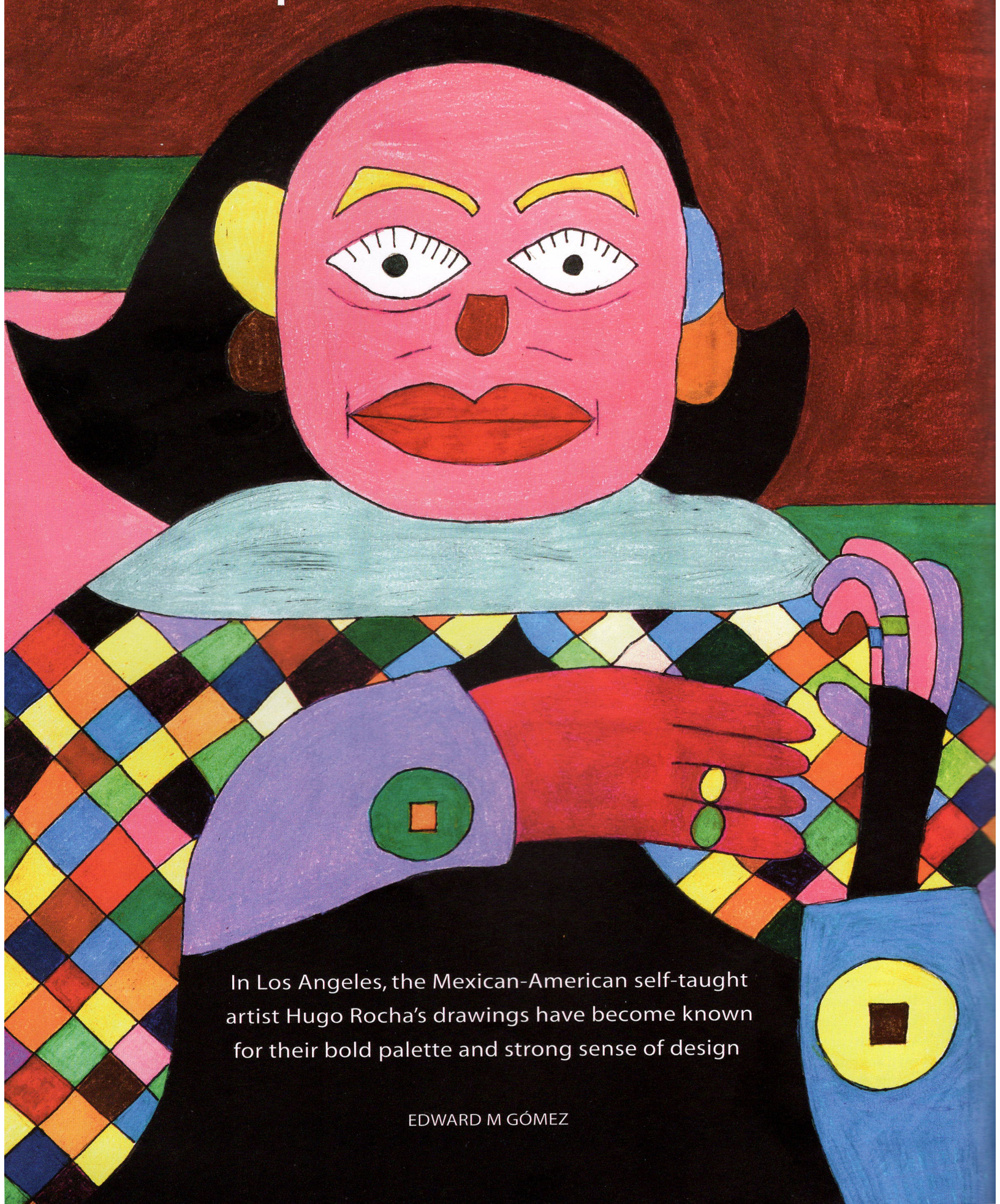


¡VIVA EL COLOR!



In Los Angeles, the Mexican-American self-taught artist Hugo Rocha's drawings have become known for their bold palette and strong sense of design

EDWARD M GÓMEZ



above: Untitled (6), 2018
 opposite: Untitled (4), 2018, 12 x 19 in. / 30.5 x 48 cm

all images: illustration marker and colour pencil on paper, 24 x 18 in. / 61 x 45.5 cm, unless otherwise stated;
 courtesy: Tierra del Sol Gallery, Los Angeles

Throughout the history of the visual arts, artists who have developed their own special ways of handling their materials and creating their works often have managed, through such original methods, to evolve their own signature styles. This tendency is as evident among *art brut*, outsider and other self-taught art-makers as it is among academically trained artists who produce their work in conscious dialogue with established art history and the well-known styles, techniques, and critical theories to which, as students, they are exposed.

In Los Angeles, Hugo Rocha is a 44-year-old, Mexican-American self-taught artist who has developed a manner of drawing that is marked by a bright palette and what graphic designers might refer to as a clean, hard edge. Despite – or perhaps because of – his particular visual language’s regular use of composition-ordering grids and simple geometric shapes to depict everything from faces and their details to lamps, tables, trees, buildings and school buses, Rocha’s colourful drawings are remarkably vibrant and expressive.

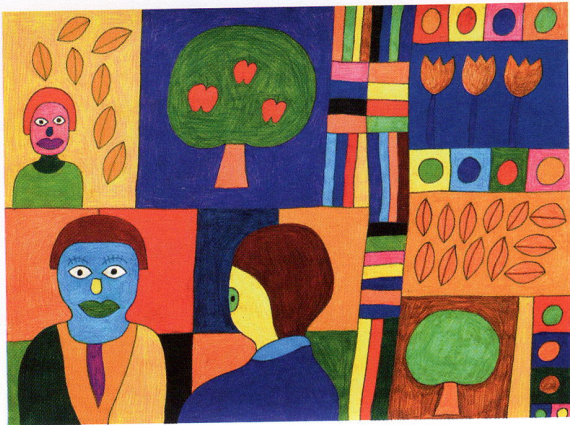
Since 2007, Rocha has taken part in an art-making programme for people with developmental disabilities

sponsored by the Tierra del Sol Foundation. The art studio he frequents is situated in the Sunland area of greater Los Angeles, north of Burbank, while the Tierra del Sol Gallery, which shows his drawings and the works of other participants in the art-studio programme, is located in another part of the city. Paige Wery, the gallery’s director, says, “It’s unusual for a progressive studio to have a gallery in a separate location. We treat this space just like any other Los Angeles contemporary-art gallery.” Well integrated into the city’s art scene, the Tierra del Sol Gallery showcases self-taught artists’ creations in the broader context of the contemporary-art market.

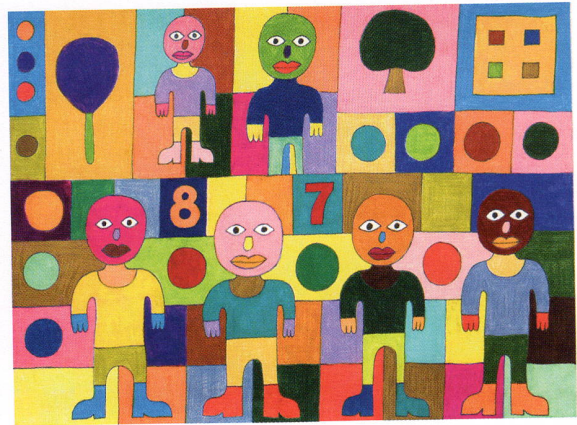
Summarising her own observations and those of some of her colleagues at the foundation and the gallery that she manages, Wery notes:

“Hugo enjoys listening to music while he works and often breaks into song, singing in Spanish. His beautiful tenor often stops people in their tracks. He has featured the names of popular singers in some of his drawings, using precise, large-scale hand lettering, which he draws without using rulers or guides.”

Wery and her co-workers recall that, when Rocha



Untitled (28), 2017



Untitled (8), 2018



Untitled (23), 2017



Untitled (18), 2019



Untitled (14), 2019



Untitled (42), 2017



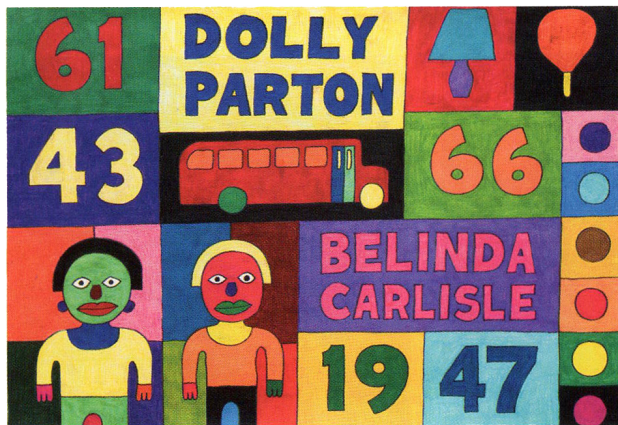
Untitled (5), 2018



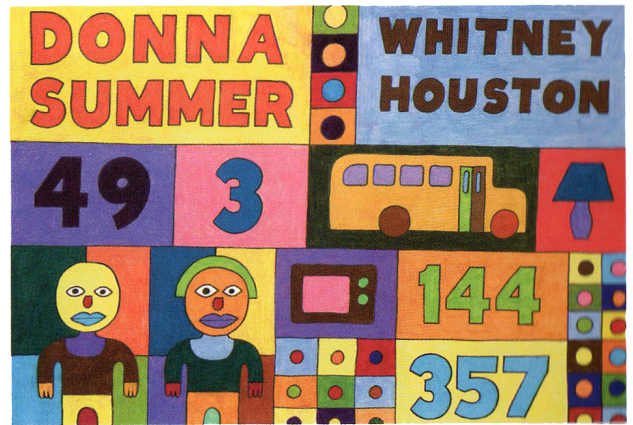
Untitled (29), 2017



Untitled (7), 2018



Untitled (31), 2018



Untitled (22), 2018



Untitled (41), 2017



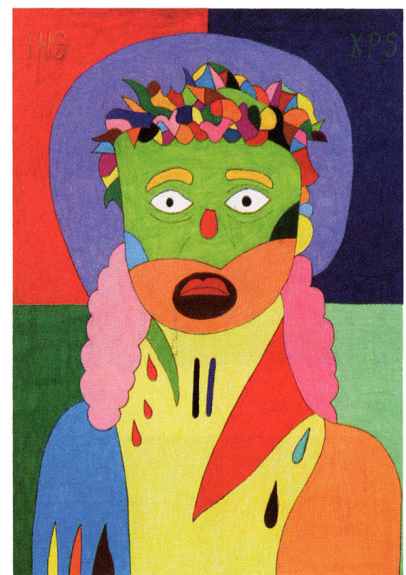
Untitled (27), 2017



Untitled (38), 2017



Untitled (16), 2019



Untitled (2), 2018, 18 x 24 in. / 45.5 x 61 cm

first began making art at the Tierra del Sol Foundation's studio, he produced lists of precisely drawn letters (varying in height from half an inch to two inches) and maps of places with which he was familiar. Often he drew such maps from memory alone. Later, he created mosaic-like works – 24-by-28-inch images of insects and animals, for example – made with small, coloured, tiled-together

pieces of paper, cut from sheets he had painted himself.

Nowadays, Rocha often begins a new drawing using a fine-line marker to sketch the outlines of shapes that he then fills in with coloured markers. After allowing his inks to dry, he overlays the neatly outlined elements of his compositions with coloured pencils, reinforcing the overall luminous quality of his chosen palette.



Untitled (25), 2017

Wery says, "Many of these works are composed completely of background squares and rectangles of colour, with human figures, numbers, letters and symbols placed within his grid formats." Some of Rocha's most recent pictures have referred to *telenovelas*, the over-the-top, melodramatic soap operas that are popular in Mexico and throughout Latin America, and which also turn up on Spanish-language television channels in the US.

Wery points out that, as he watches a video-recorded episode of one of these programmes, "Hugo will select a moment within a particular scene and create a still shot of it; then he'll use that still photo as a reference for one of his compositions." She notes, too, that Rocha will sometimes ask the art studio's staff members to provide him with maps of specific places or bus routes, or print-outs or copies of other visual material that he may use as art-making references. Wery says, "Music is a huge inspiration for Hugo, who is very focussed when he works. You can tell when he is most passionate about his subject matter." One of his drawings features the names of the country music star Dolly Parton and of Belinda Carlisle, a member of the 1980s, all-female band, the Go-Go's, written in big block letters.

In a typical Rocha drawing, human figures with big

lips and wide-open eyes stare out at viewers from their pictorial space like large, lumbering, inquisitive dolls, their bodies and clothing stiff and flat, with decorative patterning in a collar here and a variety of coloured faces – dark green, yellow, magenta or orange – there. Sometimes Rocha abandons his grids for what appear to be more organically elaborated, free-flowing compositions depicting landscapes or more detailed portraits of individual subjects, the details of their facial expressions, posture and clothing keenly observed and captured in the artist's sharply outlined style.

Rebecca Hamm, a senior member of the Tierra del Sol Foundation's art-studio staff, says, "Hugo has always been a strong and vibrant artist whose presence is calming and inspiring. His work ethic is strong, and he appears to be highly focussed on the process he has developed." Like most artists, Hamm adds, Rocha very much enjoys seeing his work on display in exhibitions.

With its strong graphic qualities and exuberant palette, Rocha has created a body of work whose *joie de vivre* may well be one of its most distinctive – and attractive – ingredients.

Edward M Gómez is a longtime contributor of feature articles, reviews and special reports to *Raw Vision*.