

# Museum of Craft and Design

# ALTARS (OFRENDAS)

# WITH ALICIA CRUZ



## PROJECT DESCRIPTION

Alicia Cruz has made numerous altars, many collaborative, that honor issues of social justice, collective pain, and solidarity. She has led altar projects with Creative Arts Charter School and participated for many years in [SOMArts'](#) Día de los Muertos events and exhibitions. Alongside images of her work, Alicia shares elements of the process of altar building both material and emotional, within the context of social action.



*Left, an altar focused on school shootings, 2016; Middle, made with Creative Arts Charter School, 2017; Right, an altar honoring departed pets, 2015.*

## RECOMMENDED AGE/SKILL LEVEL:

All ages with adult assistance; participate collectively!

## MATERIALS

- Colorful anything: Paper mache, construction paper, tissue paper, streamer, pipe cleaners, fabric. Mexican altar colors: fuchsia, orange, red, purple, yellow, blue green/aqua, and bright green.

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- Framed photos of ancestors and people you wish to honor as well as newspaper clippings, posters, words, that you might want to place on the altar
- Mementos of loved ones, and food that reminds you of your loved one(s).
- Scissors
- Glue (hot glue gun)
- Faux or real flowers (preferably marigolds)
- Table or flat space
- *OPTIONAL*: Paint; cut out skulls (or sugar skulls), images of Frida, battery-powered votive candles, holiday lights, different sized boxes for creating levels

## INSTRUCTIONS

- It may help to sketch your altar first so you can plan where your items will go. Most altars have two or three tiers. Consider the focus of this altar while you are planning, and consult with others if you are collaborating.
- Traditionally, the family (or your community) helps create an altar. An altar often brings generations and community together to honor loved ones that have passed away. Having children participate in creating the altar is a great way of talking about grief and loss issues and normalizing the cycle of life.
  - It is also a sacred space to mourn other losses, i.e.
    - loss of employment
    - good health
    - housing
    - bring attention to social justice issues such as racial/gender inequities, political unrest, and local/global tragedies that might have occurred in the past year or years.

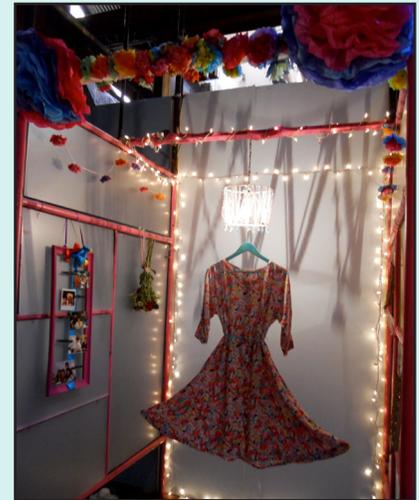


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- Using different sized boxes, construct the two to three levels of the altar. They will diminish in size as they grow higher.
- Drape the levels in cloth, typically using traditional colors as listed above.
- Place components of each level of the altar. You may follow along with [traditional placement](#) of different elements.
- Add additional adornments for the altar and area.
  - This could include marigolds laid around the base of the altar or strung alongside it, paper garlands, or lights. Marigolds traditionally create a path below and around the altar.



Left to right: Altar using design choices by Alicia's son in 2015; A non-traditional altar in 2012; Photos are placed on the left in this altar, "El Vestido de la Tía Abuela," from 2011.

- Marigolds (cempasuchiles) are central to a traditional altar because they have a very distinct vibrant color and scent. In building an altar, you are inviting your loved ancestors to visit you and have a sacred place to welcome them. These marigolds welcome them, creating a path.

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- The ritual components of Día de los Muertos go beyond the altar:
  - Costuming and headpieces bring the celebration into public space and help fully inhabit the day and night, whether this is through procession, coordinated dressing with a group, or traditional face painting.



*Marigolds surround a 2010 altar.*

## ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

### CONNECT SOCIALLY AND LEARN MORE

**Facebook & Instagram:** @MuseumofCraftandDesign

**Twitter:** @SF\_MCD

**Share your project!** Post and tag #MCDatHome

**Websites:** Visit [@mexichicalove](http://mexichicalove.com)—features Alicia's documentation of local public art