

Message in a Box



Nicaraguan artist **Franck de Las Mercedes** pushes for peace, one piece at a time.

BY DAVE GIL DE RUBIO

The famous late French Dadaist/Surrealist Marcel Duchamp once said he was interested in ideas, not merely in visual products. Given that, if he had ever come across The Priority Box Project, he would undoubtedly have approved of what artist Franck de Las Mercedes is attempting to do—use abstract expression to spread the concepts of peace, love and success around the world via brightly colored boxes adorned with those ideas.

Begun in 2006, this unique public art project has resulted in more than 8,000 boxes being mailed to people in 50 countries. The inspiration for the project came from a postal worker's comment during one of de Las Mercedes' daily trips to mail out his work during a period when he was painting portraits of celebrities and selling them on eBay as a way to pay the bills.

"I would clean my brushes on the boxes that I was using to ship out these paintings of pop stars and musicians," he recalls. "One day, after having gone to the post office so many times to mail out these boxes, one of the ladies at the counter asked if it ever occurred to me that the boxes were works of art, as well.

"When she said that to me, I was really taken with how art had interrupted her day-to-day routine in a way that it made her appreciate art as a whole. I knew I was onto something at that point. I felt that what she said wasn't an accident, and that it shouldn't be a comment that I should allow to just go by like any other everyday comment that might have been made on my way to the post office."

He came home and started experimenting with boxes of different sizes. But that wasn't all. "I had to figure out what they should symbolically contain, since people always look to see what's inside a package and usually ignore the box it comes in. This was in 2006, at a time when the war was in full swing, so it was an easy decision—peace. It really started out as an initiative for peace."

From the purchase of materials to postage, de Las Mercedes covers the cost of each hand-painted *Priority Box*. All anyone who wishes to participate in the project has to do is go to the 37-year-old artist's website, request a box via e-mail and include an address for shipping. De Las Mercedes only asks is that recipients, once they receive the box, to send back pictures for posting on his website, www.fdlmstudio.com

As part of the mission, all the boxes are gratis, in order to reinforce the concept that things like peace and hope are not only a priority, but also priceless. His website challenges people to consider, "What would you do if you suddenly received a box via

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mail, labeled 'FRAGILE: Contains Peace?' How would you use it? Would you give it to someone else? Would you sell it? Would you just throw it away?"

The launch pad for the project was in Weehauken, New Jersey, where de Las Mercedes lives with his wife in a former embroidery-factory-turned-fire-department-meeting-hall that was then transformed into loft space. The living area/work space has all the accoutrements you'd expect in the home of an artist—sketch books strewn about, paint containers and brushes, shelves bulging with books, and works on display. In de Las Mercedes' case, it's a wall of Andy Warhol-inspired portraits of a wide variety of characters, from Marilyn Monroe to Frida Kahlo and Johnny Cash to Nicaraguan poet Ruben Dario. Most impressive is the 7- by 6-foot canvas *Aperreamiento*, an abstract painting that captures one barbaric method the Spanish used to subdue the native population in the New World in the 1500s and 1600 by using vicious attack dogs. Upon closer inspection, an image of a person being torn apart by canines emerges from beneath the swirling paint strokes that cover the canvas.

It's a violent image that reflects de Las Mercedes' philosophy of painting feeling. That's something he first experienced upon seeing a Jackson Pollock painting years after he fled war-torn Nicaragua when he was 12. "Up until I went to the Metropolitan Museum of Art and saw Jackson Pollock's painting *Autumn Rhythm 10* years ago, I didn't have a way of expressing myself," he recalls. "I remember a lot of traumatic things like the sounds of bombs and the fear of seeing peers taken off the streets while they were playing that still affects me to this day. With painting, I was able to take something so dark and hateful and have something so colorful emerge that is regarded as beautiful and inspiring."

If you ask how or when The Priority Box Project will end, de Las Mercedes admits he's not sure. "I'm having fun doing it and seeing e-mails from people and the reactions [my art] is causing, especially when it inspires people to make a difference. In a world where violence is so common, I think the greatest act of defiance or rebellion is to embrace peace, love, understanding and tolerance.



COURTESY FRANCK DE LAS MERCEDES