

# MORE THAN A MOMENT

Mexico continues to bask in the spotlight as one of the richest cultural creators of our time. Michael Slenske meets the artists, makers and machers defining the country's creative renaissance at home and abroad.

**W**e always try to grow organically with the local public,” says Zélíka García over mid-afternoon splits of champagne while walking the booths of her budding Zona MACO Foto and Zona MACO Salón del Anticuario fairs during Mexico City’s rain-soaked Gallery Weekend in September. Over the past 12 years, that local-organic model has helped turn García’s fairs—and the city itself—into a must-visit hub on the international creative calendar. At the Foto and Salón del Anticuario fairs, she adds, “We have 45 galleries, and even though we’ve only been open two days, we’ve already had 5,000 visitors. Last year in total we had just 7,000 visitors.”

Her best friend, Moisés Micha, co-founder of Grupo Habita, which operates a dozen hotels across Mexico—including hotspot Condesa DF, where the Gallery Weekend luncheon hosted international museum directors and curators from the New Museum, the Institute of Contemporary Art, Miami,

the Hammer Museum and the Los Angeles Nomadic Division—couldn’t agree more.

“Right after Maco and Gallery Weekend we have Design Week and then the Grand Prix,” says Micha, noting Guadalajara’s pre-MACO weekend. “So the calendar is getting very busy.”

When García launched her first fair, Muestra, in Monterrey in 2002, it drew just 20 galleries and 3,000 visitors. “I was begging galleries to come,” she says. But last February, the original Zona MACO contemporary art fair, which launched in 2004 at the city’s World Trade Center, drew some 50,000 visitors and 160 art and design exhibitors that included Honor Fraser, Regen Projects, Carpenters Workshop Gallery, Venus Over Manhattan, Gagosian and David Zwirner, not to mention all the local powerhouses like Kurimanzutto, Galería OMR, Proyectos Monclova and Labor.

Of course, it takes more than boldface galleries to make an art scene. Foundationally, it takes

artists, and aside from the wealth of local talent, there’s a long history of international stars coming to Mexico to live and create art. This past year, Pritzker-winning architect Toyo Ito completed his fluted white concrete Museo Internacional del Barroco in Puebla; Andrea Fraser made her museum debut in a Spanish-speaking country at the Museo Universitario Arte Contemporáneo; the Guggenheim retrospective for Peter Fischli and David Weiss traveled to Eugenio Lopez’s Museo Jumex; and Candida Höfer created an entirely new body of work illuminating iconic buildings of Mexico for a Gallery Weekend show at the new Brutalist exhibition space (carved out of a former record shop) of Galería OMR, the blue-chip, family-run stalwart of the Mexican scene.

“There are so many different places that attract me and that’s what I like,” says Höfer, who shot in five Mexican states last year and will show additional images next year at the Antiguo Colegio de San



Cristóbal Gracia's multimedia  
"Aquatania Part I" exhibition at El  
Cuarto de Máquinas, Mexico City.



"La Esperanza is a smokescreen platform for the return of Preteen Gallery to Mexico City," says Zucker



Jose Davila's *Untitled (Femme d'Alger) IX*, 2016

Ildelfonso that will later travel to Museo Amparo.

Such testimonies are the embodiment of a new cultural MeMo, or Mexico Moment, appropriating the branding device conceived to sell Mexican President Enrique Peña Nieto's early economic reforms. This second-wave MeMo is helping the country project its creative talent onto the world stage: In 2016 alone *The New York Times'* travel section gave the Distrito Federal its top slot in its annual "52 Places to Go" feature; the Philadelphia Museum of Art opened a blockbuster Mexican Modernism survey; Pedro Reyes had a sculpture show at Dallas Contemporary and turned the Brooklyn Army Terminal into a political haunted house called *Doomocracy*; Jose Dávila opened his second solo show (and produced a Thirsty Coyote wine with Hacienda La Lomita) at Sean Kelly while preparing for a traveling, multi-venue outdoor sculpture project with the Los Angeles Nomadic Division through 2018; Gabriel Orozco was awarded the 2016 Aspen Award for Art during Art Crush and unveiled his stunning redesign of South London Gallery's garden; and Abraham Cruzvillegas constructed his inimitable "Autoconcanción" sculptural show with indigenous Angeleno plants at Regen Projects on the heels of his epic—and organic—Turbine Hall takeover. (Meanwhile, Cruzvillegas' hometown gallery, Kurimanzutto, made

a big splash with an acclaimed group show at Jessica Silverman Gallery last January.)

"I invited them to curate a show of their program with the hope that the exhibition would foster a rewarding international conversation. As the art world expands with a never-ending amount of fairs, to see a program as distinctive as Kurimanzutto's in a gallery show was hugely successful and well-received," says Silverman. "The food and art scene is also very hot right now because Mexico is full of culture and innovation. Plus, it's outside of a tech epicenter, which gives way to more handmade creativity."

Such DIY scrappiness is certainly at play with Mexico's young curators like Kurimanzutto's Boston-born Bree Zucker, who organized the gallery's new pop-up billboard project, Sonora 128, in Condesa, which has already featured social engagements by Antonio Caro and Nobuyoshi Araki. She's also part of the independent collective Galería La Esperanza, which produced a buzzy group show during Gallery Weekend, "Touching Hands With Someone Seriously Beautiful," which was organized by iconic curator Gerardo Contreras, who founded the legendary (and legendarily experimental) Preteen Gallery in the late aughts.

"La Esperanza is a smokescreen platform for the return of Preteen Gallery to Mexico City," says

Zucker of their group show in a bodega shop window, which employed a list of artists including Petra Cortright, Donna Huanca, Jeff Zilm and Harmony Korine as a platform to create an entirely new model: not showing individual works by the artists, but rather, by "channeling" their souls.

"The statement of the show is 'an exercise in curatorial divination' and Gerardo's statement is 'the artist is the message,' which is brilliantly terrifying," adds Zucker. "The 'group show' in that vitrine functions as one whole work, a mandala, authored by the artists via Gerardo. Of course we've had many questions already: Is it the artists, or is it Gerardo? Is the artist a curator or the curator an artist? And what is Galería La Esperanza anyway? The show is a Russian doll, because we keep adding layers. Mexico is the land of the possible. What is important is that these spaces display the work of artists we truly believe in and add to the dialogue here in the city."

Meanwhile, Gloria Cortina, the DF's first lady of interior design, is hoping to export the local dialogue (specifically the one she maintains with artisanal wood, stone and metal workers from Teotihuacan, Michoacán and Puebla) to the international stage in a new furniture collection she debuted in November at New York's Cristina Grajales Gallery.

"Mexico has a new light and Mexican clients and internationals alike are discovering the country's





COURTESY OF THE ARTIST

Jose Dávila, Guadalajara's breakout art star, is currently having his second solo show at New York's Sean Kelly gallery, "Stones Don't Move," and preparing for a multi-venue sculpture project with the Los Angeles Nomadic Division.





Nobuyoshi Araki's *qARADISE*, 2016

new vision," says Cortina. "With this new generation of designers and artists a very interesting movement is developing where you can find all these dialogues and connections not only within Mexican culture but also with international scenarios."

In addition to the increased demand for Mexican artists and designers on the international stage, the country's hospitality mavens are also redefining the popular notions of their land's image with a raft of new stateside ventures. Grupo Habita just opened the Hollander and the Robey in Chicago's Wicker Park and are breaking ground on a new hotel in Los Angeles' downtown Arts District around the corner from Hauser Wirth & Schimmel. Top chef Enrique Olvera, whose Mexico City restaurant Pujol just ranked number 25 on The World's 50 Best Restaurants list, spent the past two years expanding his beloved restaurant group to New York with the opening of Cosme, which recently hosted President Obama. "Our main concern was not to be presumptuous, because we knew beforehand that nobody likes it when a foreign individual comes to 'teach' you how to do things," says Olvera. "We just tried to do what we know the

best way we can, taking care of every detail."

The question is, will all this exposure attract more young creatives like Zucker and friends to stay, or push them further and further away? An interesting case study might be found in Cristóbal Gracia, an ascendant young Mexico City-born artist with a lumberjack beard and build, whose multimedia "Aquatania Part I" exhibition at El Cuarto de Máquinas proved to be one of the highlights of Gallery Weekend. The show precisely examined the contradictions of Acapulco—tourist destination; narco-terror hot zone—and its elisions with Tarzan, whose star Johnny Weissmuller not only shot the last film in the series on location in the seaside resort town but also lived out his final years in the iconic Hotel Los Flamingos. While such deeply considered conceits might be hard to tease out from abroad, Gracia—whose shoulder-scraping earring and trucker hat were never far from a fawning dealer or curator at the Gallery Weekend gala dinner inside the courtyard of the Noguchi-esque Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia—admitted he was currently applying to MFA programs in Los Angeles.

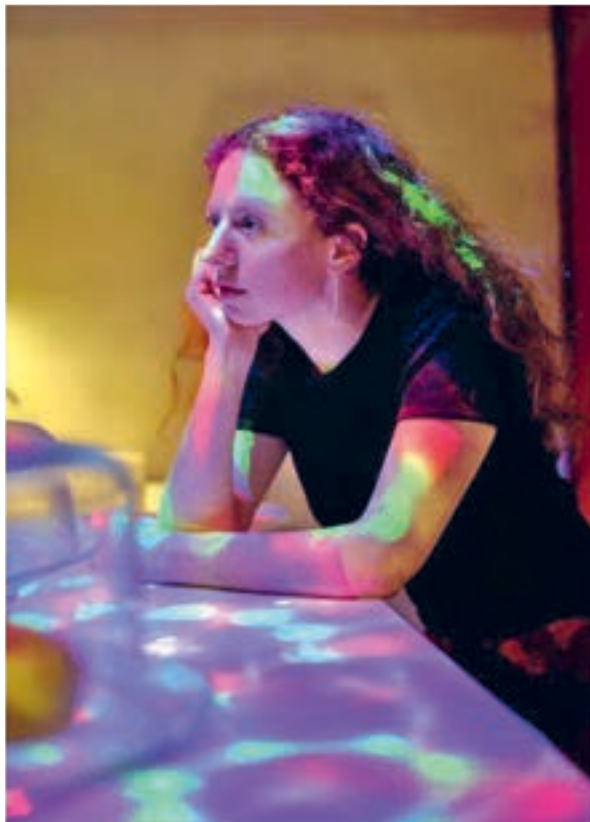
"The force of alternative spaces and a new

generation of artists that I consider myself part of are doing amazing things. It's the strangeness and contradictions of the city that allow us to do this. But I also could fall into a comfort zone in Mexico, and I don't want this," says Gracia. "I love and at the same time hate Mexico City."

These living contradictions—and let's be honest, they're shared by nearly every young artist in New York City—were stunningly illuminated via Jonathan Hernandez's unforgettable display of knives, vacuum hoses, rubber floors, illegally logged lumber, scales, package sealers, a chain saw, walkie talkies and burner cell phones. All sourced from state auctions of assets seized from narcos and mafias, he re-appropriated these items from the criminal black market into the art world black market as sculptures spread throughout, and embedded in the walls of, Kurimanzutto's kunsthalle. In the work, as in Mexico, Hernandez explains, "Fiction is always present."

Or as Oscar Wilde, whose name graces a popular street in Polanco, might have put it: *En México, la vida imita al arte muchos más que el arte imita a la vida.*





## BEYOND THE D.F.

### Guadalajara

Once home to Mexican muralist José Clemente Orozco, Guadalajara is still a town built by and around artists including Gonzalo Lebríja, Jorge Méndez Blake and the city's breakout star, Jose Dávila, all of whom show inside a Barragán-designed house that is now home to the hip Madrid-based gallery Travesía Cuatro. "Mexico needed a second scene and Guadalajara is the perfect frame," says gallery co-founder Inés López-Quesada. Artist Dávila adds, "The last five years have been especially productive with newly opened spaces like Ladera Oeste, PAOS, Páramo, Travesía Cuatro and Tiro Al Blanco, none of which existed before."

### Mérida

During Gallery Weekend, José García, Mx and Travesía Cuatro invaded a 19th-century building in Colonia Juárez with shows of Edgardo Aragón and Gonzalo Lebríja, respectively. José García, Mx, the Mexico City-based gallery that represents Simon Fujiwara, Christian Jankowski and Nina Beier, followed up on that outing with a Jorge Pardo show at their second space in Mérida, the Spanish colonial capital of the Yucatán that is also home to many top artisans. "Mérida has a different gallery profile than our space in Mexico City," says director Leticia Vilalta. "This space is created with the idea of expanding the possibilities for artists to develop projects not only in this culturally rich and tropical environment, but also to use the space as a mixture of a venue that stands between gallery space and a production site."

### Oaxaca

Since opening in the fall of 2014, Bosco Sodi's Tadao Ando-designed arts foundation/studio space, Casa Wabi, has offered residencies to 90 international artists. Four of them were featured in the inaugural exhibition (of photos inspired by the space) for the foundation's new Alberto Kalach-designed non-profit gallery in Mexico City's up-and-coming Santa María de la Rivera area. "Mexico and especially Mexico City are in a great artistic moment, but for the young artist it is still very difficult," says Sodi. "We want to give opportunities to young Mexican artists who do not have a gallery yet."

### Aguascalientes

As the name of this mountainous *estado* suggests, Aguascalientes has long been known for its hot springs. But with the addition of Museo Espacio in the industrial shell of the former railway workshops, "we foresee Aguascalientes becoming a contemporary art center, offering projects that involve the local, national and international art scene, and creating a place for knowledge and dialogue," says museum director Anuar Atala Mendoza. "Specifically, Museo Espacio gives local artists, students and visitors the chance to experience the work of leading international artists like Jannis Kounellis and Daniel Buren, as well as lectures about contemporary art, group discussions and public events like our Noches de Museo programs." Through April the museum is presenting "Wirikuta: Mexican Time-Slip," a group exhibition referencing the parallel worlds of Philip K. Dick's 1964 novel "Martian Time-Slip," featuring works by Carsten Höller, Philippe Parreno, Pamela Rosenkranz and Bosco Sodi, among others.



Top, Gloria Cortina and Bree Zucker; center, Galería La Esperanza in Mexico City; left, Cortina's *Mathias Table*, 2014.