

# ARTS SPACE

## A gathering of souls

*Altars, remembrances, and First Friday magic*

BY JOHN EWING

**B**y now, the spirits of San Antonio's dearly departed will have returned to the afterlife from their annual visit to the world of the living. Each year at this time, the intangible presence of the dead among us is felt through the wondrous signs that accompany them: a profusion of marigolds, the scent of copal, pan de muertos and sugar skulls, and candle-lit altars of personal mementos. In shops, galleries, and private homes around the city, El Día de los Muertos is celebrated on November 2 with ofrendas to loved ones now gone. Although the day will have passed when you read this, the beautiful and creative displays of affection are with us for a little while longer throughout South Town and elsewhere in the city.

Danny Lozano and Craig Pennel are largely responsible for introducing the King William District to the forgotten customs of Día de los Muertos. More commonly known as All Souls Day, Day of the Dead is a hybrid of Meso-American and Catholic customs widely observed from Mexico to Ecuador. At Tienda Guadalupe, a folk art shop in King William, Lozano and Pennel began creating traditional altars to deceased friends in 1988.

"The first year, no one knew what the hell we were doing and didn't care, except maybe the gay community, who needed this more than anybody else right at that moment," remembers Pennel. He organized some of the first public celebrations with Lozano and artist Terry Ybañez. At the height of the AIDS crisis, Día de



Hank Lee at San Angel Folk Art gallery

PHOTO BY TOMMY HULTGREN

los Muertos was observed with candlelight processions that terminated in fundraiser benefits for AIDS awareness at Blue Star Arts Complex. The processions have grown each year to include additional altars along the route.

This year, the celebration was slated to begin

at Al Rendon's Foto Real Gallery in La Villita, with altars and paintings by David Zamora Casas and a performance by Cristal Rojas Gonzales. Planned to carry photographs and flowers, the procession was charted to move toward

See First Friday page 14



Skeleton, for sale, by student artists at SAYSI

South Town, stopping along the way at Salazar Studio on South Alamo Street. With an altar to his grandmother Theresa, photographer Joe Salazar honors the woman who inspired him to be an artist. Returning to San Antonio from design school in Denver, Salazar says he learned much about himself by working with artists from other regions. Día de los Muertos helps him make additional connections: "I always had this Hispanic culture behind me and didn't realize it until I got back to the people in San

Antonio and started to see an angel here, a cross there — everybody was interpreting their own vision in painting, sculpture, and installations."

It is this collective observance that makes it such a meaningful occasion. Grief and personal loss are shared and transformed through organized ritual. Craig Pennel planned on receiving the procession at Tienda Guadalupe, where family members would serve *Bedoy's pan de muertos* (bread of the dead) and *champurrado*, a chocolate drink thickened with cornmeal. Inside the shop, the altar is dedicated to Danny Lozano and is resplendent with marigolds, cockscomb, candles, and *calaveras*, as well as personal reminders — Snickers, Big Red, tequila, and Church's chicken.

"I buy those things for Danny like I used to do," says Pennel. "It's a way of celebrating a person's existence and having a cathartic release of emotion. It doesn't really matter what the altar looks like when you're finished; putting it together is the satisfying part." Pennel describes Día de los Muertos as a gift from the indigenous peoples of America to a society with no truly effective way to cope with bereavement.

At San Angel Folk Art gallery in the Blue Star Arts Complex, Hank Lee hosts a communal altar that also educates. This year, the altar is dedicated to the Veracruz songstress, *Toña la Negra*. The public is invited to bring photographs of loved ones and offerings to place on the altar, which is then blessed by a minister with marigolds dipped in water. In addition to creative touches (for example, a *piloncillo* sugar mold used as a candle stand), Lee observes traditional customs such as mixing copal incense with marigold. The intoxicating aroma resembles earth and old bones, a reliquary welcome to traveling spirits.

Next door, Jump-Start Performance Company has fashioned an altar in conjunction with the First Friday opening

of Sterling Houston's *Santo Negro*, a folk opera based on the life of San Martín de Porres. As a saint often petitioned to intercede in times of crisis, San Martín is a popular figure on altars. This year, the presentation includes work by students from Bonham and Douglass Elementary and Poe Middle School who participate in the Jump-Starts arts and education program.

At SAYSI, across the walk, student artists are preparing for the Thursday, November 4, *Noche de Lotería*, a benefit with music, food, and games of *lotería*, or Mexican bingo. The students will also unveil a Día de los Muertos altar dedicated to the Mexican muralists Orozco, Siqueiros, and Rivera. They will host a musical celebration on First Friday and sell papier-mâché skeletons and masks called *calacas*. "We try to give the students more information with each project, a historical perspective to what we're doing and why we're doing it," says director Jon Hinojosa. Part of the education is to familiarize students with turn-of-the-century Mexican lithographer and satirist José Guadalupe Posada, who utilized the Day of the Dead skeleton as an Everyman figure in revolutionary cartoons. As Craig Pennel puts it, "the dead can say things without being punished!"

Additionally, UNAM, the Guadalupe Cultural Arts Center, the Esperanza, San Antonio College, and Centro Cultural Aztlán will have altars on display for a short time. As seen in San Antonio, the ritual customs of Día de los Muertos are delightfully infectious and have gradually inspired similar, cross-cultural celebrations throughout North America. Memorial altars can be seen as far north as Chicago, Pittsburgh, and New York, touching evidence of humanity's universal need to remember and honor the dead. ■

For more info on altars, exhibits, and First Friday, check All Day/All Night listings on page 22.