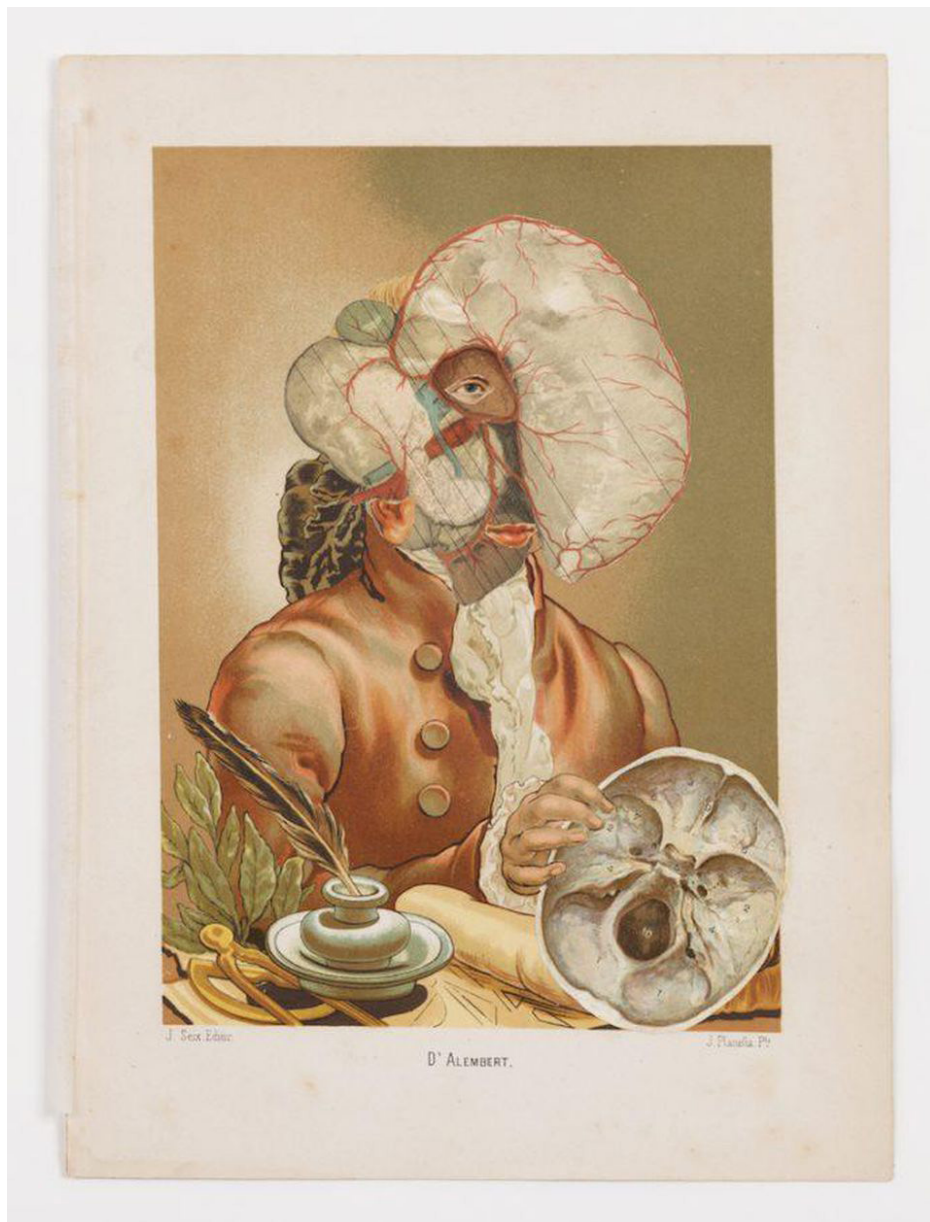


Dr. Lakra, I Presume? At White Columns

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"So I would go to the Lagunilla street market and I would find many things there somewhat haphazardly. . . you don't know what you are looking for or what you are going to find." Dr. Lakra, 2014



Dr. Lakra. Untitled (D'Alembert). 2013-2014. Image courtesy of the artist and Kurimanzutto, Mexico Cit, New York.



Dr. Lakra. Untitled (Paracelso). 2013-2014. Image courtesy of the artist and Kurimanzutto, Mexico Cit, New York.



Dr. Lakra. Untitled (Sta. Teresa de Jesús). 2013-2014. Image courtesy of the artist and Kurimanzutto, Mexico Cit, New York.

André Breton, the French writer and poet, wrote the first Manifesto of Surrealism in 1924. Fourteen years later, he and Jacqueline Lamba, his wife, arrived in Mexico at the invitation of the National University to give a lecture entitled Modern Transformations of Art and Surrealism (Las transformaciones modernas del arte y el surrealismo) at the Colegio de San Ildefonso. After this visit, where he had been steeped in Mexican identity and culture, Breton described the country as “the very land of surrealism.” He was among the first of several famous European surrealists to visit Mexico. Even Salvador Dalí made a short visit. He reputedly said, “There is no way I’m going back to Mexico. I can’t stand to be in a country that is more surrealist than my paintings”.

Aesthetically and conceptually, the collages of Dr. Lakra (born Jerónimo López Ramírez in 1972) are direct descendants of Surrealism and, more importantly, Max Ernst. Ernst’s collages elicited unqualified praise from Breton, who admired these ambiguous works, describing them as “the meticulous reconstruction of a crime witnessed in a dream.” Werner Spies, an Ernst scholar, described collage as a “A Medium of Doubt. Collage as Formal Means and Instrument of Cultural Revolt.” Ernst reinvented the collage process and transformed it completely, technically and ideologically. Spies continued, “any element of a collage, reduced to its naked self, will abscond from the work. It will lose, unlike a detail of a painting or drawing, all relation to the whole. Indeed, collage might be defined, in this sense, as a structure that by its very nature allows no excerpting, no judging by its parts.”

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Dr. Lakra. Untitled (Isaac Newton). 2013-2014. Image courtesy of the artist and Kurimanzutto, Mexico Cit, New York.



Dr. Lakra. Untitled (Leibniz). 2013-2014. Image courtesy of the artist and Kurimanzutto, Mexico Cit, New York.

The collage process—selecting, recombining and formatting—results in a whole that is more than the sum of its parts. Lucy Lippard, the art critic and curator, further defined collage as:

an alchemical composition of two or more heterogenous elements, resulting from their unexpected reconciliation owing either to a sensitive will—by means of a love of clairvoyance—towards a systematic confusion and "disorder of all the senses" (Rimbaud) or to chance, or to a will favorable to chance. . . chance is master of humor. (Lippard, 1970-1971)

Ramírez—better known as Dr. Lakra—is something of an assemblage in his own right. He is the son of Elisa Ramírez Castañeda, a renowned anthropologist, poet and translator, and Francisco Toledo, a famed Oaxacan artist, whose paintings have been described as “seamless meshing of global and local culture and high art.” Dr. Lakra’s parents divorced when he was eight, and he and his older sister, Laureana Toledo, a conceptual artist, spent their childhood visiting their father wherever he was living at the time and going to museums. He had access to various cultural perspectives, ranging from the street to the sophisticated. Ramírez liked the surrealists and the German Neue Sachlichkeit (New Objectivity) movement, championed by George Grosz, the caricaturist and painter, and Otto Dix, the brutally realistic painter and printmaker, both of whom used satire to expose and attack post-war Weimar German society.

Dr. Lakra did not set out to become an artist. As he relayed to Gabriel Orozco in an interview published in 2010, “I didn’t have much of an idea of what being an artist was. I wanted to draw, rather, to be a cartoonist; I wanted to publish little drawings, jokes, in the newspaper. Mad magazine was a big influence.” Although his father was an artist, Dr. Lakra was estranged from him for several years. As a teenager, he dropped out of high school and hung out at Mexico City’s counterculture street market, El Chopo, the crossroads for Punks, Rockers, Skaters, Darks, Emos, Rockabilies, Rastas, Metal Heads, Cyberpunks, Goths, and Deathrockers. Along the way, Dr. Lakra got involved in the local, underground tattooing scene, using bottle caps as ink reservoirs, sewing needles and cassette player motors as homemade tools of his trade. He started his own “practice” under the name Dr. Lakra (alternatively translated as scar, blemish, or just plain scumbag). He also joined a weekly Friday Workshop (Taller de los Viernes) at

Gabriel Orozco's studio, working along side the then-emerging Mexican artists Abraham Cruzvillegas, Gabriel Kuri and Damián Ortega.

In 1989, Dr. Lakra visited Berlin for three months, shortly after the Wall came down. He returned to Germany in 1991 where he spent two and a half years squatting, panhandling and, by his own admission, stealing books and reselling them. He also studied drawing and painting. Dr. Lakra then moved to Oakland, California, where he started out as a dishwasher to make ends meet. This is also where he met Don Ed Hardy—the tattoo artist—at an ink convention. Dr. Lakra returned to Mexico City to open a tattoo shop, before relocating to Oaxaca to draw, paint and tattoo for “private collectors.” Along the way, Dr. Lakra became an obsessive collector, of both ideas and objects, of what might be collectively termed Chacharas, “a generic term,” Lakra says, “that includes antiques, used things, old publications . . . all that.” His collections—accumulations really—range from books and magazines to plastic dolls and jars of insects. They overtake his studio as seen in this 2014 video, <https://vimeo.com/channels/kadiviews/101638481>. These are source materials that Dr. Lakra uses in his wall paintings, installations, sculptures, paintings, drawings, collages, comics, zines and tattoos.

Dr. Lakra is under-recognized in the United States. In 2010, The Institute of Contemporary Art (Boston) hosted his first solo exhibition, which later traveled to The Drawing Center (New York). The exhibition included a site-specific wall drawing that wrapped around the gallery's walls, on which works on paper—using materials ranging from anatomy textbooks, to magazine pin-ups and comic strips—were hung. It was easier then to connect the dots between his drawings and his tattoos, since the drawings in both shows had Dr. Lakra's inked designs and signature filigree. Dr. Lakra separates his art-making from tattooing since, as he says, “the very fact of doing something that another person asks you to do as craft; repeating the same designs is a craft.” Art is art, and ink is ink.

The current exhibition at White Columns, presented in collaboration with kurimanzutto, consists entirely of Dr. Lakra's collages. His foundation materials are chromolithographs from the 19th century. Most of them come from a volume titled *La Ciencia Y Sus Hombres: Vidas de los Sabios* (Science and Its Men: Lives of the Sages) by Louis (Luis) Figuier, a French scientist and writer who was known for putting science “within reach of all levels of intelligence,” which is a rather cringe-worthy description when you look into Figuier's history.

Dr. Lakra's collages partially mask, but do not completely obscure, the original source material (a few of which can be found online with diligent searches), such as the portrait of Gottfried Wilhelm von Leibniz. In a side-by-side comparison of the original lithograph with Dr. Lakra's collage you can see where and how the artist “replaced” Leibniz's escutcheon—his coat of arms—with a cutout of a human skull, and substituted Leibniz's face with a heart and other human image parts, leaving only a single blue eye in the original. Other foundation drawings include oddities like Descartes giving philosophy lessons to Queen Christina of Sweden. The head of the queen is replaced with the head of a cat; a smoking boar toting bags of money replaces Descartes. A third work—*El Renacimiento* (Renaissance)—obliterates both a medallion of Leo X, the last of the profligate Renaissance popes, with a cartoonish “tribal” mask, as well as the allegorical image of the Renaissance herself. More importantly, “Miss Renaissance” sits with her foot hovering just above the body of a nude (presumably, “primitive”) woman. It is a sign of complete suppression and catholic victory. There is a sense of something entirely Through the Looking-Glass, and What Alice Found There at work here. There is also an undeniable relationship to 18th century Mexican painting. Dr. Lakra creates a fantastical, complex world where the macabre is humorous. Happy Halloween.

As Breton wrote about Ernst's collages: “Who knows if we are not somehow preparing ourselves to escape from the principle of identity?” Each collage is decidedly ambiguous, an entirely new image with a new meaning. Deciphering Dr. Lakra's work is not simple, even though he does not overly obscure the original source material. These collages take an entirely different level of concentration and focus, as you look at these cryptic, often-absurd, visual puzzles. As kurimanzutto, Dr. Lakra's gallery in Mexico City, summarizes it, the artist “dismantles and subverts dominant ideologies to question what is considered civilized or barbaric, correct or incorrect, ‘high’ or ‘folk’ art.” Collage may look easy, even benign, but it is as calculated and strategic as art can be. The inspiration for each of Dr. Lakra's collages originates in the imagination, a