



Dorothea Tortilla



by Ricc Freeman-Zachery

If you doubt that art mimics life, or that life influences art, you need look no further for proof than to Dorothea Tortilla, whose art is bright and colorful and laced with irreverence and a healthy dash of humor.

"I'm not trying to be anti-religious," she says of her over-the-top *Día de Muertos* shrines and funky brooches. "I'm just trying to bring a little humor into it. We're all hanging on by a thread, right?" She readily admits to keeping vials of holy water and holy dirt from the shrine at Chimayo, in New Mexico. "I might take a satiric view of it, but I believe in it, too. Our Lady of Guadalupe

may well be looking over me."

Day of the Dead, a religious holiday most closely observed by Catholics in the Southwest and throughout Mexico and Central and South America, is a time of remembering the dead but also of celebrating life; and it's not at all gloomy. There's certainly nothing morose about *No Mo' Flamenco*, Dorothea's tribute to a certain flamenco queen. In this piece, the dancer-turned-skeleton holds a red rose in her teeth. Her shrine, like the others created by Dorothea, sings with hot pink and flaming red and dazzling turquoise and celebrates the artist's sense of humor.

And Dorothea's life, like her art, has always been colorful, unconventional and as filled with laughter as she can make it.

"I love irony, absurdity and the strangeness of everyday life," she says. "I love to examine the vast oceans of universal meaning within the backyard kiddie pool of my imagination." She collects headlines from tabloids, such as "Man Changes Sex, Then Changes Mind," "Woman Drowns in Sauerkraut," and "20 Naked People from Floydada Texas in Car Wreck." She admires the art of Meret Oppenheim, the female Surrealist who created a teacup, saucer and spoon from fur.

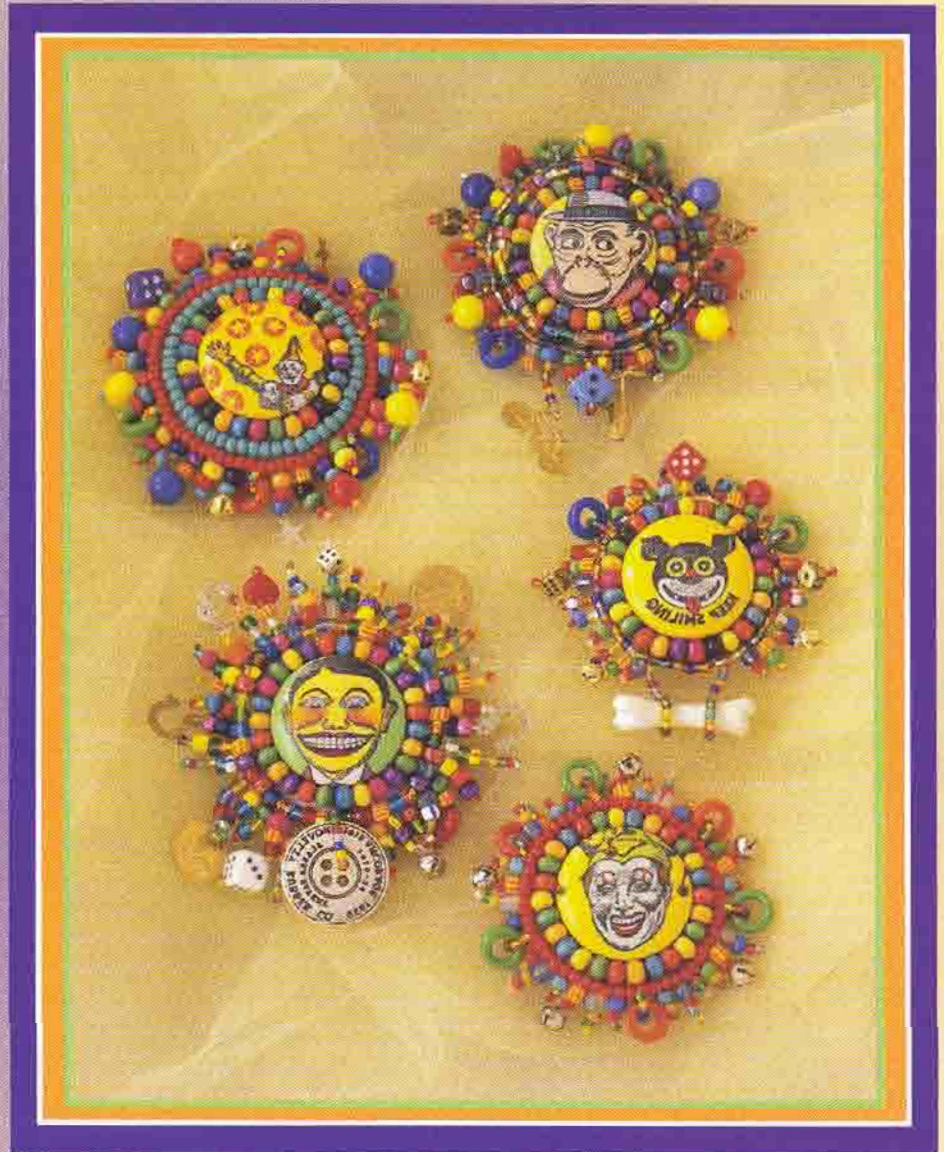
"She also took a pair of high heels and trussed them up on a platter to look like a roast chicken," says Dorothea, who confesses to being entranced by the Surrealists' alteration of everyday objects, such as Claus Oldenburg's soft typewriter and his oversized baseball bat, hat and spoon. Not all of her influences have come from fine art, even though she's a great believer in the importance of studying it. She loves the Surrealists, but she also loves kitsch—snow globes from Branson, Missouri; stuff from Lawrence Welk Village; plastic aliens barbecuing—and for years she displayed these things in her own Museum of Natural Kitschery. She's found her greatest inspiration in a museum and a movie, but maybe not ones you'd expect: the Liberace Museum in Las Vegas and *Priscilla, Queen of the Desert*, a riotously colorful film about drag queens that reinforces her fascination with costume.

"I started making these little outfits for myself when I was 10, these little Las Vegas showgirl outfits that I'd wear around the house when no one was home, with feathers and whatever you can pull together when you're a little girl," says Dorothea, who was born in Chicago and never really had an "ordinary" childhood. Her parents, both born in Denuda, Poland, were accordion players with a polka band who sought asylum in the United States after being invited to play on a 1950s-era television show, *The Big Joe Polka Fest*. When Dorothea won a school art contest for Saturday classes at the Art Institute, her parents gave the 11-year-old artist bus fare and a hand-drawn map of downtown Chicago and sent her on her way.

"I got lost a lot, but I went the 13 miles on the bus and the subway system all by myself and became a strange and offbeat

child wandering through the halls of the Art Institute," recalls Dorothea, who had spent her early childhood pestering the members of her mother's sewing club to teach her how to sew and embroider and knit. "I wove potholders and sold them door-to-door like a Fuller Brush man—my first venture in selling crafts!"

After those early art-filled years, Dorothea finished college, albeit by a round-about route, taking time off to celebrate her 18th birthday in Haight-Ashbury in San Francisco and then, later, returning to Chicago to marry a friend who was an



accomplished drag queen. In his act, he sang "Surrey with the Fringe on Top" wearing a Dorothea-crafted Miss Emma Heart Futsydutz costume. He and his parents enlisted his new wife in making outfits not only for his act, but also for the family's life-sized Infant of Prague doll, which was kept in a bell jar in the middle of the living room and required seasonal religious costumes. More with the costumes; a theme is beginning to emerge.

"That marriage did not last," says Dorothea simply.

She returned to school, graduated with a degree in art, married again and became a graphic artist and published cartoonist. With her second husband, Max, she began a leather goods company, now called "Poor Taste and Max Hand Leather Goods." The company creates leather furniture and accessories, such as braided leather belts that Dorothea exquisitely beads by hand.

The "Poor Taste" part of the business refers to her jewelry, shrines and wall hangings. Much of the latter was inspired by the years she and Max lived in Taos, New Mexico, where the

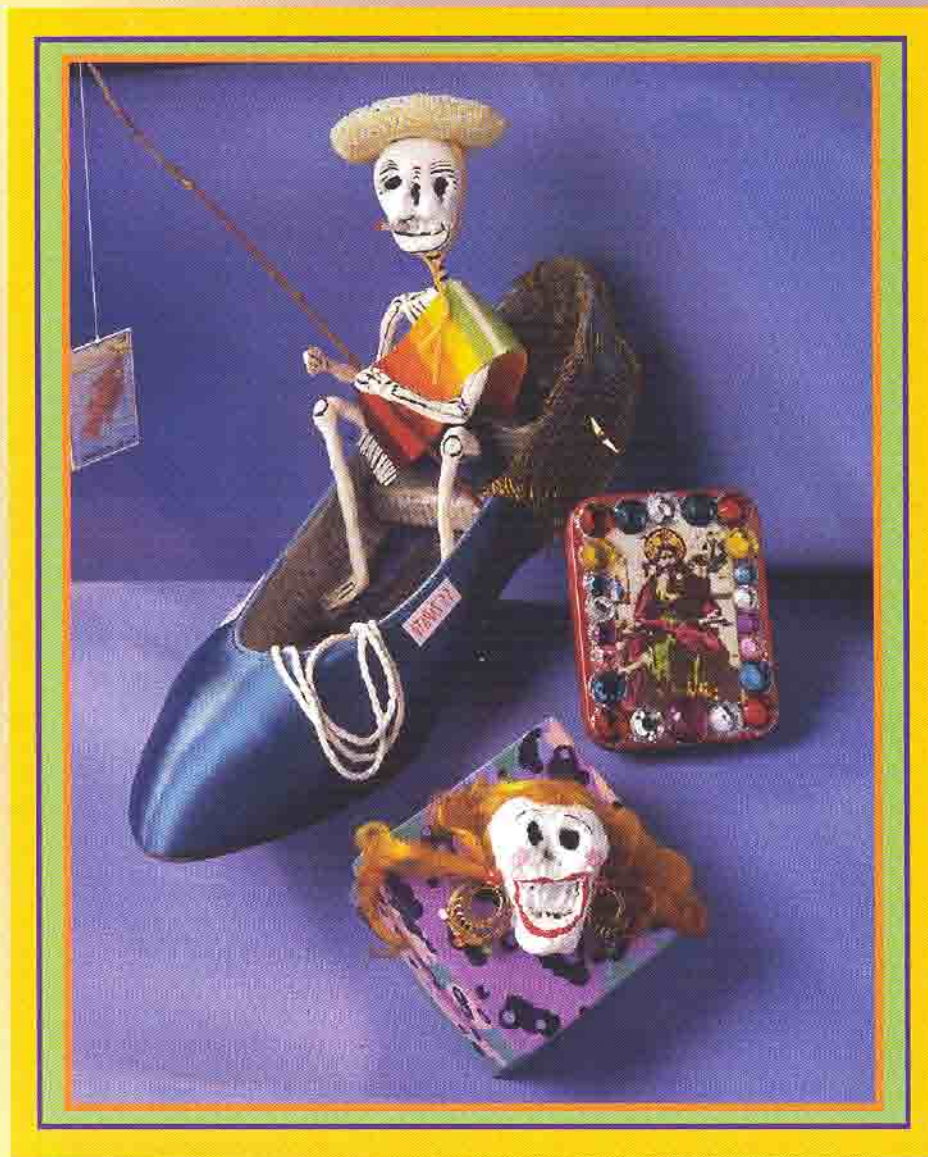
relationship with organization.

"I try to be organized, as I get very frustrated if I can't find things," she says. "So I label things, put things in boxes. But when I'm working on something for a deadline, it looks like a tornado in Hobby Lobby." Instead of a "perfect Zen studio," with everything white and pristine, she has a working space replete with a life-sized pink flamingo and some big, drag queen earrings. Nearby is her collection of Terrible Purses, prominently featuring a little satin number with bridal bouquets encased in plastic. In the middle of it all is a statue of Our Lady of

Guadalupe, enshrined in glass and surrounded by chartreuse rabbit fur. Dorothea begins her mornings here, after a walk along the beach.

"If I don't have something cooking, an idea already in progress, I like to sit down with my sketchbook and read and write and draw things," she says. She adds pictures and stories about other people's work that inspires her, as well as photographs, collages and color samples. "When the ideas don't go right, I just do rote work, like cutting or something else mundane; but I always work, even if it's just to daydream about my work. I'm never bored." She has so many ideas and projects going that the problem is not to find something to do, but to find the time to do all the things she loves.

"I need a lot of time alone, and I need my life and surroundings to be as simple and as uncluttered as I can make them," she says. Childless by choice, she carves out time for her art by limiting the time she spends socializing. "Since I spend so much time coming up with original ideas, I definitely feel the need for rejuvenation, and so I walk on the beach for miles." After mornings spent on her own art, she turns to the work of the business, designing and filling orders. She likes to move back and forth between projects, though, and finds that the two areas of her life are beginning to overlap



culture and images of the Southwest asserted a strong influence.

"I began to become intrigued by tales of sacred paintings that shed actual tears, the dirt from the shrine at Chiminay that heals and the image of Jesus that appeared in a homemade tortilla," she says. "I re-told these stories so many times that people began calling me 'Dorothea Tortilla.'" The name pleased her, and it stuck. She's carried it, along with the legends and observances of the Southwest, to Bandon, Oregon, where she and her husband now live. Their home studio, near the rough coastline, is like the studios of many other artists, reflecting Dorothea's love/hate

more and more. This melding began when she and Max discovered a cache of antique leather postcards in a store on Canyon Road in Santa Fe. Each card had a picture burned into or painted onto the leather, and Max suggested doing a line of postcards for their business.

"So I got into creating these leather journal covers," she says of the removable leather casings she stamps and paints for the regulation-sized art journals available at arts and craft stores. "I was looking for ways to combine beads and our leather products, such as the leather belts." She'd been doing intricate

hand beading for so long that its inclusion in the leather pieces was inevitable.

"I started in the Campfire Girls," she says. "I got one of those little looms and started doing the beadwork." Since her mother was a Bluebird leader, Dorothea had been in the groups since she was about 3 years old, and the beading came in handy in decorating her Campfire vest. "I continued with beading, and in high school I made and sold earrings with all these great beads and findings that were available in Chicago." Sewing and beading and painting and creating costumes, and then, later, making shrines and wall hangings—all of it flows through her life like the converging tributaries of a river.

"I feel like I get in a rut if I do all one thing—sewing, or beading, or stamping. I switch to something else and so keep a bunch of things going at one time," she says. Since sewing is a constant, given that lifelong love of costume, the sewing machine is always out and ready to go. Watercolor is another constant, so there's always room for it as well. All of these come together in the things Dorothea likes to do best, like her funky beaded brooches. When she's working on them, she gets up early, takes a walk and gets coffee and heads for her studio.

"I close the door so my cat, Tippy, can't 'help' me," she says. "Sometimes I put the 'Do Not Disturb' sign on the door so my husband can't help me, either!" Then she puts on her favorite music—jazz by Ray Brown, Miles Davis, Bill Evans, or the Reverend Al Green—and sits down at her big, green table facing a window that overlooks garden trellises.

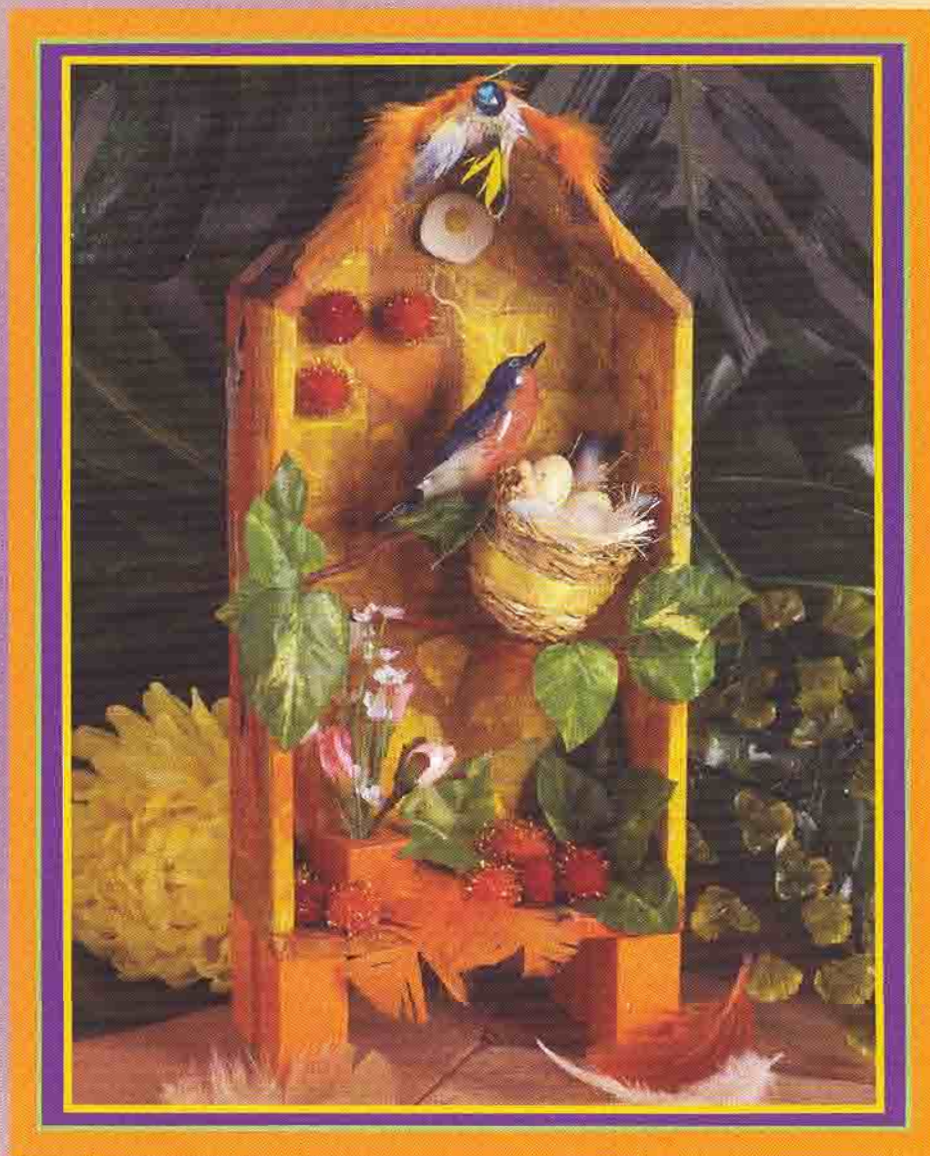
"I'm surrounded by hundreds of bead containers, charms, toys, buttons, my thread and needles and rubber stamps." Her first job is to pick the stamp image to go in the center of the brooch, something that relates to her favorite themes: Love, Luck, Jazz, the 1950s, Women's Roles with a Twist, Carnival, Defunct Celebrities (like Tammy Faye Baker, a favorite) or Kitsch.

"A lot of times I have notes or sketches in my sketchbook to remind me of weird ideas that I want to see in 3-D," she says. She stamps her chosen image and hand-paints it, and then she glues it on a base for her intricate beading. The brooches can be worn as jewelry or displayed on their backgrounds of felted wool woven by her friend, Sheila Martin.

"I love the concept and the actual doing of the piece the best," Dorothea says. "I get lost in the process and the time flies

until—Tippy or my husband needs lunch!" After lunch, it's back to the studio to fill orders. No matter what she's doing, though, she's coming up with ideas and finding inspiration, something that's as natural to her as, well, chartreuse rabbit fur.

"It's important to find your own place. Years of thinking and sketching and reading go into a lifetime of figuring out who you are and what you want to do," she says. "I was always a very strange child. I had weird ideas and sewed weird things. I've always had an eye for the wacky and the weird, and I always try to come up with something a little different, something with an edge. Something that says it's mine. The worst that could happen



is when someone just says 'Oh.'"

It's hard to believe that happens very often in the weird and wonderful world of Poor Taste. ❀

Rice Freeman-Zachery is a writer and artist living in Midland, Texas. Her articles have appeared in numerous publications; and her dolls, jewelry, and books have been featured in shops and galleries in New Orleans, Taos, Denver, and Seattle. You can reach her at rice.freeman-zachery@att.net or visit her web site: www.rhwarf.com/~mnoelrice.html. Dorothea Tortilla can be contacted at Dorothea.Tortilla@msn.com.

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