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A Tattoo Master, Off the Street, Into the Gallery

By CAROL KINO

WHEN artists come to New York for a show, they often make a trip to Chelsea to check out the competition. But when the Mexican tattoo artist known as Dr. Lakra arrived last month to install his exhibition at the Drawing Center, he headed straight for the New York Public Library on 42nd Street, to sign up for a library card. Then he began researching some of the subjects that fascinate him, like 19th-century medical instruments, witchcraft and anthropology.

"When I travel, I always go to public libraries," he said in a recent interview. "I'm always hungry for images."

He had also visited the Strand bookstore, to buy books about British Raj photography, and Forbidden Planet, a store that sells comic books. All these threads, and more, can be found in this 39-year-old artist's [first New York](#)

solo show, on view through April 23 at the Drawing Center's temporary project space at 3 Wooster Street in SoHo.

The show consists of a giant wall drawing, constructed around sepia-tone ribbons of paint that form silhouettes of stalactites and stalagmites on the walls around the room. The paint seems to metamorphose into different things, including hanks of hair, statue-topped pedestals and piles of excrement. Also in the mix are large paintings of faces, animals and internal organs, which Dr. Lakra painted in the space during the 10-day installation, and dozens of small ink-on-vellum drawings, made over the last year in his Oaxaca studio. Look closely, and you'll see faces, medical illustrations, African totems and plenty of naked women enacting scenes from porn magazines. On the far wall a three-foot-tall skull faces off against a taller portrait of a Maori warrior, his skin covered with gang tattoos.

It's a departure from the smaller-scale work that made Dr. Lakra's reputation: tattoo-like drawings that he inks on found objects like dolls, toys and girlie pictures culled from midcentury magazines.

In its flamboyance the work at the Drawing Center seems a departure from Dr. Lakra's personality. Although he sports big, Gypsy-like silver hoop earrings and is nearly covered with tattoos (with a heart on his left hand and a skull and crossed paint brushes on his right) he is also quite mild mannered and soft-spoken.

"Lakra is a much more complex artist than people realize," said his longtime art dealer and friend Jose Kuri, a partner in the [Mexico City gallery Kurimanzutto](#). "It's very easy to pigeonhole him as a tattoo artist who entered the art world with these tattoos on vintage magazines. But he's really well-educated in classical painting and anthropology."

And among today's young Mexican avant-garde, he is the one "who has best incorporated Mexico's tradition of illustration and printmaking and graphic design and pre-Colombian art," said Pedro H. Alonzo, who organized Dr. Lakra's [first solo museum show for the Institute of Contemporary Arts/Boston](#) last year. Mr. Alonzo also noted the artist's many references to José Guadalupe Posada, known for Day of the Dead imagery, and the Mexican caricaturist Miguel Covarrubias.

Born in Mexico City as Jerónimo López Ramírez, Dr. Lakra is the eldest son

of the anthropologist and poet Elisa Ramírez Castañeda and [the painter Francisco Toledo](#), one of Mexico's towering cultural figures. (Mr. Toledo has had a hand in founding just about every cultural institution in his native Oaxaca.)

Dr. Lakra and his older sister, the conceptual artist Laureana Toledo, spent their childhood travelling around the world and continued visiting their father wherever he was living — New York, Paris, Barcelona — after their parents divorced in 1980. "My father took us to many, many museums," Dr. Lakra said. "It was a really important time for learning about art." Early on, he was fascinated by Dada, the Surrealists and the caricatures of George Grosz, Honoré Daumier and Otto Dix.

Now that he's married with two young sons of his own, Dr. Lakra admits to seeing many similarities between himself and his father, primarily their obsession with drawing. But their relationship wasn't always so smooth. As a child he was also obsessed by comic books and Mad magazine, both of which his father hated. "This was even before I was a rebellious teenager," he said, when he dropped out of high school and hung out at Mexico City's El Chopo street market, where a nascent tattoo scene was under way.

Back then, he said, tattooing was associated with Mexico's criminal underclass. (His own tattoos, he said, had made him a target for the police more than once.) He and his friends were soon practicing the art on one another, using equipment jury-rigged from sewing needles and cassette player motors. "You used to put the ink in the bottle cap of the beer you were drinking," he said, laughing, "or you would clean one you found in the street." (Along the way he earned his nickname "Dr." because he carried his equipment in a doctor's bag, and "lacra," a Mexican expression that suggests a scar or a mark on the skin, and the scum of the earth.)

Yet he was also leading a parallel art-world life. After quitting school he joined a workshop [led by Gabriel Orozco](#), where his fellow students included Gabriel Kuri, Abraham Cruzvillegas, and Damian Ortega, now [leading lights of the new Mexican scene](#). That's also how he met his dealer, Jose Kuri, Gabriel's older brother, who used to hang around the artists' workshop sessions and go drinking with them afterward. "Jerónimo was much younger than the others," Jose Kuri said. "But he was very precocious. And he had his own way of doing things."

So while the others went on to form Temistocles 44, a collective where they explored performance and conceptualism, Dr. Lakra decamped to Berlin, where he spent two years squatting and panhandling. By 1993 he had moved to Oakland, Calif., drawn by the tattoo scene.

He soon met the tattoo artist Don Ed Hardy at a tattoo convention. Mr. Hardy, impressed by Dr. Lakra's drawings, traded him professional tattoo equipment for a painting and took the younger artist under his wing. "I couldn't do a proper apprenticeship because I was working," Dr. Lakra said, referring to his job as a dishwasher. "He let me be in the shop just watching. I became friends with all the other workers, and I got many, many tattoos."

It was also Mr. Hardy who gave Dr. Lakra his New York gallery debut, by including him in "Pierced Hearts and True Love," a tattoo show that he organized with the Drawing Center in 1995.

By then Dr. Lakra had returned to Mexico City and set up his own tattoo shop. He also began showing with La Panaderia, an artist-run space, and creating street murals. Mr. Kuri lured him to Kurimanzutto soon after it opened in 1999, and Dr. Lakra quickly realized the benefit of being associated with a commercial gallery. "They were selling my drawings for two or three times the price I was selling them for at tattoo conventions," he said. "I didn't have to bargain." (These days he tattoos mostly for private clients.)

For his first solo show at Kurimanzutto in 2009 Mr. Kuri encouraged him to work on a larger scale by creating a mural that would relate to the gallery space just as his tattoos relate to the human body. Although there was a strong market for his drawings, "we wanted to push him," Mr. Kuri said, "knowing that it would really feed him as an artist."

He made his second site-specific wall drawing last fall, for the ICA/Boston show, where he also exhibited small-scale drawings. But this time, Dr. Lakra said, his aim was to meld the drawings and the mural.

"I didn't want to separate them," he said. "I wanted to have everything blending together." Figuring it out was "like a puzzle," he added, and the same might be said of the way he has built his art career.