

## Vistas de Guatemala

*Painter John Maxon's first exhibit in Guatemala comes to the Galería Panza Verde in January*

Volcanoes are awesome. Not in the bleach-blonde-California-surfer-way, but in a biblical way, invoking feelings of fear, awe and wonder.

Perhaps you are like me, a lowland dweller who takes these turbulent obelisks for granted by boldly playing house aside one. Imagine, though, that we are residents of Guatemala past. We are farmers, working our land, trying to survive. Video games and infuriating iPhone updates are thousands of years into the future. Our lives are simple. All around us, beautiful peaks stretch as far as there

is land. Elders recount ominous legends of the destruction these peaks can cause. Some have even witnessed the desecration with their own eyes. We pray to the gods that such displays of fire and ash never occur during our lifetime. But secretly, we hope once in our lives to witness the auburn clouds of smoke and rippling heat billow into the blue-black sky.

John Maxon does not exclusively paint volcanoes, nor does he exclusively paint landscapes. But on his first trip to Guatemala last year, the country's natural pyramids visually excited him, as did its colorful peo-

ple. When his show at Galleria Panza Verde opens next month, many of its 20 pieces will reflect his sleeping geological muses with patchworks of flora, fauna and human existence snaking up their torsos. Maxon painted most of these from a hacienda in San Juan del Obispo, just outside of La Antigua Guatemala, and others while traveling through the Highlands.

In his work, Maxon is less concerned with communicating visual reality than he is with evoking emotion through texture and gestural strokes. His visceral use of color is one of the defining ...continued page 76



posed villancicos in Portuguese, Tlaxcaltec and pseudo-African dialects.

Villancicos were promoted by Hermano Pedro de Betancur (1626-67), now a saint, who also promoted Christmas posadas and nativity scenes in Guatemala, following the steps of St. Francis of Assisi. Villancicos are sung during these. Beginning on **Dec. 16** at the various churches, they go from house to house each night, and return to the same church for Christmas Eve. Organized by special church and family groups, the followers carry a turtle shell, chinchines and candle lanterns. Anyone may join along the way as they carry figures of the Virgin Mary and St. Joseph to various houses. Different villancicos are sung each evening—depending on that day's liturgical theme. Some popular villancicos include *Campana sobre campana*, *El niño del tambor*, *A la ro ro niño*, *Pero mira como beben los peces en el río*, *Cancion del tamborilero*, *Madre de nuestra alegría* and *Venid Pastorillos*, to mention just a few.

As Dr. Dieter Lehnoff points out in his book, "Creación Musical en Guatemala," villancicos are designed to incorporate the faithful so they may identify emotionally with each theme. These are dramatical and semi-dramatical and refer to stories and specific peoples. Musical instruments such as harps, guitars, flutes, chirimías and organs began to accompany these cancionetas during the 17th century as local instruments were also incorporated with local languages.

Lehnoff, the expert on Guatemalan music, almost single handedly began preservation efforts of colonial musical materials when he "rescued" old musical books from Santa Eulalia and the old archives throughout Guatemala to transcribe them. These include works from Santiago de Guatemala by musicians who composed magnificent pieces! Some were composed by chapel masters (maestro de capillas) at the Cathedral in Santiago in different renaissance and baroque styles. Manuel José de Quirós and Rafael Antonio Castellanos are some of the most renown in Guatemala. In the December 2008 Revue, Lehnoff noted, "When I first viewed the ancient manuscripts in the early 1980s, I was surprised at the beauty of the music and decided to devote efforts to its revival. Thus, many long-forgotten works could come to life again, enchanting present-day audiences with their serene beauty as they did the dwellers of the city four centuries ago."

Accompanied by Cristina Altamira-Lehnoff's extraordinary voice, Dieter and Cristina just released their new CD "200 Años de la Sociedad Filarmónica de Guatemala" with two villancicos by José Escolástico Andrino that are sung today. Cristina points out that the songs *Tortuga de Pascua*, *el Pavo* and *Nochebuena* are featured in their CD, "Melodías Inolvidables." These make for great Christmas presents and are available in local bookstores!



## Art Exhibit

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qualities of his work. Maxon explains, "When I'm using colors, it's joy. Joy for living. It's a gratitude for what I have as an artist and what I can express in that way." With this collection, he captures the affecting essence of Guatemalan colors most tourists romanticize long after suitcases cases are unpacked—sanguine reds, aquamarine blues and toasted ochres.


Maxon feels drawn to Panza Verde and its intimate gallery space for his debut show in Guatemala. The space feels warm and inviting, the viewer drawn into the space and the work. Galería Panza Verde has been displaying both Guatemalan and international artists for over 14 years, and is excited to host Maxon's show, *Vistas de Guatemala*.

Maxon's career has been long and prolific. He studied painting and sculpture at San Jose State University and later at the University of California, Davis. He has studied under Howard Brodie, Roy DeForest and William T. Wiley. In addition to his work as a painter, he is an adjunct professor at Cabrillo College in California, where he continues the tra-





dition of mentorship, working with young artists exploring styles and mediums.

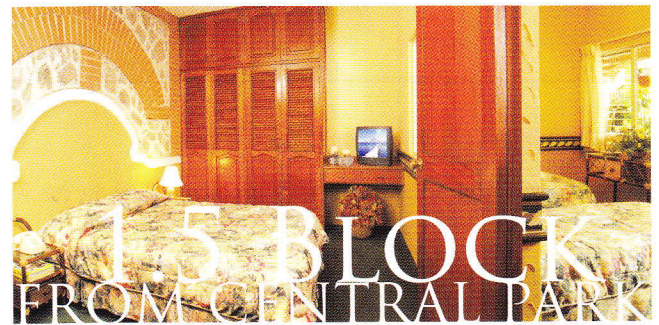
What excites Maxon beyond his own creative process is the communication and connection fostered with his audience. "For me, it's fun to do pieces that allow people to be pulled in, because someone is actually participating in the viewing. The artist does the work, but they still need the viewer to communicate. When the viewer gets that kind of connection to the work, that is the place where the artist can feel they've been successful." He is excited at the possibilities to foster new connections with this show. 



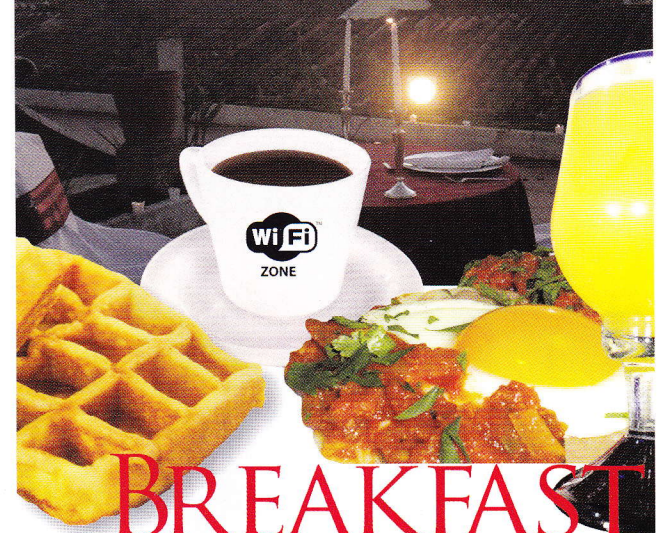
The show, *Vistas de Guatemala*, will open at the Galería Panza Verde **Jan. 8** and will be on display until March 10. (See DateBook for details).

*Natalie Rose is a freelance writer based in La Antigua, Guatemala and New York City. When in town, she resides on a volcano. (Thankfully, it's dormant.)*

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