
La muerte en el altar (Death on the Altar)

Report by: Christina MacSweeney

La muerte en el altar is a photographic essay describing the ritual altars constructed during the Day of the Dead celebrations in Mexico. The text is composed of a short explanatory foreword, which clearly outlines the context of the images and 37 full-page photographs in sumptuous colour, with terra cottas, oranges and yellows predominating; the illumination is generally low-level, warm candlelight. While the majority of the photographs are simple straight-on views of the altars, a number use longer focus to view the scenes from outside the home or show the delicate trail of petals laid out to guide the dead soul inwards. The composition of the images is generally dominated by the central table adorned with its offerings of fruit, bread, candles and religious images. Photographs of the departed people and their possessions provide a fascinating insight into their identity, at least as how they are remembered by families and friends. Occasionally other parts of the dwelling are glimpsed through a curtain or open door, accentuating the sense that life goes on, even during these days when death prevails.

While the colour, composition and lighting of these images are all excellent, what makes them outstanding is the wealth of detail, which allows the viewer to slowly build up an image of the dead person, to almost share his/her presence with the unseen mourners. The photographs also demonstrate the loving care with which the altars are put together and offer insight into the artefacts which form an integral part of the rich Mexican popular culture. One also feels a great sense of privilege at being permitted to enter at this most intimate of moments.

This is certainly a book which is capable of providing enormous pleasure to those interested in both Mexican popular culture and the art of photography; a pleasure which could be oft repeated.

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