

PORTRAITS Podcast – Hugo Crosthwaite Episode

[INTRO MUSIC]

Kim Sajet: Welcome to Portraits: a podcast from the Smithsonian National Portrait Gallery where art and biography, history and identity collide. I'm Kim Sajet.

[MUSIC]

Kim Sajet: This episode, we challenge the definition of portraiture. That's a lofty goal of our Outwin Boochever Portrait Competition. If you're not familiar, the Outwin has been held every three years since 2006. And we ask artists from all over the United States to send us a portrait that speaks to our contemporary moment. We're not looking for a traditional painting of a powerful subject in this case. We're asking creative people to introduce us to interesting people, so a lot of other people actually all over the world can meet them. And we ask artists to submit work in all media: painting, drawing, photography, video and even performance. Well, today, I'm thrilled to be introducing you to this year's winner, Hugo Crosthwaite.

[MUSIC]

Kim Sajet: Hugo won for his stop motion drawing animation called, "A Portrait of Berenice Sarmiento Chávez," about the perilous journey of an immigrant who crosses the border from Tijuana into the United States. This video is basically an animated portrait, and it's composed of around 1,400 photographs that Hugo took while he was drawing Berenice's story. It's no accident that Hugo chose to focus on immigration. He grew up in Tijuana and he knows the Mexican border really well. And he actually crossed it the very morning of our interview to get to a studio in San Diego.

[MUSIC]

Hugo Crosthwaite: Yes, well, you know, I got up at 5:00 a.m. and I think I left like around, you know, 5:45 or so. I've had the experience of having to wait three to four hours to cross...

[MUSIC]

Kim Sajet: Wow!

Hugo Crosthwaite: ...to cross the border.

Kim Sajet: You're on your 10th cup of coffee. Do you do that? (Laughs)

Hugo Crosthwaite: (Laughs) Oh, yes, yes.

[MUSIC]

Kim Sajet: We've included a link to Hugo's stunning video in the episode notes in your player. And you know, you might want to watch it now before our interview. Honestly, it's just three minutes and we'll totally wait.

[MUSIC]

Kim Sajat: And now here's my interview with artist Hugo Crosthwaite.

[MUSIC]

Kim Sajat: Hugo Crosthwaite, it's such a exciting moment to speak with you. You are the winner of the Outwin Boochever Portrait Competition of 2019. I can't wait for everyone to see this amazing work of art. We're going to talk about it today. I have to tell you, when we, when I first saw it and in fact, when we showed it for the first time to our advisory board, there was complete silence afterwards. No one actually knew what to say. It's incredibly powerful. And it's a video of this woman who's crossing the border. She's in a bus. She's going from Tijuana into the United States. Can you explain this video for those people listening?

Hugo Crosthwaite: Sure. The video, this particular video is the story of the immigrant experience of Berenice Sarmiento Chávez as it was told to me by her. Berenice is a woman that I met about uh, you know, two, three years ago and I met her on the streets and uh, you know, we started talking and she told me this fantastic story, you know, of what she went through, you know, the trials and tribulations that she experienced. And, you know, when I was hearing her story, I wanted to tell that story through my drawing, through my, you know, through my, to my video.

Kim Sajat: Can you talk a little bit about the music because I still have it in my head? It's this incredible music that just doesn't let you go.

Hugo Crosthwaite: Um, well, yes. You know, once you do a video, you do the visuals, you do the drawings, and then you think you need to put something into it.

Kim Sajat: Yes.

Hugo Crosthwaite: And then at some point, I got into a bus and I was heading towards the, towards the border. And it was a small bus, you know, filled with people and going into, going to the, to the United States border. And uh, the lady came in with a guitar and she started singing, you know, asking for, you know, 10 pesos, you know, five pesos, but her boo... her voice was incredible! Like when I heard her voice...

Kim Sajat: Yeah!

Hugo Crosthwaite: I was...

Kim Sajat: It is.

Hugo Crosthwaite: I said, "Oh, my God. This is, this is what I want!"

Kim Sajat: And that was the role? You just, you just press the record button that was...

Hugo Crosthwaite: Well, of course, you know, you're never ready when something happens...

Kim Sajat: (Laughs)

Hugo Crosthwaite: You know, you're never ready to capture it, no?

Kim Sajat: (Laughs) You're like, "Bother! What am I going to do?"

Hugo Crosthwaite: (Laughs) Exactly.

Kim Sajat: (Laughs)

Hugo Crosthwaite: So then, so then I had my iTouch, you know, with this little crappy microphone, and you know this, and, and I asked, you know, I asked, you know, "Rosa, you know, could you sing some something for me?"

[SINGING AND GUITAR PLAYING]

Hugo Crosthwaite: The video starts, um, basically with this white page. You never see my hands. You only see this line, you know, a very shaky line, kind of appearing on the page. And then, and then one eye. Then the face starts developing. And then, and then it's the face of a young woman. And there's this girl, you know, this girl that's just sitting thinking, of, you know, the American dream, you know, crossing over and then suddenly, like a skull starts appearing on the one side...

[SINGING AND GUITAR PLAYING]

Kim Sajat: Yeah. That's very scary when that comes in.

Hugo Crosthwaite: (Laughs).

[SINGING AND GUITAR PLAYING]

Hugo Crosthwaite: ...which is, you know, also very traditional in Mexico. You know, we have the day of the dead and this, you know, this idea that we live with death and we celebrate death, no? So then, that's as a positive no? Precisely as this, as this idea that life is short, so then live it and live it well. So then would add, with white paint, I started painting this kind of thought bubbles that would come out of death and would infect, Berenice, you know, the girl, the young girl, no? And then these thought bubbles would hit the figure of Berenice, and it would turn into this kind of, you know, perverse kind of Mickey Mouse figure, you know, like, which is this representation of, of this American dream that's, that's a fantasy, you know? That's you know, that's marketing, you know, from the United States to the rest of the world, no? You know, the Promised Land, but is this very perverse kind of image of like a Mickey Mouse, no? And then that Mickey Mouse figure starts expanding and, and it becomes this thing that starts of whitening out the surrounding environment of Berenice. And she's just left, you know, inside this Mickey Mouse figure that also starts being erased, you know, to this white paint, until all the traces of the drawing are gone. Everything is white and then even the white starts erasing the border and it just becomes a white page.

[SINGING AND GUITAR PLAYING]

Kim Sajat: Yes, it's just whitened out.

[SINGING AND GUITAR PLAYING]

Hugo Crosthwaite: So, I kind of left the ending kind of open, no? And it really...

Kim Sajet: Well, it worked. (Laughs).

Hugo Crosthwaite: (Laughs).

Kim Sajet: I was going to tell you, I was like, "What happened? Wait a minute." What... There's... It definitely leaves you up in the air. Yeah.

Hugo Crosthwaite: Hmm, mmm.

Kim Sajet: When that skull appears, I was starting to get really worried for her.

Hugo Crosthwaite: But here it's this idea of, you know, you know, always like, you know, like paintings were, you know, old paintings were, there would be the artist or the poet and death was behind them, no?

Kim Sajet: Memento mori, right?

Hugo Crosthwaite: Memento mori, but then also its inspiration. You know, this idea that, you know, it's this death figure that plants the idea in her, "Hey! You can have a better life. You know, life is short." You know, life is you know, you better grab life, you know, fully. So, then it's this memento mori that just death is there, but then it's also this inspiration to live, not to live...

Kim Sajet: Hmm, mmm.

Hugo Crosthwaite: ...because time is limited. You know, that's the whole point of memento mori.

Kim Sajet: Memento mori is really coming out of the medieval period...

Hugo Crosthwaite: Hmm, mmm.

Kim Sajet: ...which was this reminder in very visual terms. You'd see a beautiful woman or a man in the bloom of their youth, but there would be a skeleton around the corner or a skull that did indeed remind them that, that life is transitory and death is literally around the corner.

Hugo Crosthwaite: Yes, yes.

Kim Sajet: It is very beautiful, actually, but it's also very enigmatic.

Hugo Crosthwaite: And as she was telling me the story, it was pretty fantastic you know? It had elements that, that I, that I thought it was very interesting because, you know, she's telling me her story, but as the way she...

Kim Sajet: You weren't entirely sure that it was true?

Hugo Crosthwaite: Exactly. Yes. I wasn't sure it was true, but, you know, to me, you know, a lot of, of oral tradition has this level of exaggeration, like you're, you're, a way of or perhaps dealing with her suffering or, or dealing with what she went through. She, she exaggerates things as a way of coping with it. So, then she was telling me, you know, that at some point she got shot in the face, but then I wouldn't see any evidence of her being

shot in the face. There was no scar. There was nothing, you know? It could be a lie, could be a complete exaggeration, but it had universal truths about the disenfranchisement and you know, the vulnerability of immigrants. So, then I, I wanted it just to be this, a poem, a poem of, of her struggle, you know, and, and that's a poem I had the fantasy. It had the exaggeration and it wasn't, but, but it has underlying truth to it. And it was a story that had stuck in my mind, you know, because, you know, the last time I spoke to her was like about, you know, two years ago, and, you know, I don't know where she is now. I don't know. You know, I don't know if she crossed over into United States, if she's here in San Diego, I don't know, but, but that's her story stuck into my mind. And I decided, well, this is my opportunity to tell a portrait, which is not necessarily that the likeness of the person. It's her story, her experience, her fantasy, and that is her likeness.

[MUSIC]

Kim Sajet: My guest is Hugo Crosthwaite, winner of the National Portrait Gallery's 2019 Outwin Boochever Portrait Competition. When we come back, Hugo tells us about growing up along the border and how a mishmash of tourist trinkets influenced his art. Stay with us.

[MUSIC]

Kim Sajet: I'm talking to draftsman, muralist and portraitist Hugo Crosthwaite. Hugo is a Mexican-American artist who works in graphite and charcoal, combining baroque imagery with modern abstraction. It was his three-minute-long animated video called, "A Portrait of Berenice Sarmiento Chávez," that won the 2019 Outwin Boochever Portrait Competition. Let's get back to our conversation.

[MUSIC]

Kim Sajet: So, a lot of your work is influenced about the border. Can you tell us a little bit about growing up?

Hugo Crosthwaite: Well, yes, I was born in Tijuana and I grew up in a, you know, like a small, well it wasn't even a town yet when I was growing up, but it was part of Tijuana. And basically, when I was growing up in the 70s, there was nothing there other than just one big old hotel, The Hotel Rosarito, which had been there since the 1930s or 40s. And then a bunch of curio shops that would line up the road and my father had one of those curio shops.

Kim Sajet: And what did he sell in the curio shop?

Hugo Crosthwaite: Um, trinkets and uh, like Mexican, cheap Mexican artifacts, and uh serapes and guarachas, you know, but then also we would have like, you know, kitschy things like gesso Bart Simpsons, and gesso you know,

Kim Sajet: (Laughs).

Hugo Crosthwaite: ... like made out of gesso, Batman and that kind of thing that we would sell to Americans.

Kim Sajet: So straightaway, this is reminding me of your work.

Hugo Crosthwaite: Hmm.

Kim Sajet: You have this real touchstone with pop culture. You create images that are sometimes cartoon-like, really beautifully drawn. Do you think that, in fact, your father's curio shop might have affected how you do your art practice now?

Hugo Crosthwaite: Um, yes, very much. You know, when I was growing up in the 70s, pretty much Rosarito was very empty no? You could you know, you could see the beach from, from the storefront from my father. So, it was very open ground, lots of space, but inside the curio shop, it was very dark, very, very baroque in terms of, filled with imagery and filled with things no? You know, usually Americans, when they came to a curio shop, they wanted the experience of going, you know, kind of like the Indiana Jones adventure you know, kind of thing. You know, you would go in and you would find this store, dark store, filled with lots of objects.

Kim Sajet: Yeah!

Hugo Crosthwaite: And I remember as a kid, you know, you know, my father would tell me to talk to you know, talk to the Americans, talk to them and, you know, steer them to the, you know, the pricey objects, not the cheap knickknacks, you know. (Laughs).

Kim Sajet: (Laughs).

Hugo Crosthwaite: And as a way of doing that, it was you know, we would, you know, mix, you know, Mexican Aztec mythology with, you know, stories of our own. And just trying to make a story about, oh, you know, this is Tlaloc, the God Tlaloc of rain and, you know, there were a lot of sacrifices made to him.

Kim Sajet: (Laughs).

Hugo Crosthwaite: He would rain, blood. You know, it was just fictionalized accounts.

Kim Sajet: Oh, the gorier, the better yeah?

Hugo Crosthwaite: Exactly. Of course, you know, they wanted that adventure you know? (Laughs).

Kim Sajet: (Laughs).

Hugo Crosthwaite: So, then it was this very dark, very baroque, which I loved, you know, I you know, I was, I was never interested in the beach. I was never interested in that open space. I was always interested in those dark spaces filled with faces and cartoons and objects. And I think that influenced my work a lot. Yes.

Kim Sajet: What a perfect childhood though, for a young boy to live in this magical Aladdin's cave where you could come up with any story. And probably no surprise that you turned into this storyteller artist, but, you know, it's still hard work, right? You tell me, you went to art school in San Diego and you know, it's one thing to tell a story, but you also are incredible drawer. You're an amazing illustrator and of course, a videographer. Can you tell us what was that transition like?

Hugo Crosthwaite: Well, well, yes. You know, I grew up in that curio shop, but I actually hated being at the store. (Laughs).

Kim Sajat: Oh really?

Hugo Crosthwaite: You know like.... (Laughs). It was boring to me just to sit there waiting for Americans. Yes, I loved the environment. I loved the, you know, the baroque feel of, of everything that was surrounding me, but also, it got pretty boring. And one of things that my brother and I would do was we would put out this big sheet of paper and, and we would start drawing as a way of passing the time. And, and, you know, back then, back in the 70s, I remember Star Wars was a big thing. So then, you know, he would draw on one edge of the paper. He would draw, you know, a Tie fighter and then at the other edge, I would draw an X-wing fighter and then I would draw the line of fire you know, like, oh you know, he's gonna shoot a laser beam. So, then I would draw across the page a line and then it would reach his hand. And then I would decide there, oh, you know, it's gonna be an explosion or boom, boom or no, it missed no? And then he would draw another ship and then he would draw a line across it, you know? The paper. (Laughs).

Kim Sajat: So, this is, this has an art tradition and I know that you are very aware of it because you talk about it in other work that you've done. Coming out of the surrealist, you probably had no idea when you were a young boy that you were actually following that tradition called the, "Exquisite Corpse."

Hugo Crosthwaite: (Laughs).

Kim Sajat: And it's a great party trick, right?

Hugo Crosthwaite: Yes.

Kim Sajat: Where you have a piece of paper, you might fold it over multiple times. People at home, you might want to try this. Where you started drawing and then where the fold is, you turn it over and you give it to someone else, but you just give them a little hint what you're drawing, where it sort of stops, and then they have to add. And then later on you sort of unfold the picture and you see all of the things that you've all added as a collective. I mean, you were kind of doing that with your brother.

Hugo Crosthwaite: Yes. Yes. And that's pretty much the way I taught myself how to draw. It was always this improvised narrative that would happen on the page. And even to this day, it's, it's that idea that I have no idea what the drawing is going to be about until I actually finish it.

Kim Sajat: Going back to your video for a minute. One of the things I find really fascinating is that you actually say, "I white out the border. I erased the border." Is there something psychological going on there that we're actually literally trying to get rid of these borders, both physical and imagined?

Hugo Crosthwaite: Yes. Yes, very much because, you know, even to me, growing up in this border region, you know, in the 70s, there was a border, but there wasn't a border no? You know, I could cross, we would cross, you know, and it would just take, you know, five minutes to get across and then you could come back and go forward. There was never this, this idea of an imposing border that would stop you or block you no? You know, every you know, we would go shopping, you know, we would go across the border to get, you know, milk, and then we would come back, you know, to, to, to Mexico. And also, then it was this trivial thing. This idea that, you know, that we're crossing between two nations into

conscious if we never really thought about it you know? I didn't, I never thought about it as a child you know? There was never this issue of, of a border that stops, you know.

Kim Sajet: And there's a very stark border now.

Hugo Crosthwaite: Hmm, mmm.

Kim Sajet: I've seen pictures. I actually haven't been, but there's a beautiful, beautiful beach at Tijuana and then suddenly, the beach is cut in half by this giant steel vents.

Hugo Crosthwaite: Hmm, mmm. Yes. Yes.

Kim Sajet: And that is just such a shocking thing to even look at.

Hugo Crosthwaite: Hmm, mmm.

Kim Sajet: It's such a reminder that you can be walking along the beach and suddenly you really can't go any further.

Hugo Crosthwaite: Yes. Yes.

Kim Sajet: Hugo, what do you hope that people will take away when they see your work?

Hugo Crosthwaite: First of all, to me, I want people to take away the beautiful draftsmanship that my videos are a celebration of draftsmanship that, you know, you know, today we're seeing a lot of, you know, manufactured artwork. You know, work that's, you know, um commissioned...

Kim Sajet: Computer generated. Yeah.

Hugo Crosthwaite: Exactly. Uh huh.

Kim Sajet: Yeah.

Hugo Crosthwaite: But here is just this, you know, very simple notion of a white page and the line and then experiencing the same feeling that I have when I'm working on it. When I'm drawing, I had no idea where the drawing was going to end up.

Kim Sajet: It's very suspenseful.

Hugo Crosthwaite: And then also then the other is Berenice's story you know? What she suffered, what she went through, you know, instead of hearing, you know, the situation about the border, instead of hearing a statistic, you know, 50,000 migrants cross or reach Tijuana, all of this, I wanted to visualize a personal story. It's the story of your grandmother who also came from Europe or came from someplace else to the United States no? How they left everything behind. So that's the story of Berenice or someone who, who crossed over and had this experience and then in the end suffered this terrible setback and got deported and goes back to Tijuana. And then again in Tijuana, and she's dreaming of crossing into United States again, you know, to you know. It's this kind of the story of Sisyphus no? Like...

Kim Sajet: Yes.

Hugo Crosthwaite: ...that big rock, you know, that you're carrying up the hill. (Laughs).

Kim Sajet: Pushing the rock up the hill. Yes.

Hugo Crosthwaite: Exactly and rolls back.

Kim Sajet: Yeah.

Hugo Crosthwaite: But then, you know, that's the human, that's the human spirit. You know that it's not going to give up and you want to succeed.

[MUSIC]

Kim Sajet: A big thank you to Hugo for taking that 5:00a.m. wakeup call and speaking with me. You can see his amazing stop motion drawing video in full and all the other Outwin Finalists at the National Portrait Gallery. The exhibition will run until August 30th of 2020 or, as I mentioned, you can find a link to Hugo's video in the show notes of this podcast in your player and also at our website: npg.si.edu/podcasts.

[MUSIC]

Kim Sajet: Just an FYI, as the Outwin winner, Hugo will be commissioned by us, the National Portrait Gallery to do a portrait of someone that we'd like for the collection. The last Outwin winner was Amy Sherald and we commissioned her to depict Michelle Obama. And I think it's pretty fair to say that it's become one of the most famous portraits in the United States today. So, stay tuned to see who Hugo will be portraying.

[MUSIC]

Kim Sajet: And before we go, I want to mention that a few of our listeners reached out with thoughts about our last episode exploring the lives of two women who spied for the Confederacy during the American Civil War. These listeners felt we focused on their exploits in a way that obscured the fact that at the end of the day, they were working to preserve slavery. We agree. Thanks to that insight. We've updated the episode to provide a little more context. We are learning and listening and really appreciate it when you get back to us.

[MUSIC]

Kim Sajet: This is the last episode of Season One. So, now is a great time to go back and catch up on the rest of the season, if you haven't already. Our podcast team includes Ruth Morris, Jason Orfanon, Deborah Sisum and Rebecca Kasemeyer. Our theme music is by Joe Kye. Tarek Fouda is our engineer. We'll be back early next year with more episodes of "Portraits." Until then, I'm your host, Kim Sajet.

[MUSIC]