass artists, on the nature of representation. It is also a means to begin parsing out two interconnected questions: When does incorporation become appropriation? And where does the delicate line between appreciation and appropriation lie?

It is obvious from Janecký's statements that he found something within Día de Muertos celebrations that resonated with him. This is, of course, not an uncommon experience. Those privileged enough to see and experience a bit of the world, literally or through means like books, pick up resonant memories, objects, or ideas here and there. These connect us to, and become a part of, our work and ourselves. There are also those of us privileged (or so I like to think) to exist at the crossings of many borders, whether literally or by blood, a condition that leads to a multifaceted and multicultural self.

In the category of those literal and figurative travelers, William Morris's artifact-like figures, vases, and jars draw on what the late James Yood, in the Summer 2007 issue of *Glass* (#107) called



LEFT: *Calavera Negra II*,
2017. Glass and metal.
H 32, W 11, D 6 in.

COURTESY: HELLER GALLERY

RIGHT: *La Calavera Corazon*,
2017. Glass and metal.
H 33, W 12, D 7 in.

“historical modes” and ways of thinking associated with the ancient or native peoples of North America, Africa, Oceania and Central America. Morris clearly resonates with these ways of thinking, and they represent what he believes to be a deeper understanding of one’s place on Earth. His works “resurrect [the] ideologies and appearances” of these peoples as a sort of corrective to the destructive tendencies of the modern world.

Among those enmeshed in the threads of many worlds are Einar and Jamex de la Torre. Their kaleidoscopic works combine elements not only from Mexican and American culture, but also, increasingly, from cultures around the world. Take, for example, *Tara’s Temple*, a Tara Buddha shrine tagged with graffiti, or *Eastern Medicine*, a Mayan calendar surrounded by images of *la Virgen* and displaying a central face that looks like a cross between the face of Tonatiuh (the sun god) and a Hindu mask. Such works can be seen as manifestations of lives lived within and between both sides of the border, as well as embodiments of an existence that questions the purity and stability of cultural identity.

Looking at Janecký’s work, the exhibit text at Heller Gallery cites his familiarity with the Sedlec Ossuary in his native Czechoslovakia, a curious chapel decorated with thousands of bones arranged into chandeliers and other decorative elements. This information suggests that the *calaveras*—defined as “decorative representations of skulls”—resonated with Janecký’s own experience with the human skull. This led him to “set to work on incorporating” these representations into his work.

“Representation” is an interesting concept and one through which I began to think about Janecký’s body of work and the issue of appropriation. The cultural theorist Stuart Hall describes representation as “using language to say something meaningful about, or to represent, the world meaningfully, to other people.”



La Quinceañera, 2017.
Glass and metal. H 22 ¾,
W 10 ¼, D 8 in.

Hueso de Cobre, 2017.
Glass and metal. H 31,
W 12, D 9 ½ in.

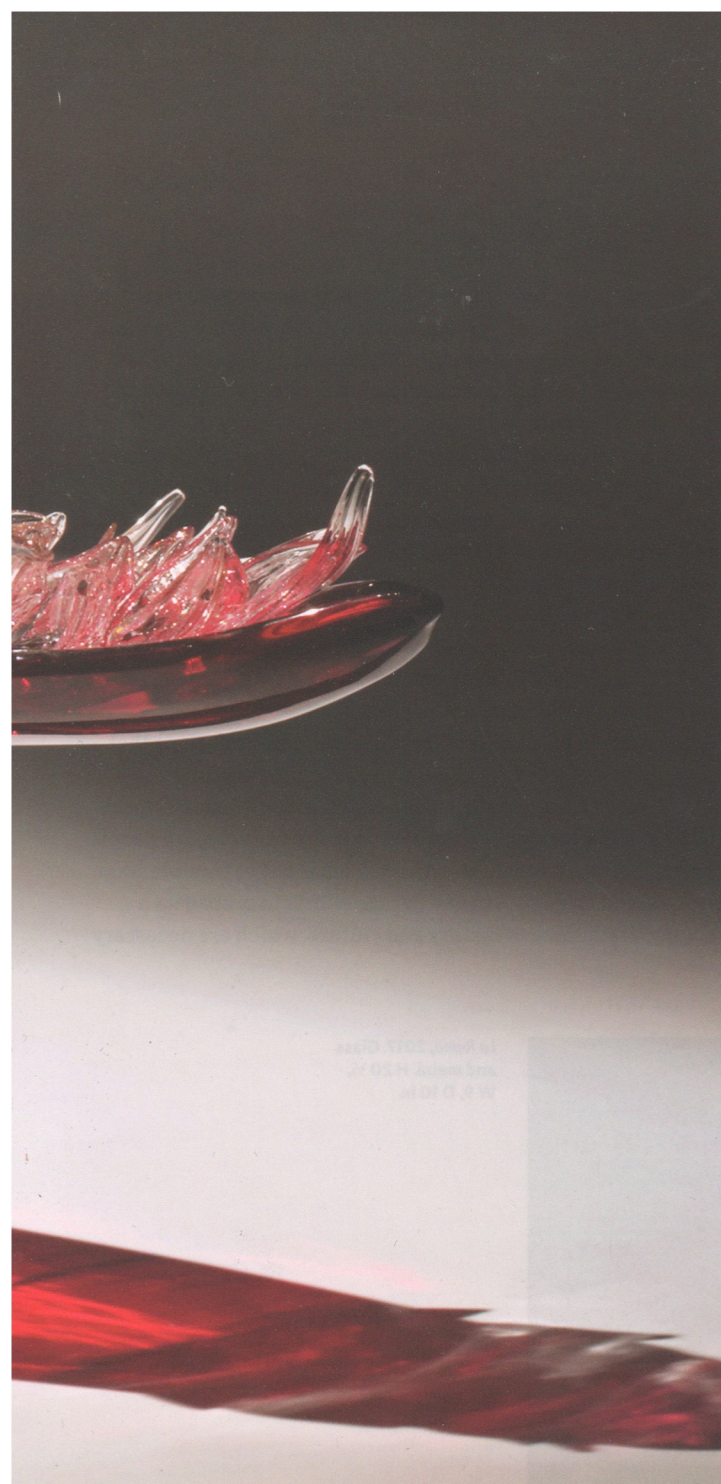




Pluma Mortal, 2017.
Glass and metal. H 13 ½,
W 39, D 7 in.

This language is not only verbal or written, but also visual. The way we use or incorporate images, how we talk about them, and the emotions and experiences we attach to them—all create meaning. Expanding on how representations create meaning, Hall states, “We should perhaps learn to think of meaning less in terms of ‘accuracy’ and ‘truth’ and more in terms of effective exchange—a process of *translation*, which facilitates cultural communication while always recognizing the persistence of difference and power between different ‘speakers’ within the same cultural circuit.”

Focusing on the first part of Hall’s statement, if a representation is a translation, it is always a departure from the original. This is



inevitable in any exchange. It is clear that Janecký did not carbon-copy a few *calaveras* and pass it off as his own work. Instead, he filtered it through his own lens, colored by his personal experiences. We can perhaps see Janecký's work as an act of respectful translation, prompted by an invitation. This is something emphasized by the language both Janecký and Heller Gallery use to describe "Día de Muertos." William Morris similarly did not produce carbon copies; he incorporated elements ("attitudes and philosophies," according to Yood) of those civilizations that most appeal to him. And he, too, is sincere, incorporating other cultures "carefully and honorably."

And yet a representation formed by exchange, regardless of the meaning that it creates, regardless of good intentions, even regardless of whether it fits with our personal experiences or not, can still be formed via appropriation. So when is this the case? This is where the second part of Hall's statement comes in, the part in which a translation facilitates communication while recognizing power imbalances. Translation is, to echo the words of famed literary theorist Gayatri Spivak, "a field of power." As an act of translation, a representation can become appropriative when there is a power imbalance: someone from a more privileged position or culture takes or modifies something from a historically less privileged culture in an unequal exchange; nothing is given back, and/or the imbalance is not acknowledged. This can be done intentionally or unintentionally.

The process through which artists filter other cultures through their experiences thus introduces another dilemma. Is Janecký from a privileged position? Yes. "Día de Muertos" and its sale in Heller Gallery are made possible by Janecký's participation in a cultural circuit that may be, in a sense, above that in which the people with whom he celebrated Día de Muertos exist. From this position, the skull's status as "a universally potent image" can be easily used to gloss over an unequal act of incorporation. This is also the privileged position from which Morris can claim that he is able to access a psychological state associated with "our collective ancestors." Words like "universal," "common," and "collective" diffuse inequality (though I do not mean to imply that these artists intentionally use these words to disguise this fact; I am simply pointing out what the language does). Morris may be an artist who, as Yood pointed out, can melt time away, but this also disguises the fact that many cannot escape the consequences of time and history (i.e., colonialism). Salvador Dalí knew this well: *La persistència de la memòria*; memory persists. Further, does history, whether that of ancient Egypt, ancient Greece, Mesoamerica, or Oceania, really belong to everyone, equally?

Compounding this universalization, "Día de Muertos" is displayed using the classic white-cube method of placing objects on plinths under boutique lighting, a strategy that has been considered decontextualizing (though this is what we expect when we walk into a commercial gallery, right?). But can we call this work appropriative on the basis of these universalizing factors alone? Do we gloss over the fact that Janecký was invited to participate—that he did not just go in and take what he was not allowed to take? There is consent and respectful translation here. Whether there is mutual benefit for both parties involved in the translation, however, remains a bit ambiguous. An unacknowledged power imbalance is also a characteristic of Morris's work that could lead to accusations of appropriation. While Morris certainly respects and appreciates the cultures he draws on, he also restricts them to an idealized past, an act that keeps non-Western groups in a subordinate position.

In contrast to Morris, the De la Torre brothers show that cultures are not preserved in amber. David Pagel, writing on

the De la Torre brothers in the *Los Angeles Times*, describes the brothers' work as "mak[ing] scathing fun of the idea that history is sacred, that culture is pure, that identity is stable, and that meaning can be passed from one generation to the next without mutating into something no one expected." If we, as Hall suggests, view culture as a conceptual map that determines what a representation means and how we can represent (or not represent) something, claims of appropriation try to fix meaning; they state that the appropriated object or act departs from a particular conceptual map. But in an increasingly interconnected world where cultural purity is often called into question, there is not one conceptual map, but several ever-changing maps. It is a fact that cultures both past and present continue to exchange ideas and be inspired by each other. The De la Torre brothers themselves said, in a conversation with the *Glass Quarterly Hot Sheet*, that culture is "an organic magnet that appropriates whatever it wants." So what do we refer to when we say that a work of art is appropriative?

And yet, as someone who resonates with the work of the De la Torre brothers, I still ask myself: Is borderlessness the new universality? Do some of us unwittingly use an existence at the crossroads of multiple identities to incorporate whatever

resonates with us? The ability to seamlessly incorporate the multiple cultures that form or resonate with one's self is itself a privilege. When this seamless incorporation ignores history and context, it is, I think, not much different from the privilege that allows Morris to claim universal access to the history of non-Western cultures. Change and evolution is inevitable and necessary, yes. But in many cases, it is important to define the "proper" and "improper" ways of representing (translating) visual imagery to preserve meaning and tradition, to establish ownership where it has been taken away, and to provide a touchstone for contemporary practitioners. So how do we acknowledge both fixity and change when we speak about appropriation? Culture, I have learned, is simultaneously rooted and shifting. Any discussion of appropriation should keep this in mind.

We must also keep in mind that the same power relations that allow appropriation to take place also allow those who cry "appropriation" from privileged armchairs in the Western world to make those claims for, and sometimes over, the voices of people within the culture we want to protect. This is not to trample good intentions, and this is not to discourage efforts to propagate a deeper understanding of history and culture, which are necessary



La Reina, 2017. Glass and metal. H 20 ½, W 9, D 10 in.

Ambar, 2017. Glass and metal. H 13 ½, W 11, D 7 ¾ in.



and important during any act of exchange and/or incorporation. This is simply to encourage more nuanced thinking on this subject. Further, what is important is not simply whether a work or act is appropriative or not. It is important to also ask: What are the networks and relations that allow appropriation to occur in the first place?

In the end, looking at Janecký's work on its own and within a constellation of other glass artists whose work can be considered appropriative, I find it difficult to pronounce this body of work as an act of appropriation or not. It lies, I think, somewhere between. Appropriation is complicated, and so is an artist's body of work. Just as *Día de Muertos* is not simply about death and skulls but is, in fact, about honoring life and family, Janecký's "*Día de*

Muertos" is not a meditation on the skull as a flat, universal symbol, but about its presence in a vibrant and living cultural celebration. This life is present in his works: The skull in *Ambar* appears to be rising out of a floral arrangement, the silver eyes of *Hueso de Cobre* glimmer in the light, and *La Palida* stands confidently in her swaying leaves as if she is a living person. On *Día de Muertos*, the border between the living and the dead is blurred. For now, the lines between appreciation and appropriation remain in this case, I think, similarly blurred. ■

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