



BRECKENRIDGE CREATIVE ARTS  
**EXHIBITION TOUR**

FOR  
**Day of the Dead:  
Aztec Adventures of  
Cholo, Vato, and Pano**

BY  
**TONY ORTEGA**



[breckcreate.org](http://breckcreate.org)

# TONY ORTEGA

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**TOUR OF OLD MASONIC HALL EXHIBITION OCTOBER 2016**

# OVERVIEW

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- Author/Artist: Story by George Rivera, Illustrations by Tony Ortega
- Title: *Days of the Dead: Aztec Adventures of Cholo, Vato and Pano (Dias de los Muertos: Aventuras Aztecas de Cholo, Vato y Pano)*
- Date: 1998
- Medium: Pastel on paper

# MAIN THEME: EXPLORING CULTURAL DIFFERENCES

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- Approach to theme: Students will examine 12 pastels by Tony Ortega to learn about the rituals and customs associated with Dia de los Muertos. Students will then compare their learnings with Halloween and American notions of death and the afterlife.

# OBJECTIVES

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- Objectives: What do you want students to know and what do you want them to experience through working with the object? Students will:
- 1). Examine all details about the environment (depicted) in order to get a sense of context.
- 2). Collect visual clues (iconography) to determine the possible identity of the figures and the action involved.
- 3). Reflect on the creation of the artwork by imagining where they would be in the painting and where the artist had to be when he painted this scene.

# INTRODUCTION

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- Hello everyone! Welcome to The Old Masonic Hall. This building was built in 1892 and is part of the Arts District Campus, which hosts classes and workshops throughout the year. This morning we are going to explore cultural differences through 12 pastel drawings by the artist Tony Ortega. These paintings comprise a book called “*Days of the Dead: Aztec Adventures of Cholo, Vato and Pano (or Dias de los Muertos: Aventuras Aztecas de Cholo, Vato y Pano)*”. Has anyone ever heard of Dia de los Muertos before? What do you know about this holiday?

# PASTEL #1

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- Let's imagine that someone asked you to describe **where this scene is taking place**. I'll give you 30 seconds to take in everything you can about the environment that these people are in, and then we will turn our backs to the drawing and try to remember what we saw. Ready, go!
- *-The skull and cross might indicate we are in a cemetery. The dark sky makes us think it is nighttime. We see a boy and two dogs but it is unclear what they are doing. **What does the boy's body language or position suggest?***

# PASTEL #2

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- In this next drawing, Ortega has included the same three figures, but in this image, the boy is wearing a costume and the background has changed. Now let's take a closer look at the imagery in the background. Through what imagery is Ortega referencing the Aztec Indians?
- *The Aztecs arrived in Mesoamerica around the beginning of the 13<sup>th</sup> century. They established their capital at Tenochtitlan and became a dominant force in central Mexico. They were eventually overthrown in the 15<sup>th</sup> century by the Spanish conquistadores.*
- *Similar to Egyptian pyramids, Aztec temples were often stepped and faced west. Stairs would lead up to a sanctuary holding a sacrificial altar for sacrifices to the gods. These temples were made of bricks and covered with stone and plaster. Supposedly they were painted with bright colors and historians believe they were each dedicated to a different Aztec god.*
- *The Aztec calendar was based on a solar cycle of 365 days and a ritual cycle of 260 days.*

# PASTEL #3

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- This drawing accompanies the following text by George Rivera: “When the souls come down, they must prance because the Aztec gods make them dance.” How are these gods depicted? What kind of relationship do you think the Aztecs had with their gods?
- *The Aztec faith shared many aspects with other Mesoamerican religions including human sacrifice. Central gods included: Huitzilopochtli (god of war and sun) and Quetzalcoatl (the feathered serpent). Show pictures. Do these images resemble the gods in Oretega’s drawing?*

# PASTEL #4

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- *Ofrenda* is Spanish for offering. What kind of offering is Pano making? Have you ever made an offering or donated something special to a deceased relative or to someone special in your life?
- *In Mexican culture, ofrendas (or memorial altars) often refer to the occupation or hobbies of the deceased. Ofrendas are found in family homes and in public spaces to honor well-known figures. These memorial altars are often constructed to have multiple levels—a reference to the Aztec pyramids or the stages of life, and they frequently include symbols of the four elements: water, fire, earth and wind. A glass of water is set out for the thirsty souls of the deceased, candles are lit, fruits and vegetables reference the earth, and fluttering sheets of papel picado refer to the wind.*

# PASTEL #5

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- Now let's discuss the figures. What do we know about these people based on their clothes, their surroundings and their body language? Why do you think Ortega did not draw faces on the girls?
- *The fact that the girls lack faces is intentional and “reinforces the importance of the group over the individual. While anonymous, his characters are not devoid of emotion or gesture. If anything, they seem to become even more personal and relatable as they take on the potential of being anyone or everyone” (Markowitz).*
- *A cholo is defined in the Oxford Dictionary as a Latin American with Indian blood (a mestizo). While the word may be used disparagingly (to refer to a Mexican-American youth who belongs to a gang), a cholo also symbolizes resistance. Originally, the word comes from the American Spanish word “cholollán” (or Cholula) in Mexico. Vato is colloquial Mexican word for guy or dude. Pano is Tony's son, Ciprano.*

# PASTEL #6

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- The previous images have depicted scenes from the Day of the Dead. What imagery in this drawing do we associate with Halloween?
- *Jack-o-lanterns are actually an Irish tradition, based on a mythological figure named Stingy Jack who was known for playing tricks on the devil. When Jack died, he was stuck in purgatory and was doomed to wander around with a single burning coal placed in a carved turnip. As such, original jack-o-lanterns were made out of turnips or potatoes, native to Ireland. Carved pumpkins did not exist until the Irish immigrated to America (<http://www.marthastewart.com/1090595/decorative-past-history-jack-o-lanterns>).*

# PASTEL #7

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- Imagine yourself somewhere in this scene. Where are you? What does it feel like to be there? Where do you think the artist was when he painted this scene?
- *In many cultures, it is common to gather among friends and family to honor the dead. In Jewish religion, for example, shivas occur for 7 days following a funeral, and involve prayer, reflection and the celebration of life. Mirrors must be covered and family and friends are asked to sit in uncomfortable chairs so all concentration is focused on the deceased. In Hinduism, families and friends also congregate, but the mourning period is restricted to 13 days, as Hindus believe that the soul will be harmed if there is too much sorrow. During this time, Hindus bathe twice a day, wear white and eat one vegetarian meal a day.*
- *While Dia de los Muertos is more of a celebration than a time of mourning, Ortega depicts the importance of community and family in the process of honoring the deceased, and we are pulled right into the scene with the close and frontal perspective.*

# PASTEL #8

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- Describe the composition of this drawing. Where is the horizon line? Is everything centered? Where does your eye travel first?
- *“For Ortega, layering is not solely an aesthetic decision, but also a representation of the many layers of meaning in each of the images” (Markowitz, Joan. Tony Ortega: Mi Frontera Es Su Frontera. Boulder: Boulder Museum of Contemporary Art, 2010). Ortega’s compositions are rich with detail and demand our full attention, reminding us to look at the world around us with curiosity and appreciation.*

# PASTEL #9

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- Looking at this image, why do you think Tony Ortega used such bright colors? How does this effect the mood of the painting?
- *Whether painting, printmaking or drawing, Ortega often uses bright primary colors and outlines shapes in black, honoring the indigenous folk art style. As a self-proclaimed “expressionist,” Ortega uses this style for emotional effect. As such, his work does not attempt to depict objective reality but rather the subjective emotions and responses we have to our surroundings.*

# PASTEL #10

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- Reflecting on all of the drawings in this room, why do you think Tony Ortega included Cholo and Vato in every scene?
- *The fact that Pano is accompanied by Cholo and Vato in every scene might be a religious reference to the father, son and the holy ghost. Since Dia de los Muertos (Oct 31-Nov 1) coincides with All Saints and All Souls Day (Catholic holy days on Nov 1st and 2nd), the holidays are intertwined, and share many rituals, including prayer for the deceased. Catholics believe those who have died in a state of sin (but not mortal sin) enter purgatory, and both holidays offer an opportunity to pray for these souls.*

# PASTEL #11

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- Continuing along our journey, how has Tony Ortega depicted the landscape vs the figures in this drawing?
- *Through the use of pastels in these drawings, Ortega's figures pop to the foreground. Pastel techniques are varied and create a range of visual effects, and Ortega uses this quality to suggest texture and mass.*

# PASTEL #12

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- In conclusion, do you think this final image is sad, happy or indifferent? How would you describe Rivera and Ortega's message to the reader/viewer?
- *To understand Day of the Dead, it is important to remember that death in Latin American culture is accepted as something inevitable. As such, skulls and skeletons are intended to be humorous and are made to celebrate the fleeting nature of life. Furthermore, as much of the artwork created for this holiday is ephemeral, Rivera and Ortega remind us to treasure every passing day.*