

# Feliciano Béjar: the poetry of all things

**F**eliciano Béjar goes beyond the frontiers of fantasy. What in Akira Kurosawa is a dream—the person who “enters” the various paintings exhibited in a gallery—in Béjar is a fact of daily life. Combining diverse artistic talents, the love of nature and inexhaustible energy, he built the house he shares with his three adopted children: Susana, Martín and Carlos. The importance of Feliciano Béjar’s living space is clearly shown in Martin Foley’s book *El recogedor de soles* (The Collector of Suns), published in 1992.

We chatted in front of the fireplace where logs crackle—although the fire was unable to overcome the invasive cold of the living room. Surrounded by *magiscopios* (“magiscopes”) of



*He built the house he shares with his three adopted children.*

different designs and sizes, accompanied by carved-wood images of saints, clay figures, paintings and lamps of leaded glass, Béjar begins to speak of the terrible experience he went through in a psychiatric hospital.

His denunciation was published in the press in 1992. Now, two years after having overcome the nightmare, Feliciano has begun a campaign against psychiatric hospitals and medical specialists in charge of the patients. This theme (the memory, the pain which he has been unable to alleviate) breaks out repeatedly during the interview.

Béjar wishes he could be omnipotent so he could do away, once and for all, with the abuses medical authorities commit against defenseless human beings. In the depths of his heart he may know that it’s easier to make a desert town green—something he is doing at Llano Grande, in the state of Mexico’s municipality of Jilotepec—than it is to sow compassion and harmony among our fellow men.

But he is not one to give up. There is no doubt that this artist’s struggle for a psychiatric system that does not violate human rights will continue as long as he continues to draw breath.

—One of the pills they made me take in the psychiatric hospital left me unable to speak—says Feliciano Béjar in a vibrant yet serene voice—so I kept a diary. Gina Batista is going to make a book out of it. The book will also contain the complete history of what happened.

A telephone call interrupts the conversation and he turns away.



*Elsa Escamilla.*

*An Indian woman taught him love and respect for materials.*

When he returns, Béjar shows us one of the first magiscopes he made, and we soon accompany him to his studio. On the walls are enormous paintings with religious themes; there is a large table where magiscopes flower at different heights; on the floor—strewn as if by accident—are hand-sewn tapestries.

Béjar continues to make magiscopes, but is also doing engravings. —I intend to put them in order, because maybe I’ll present an exhibit made up only of prints. Look at these tapestries. For some reason there was a time when artists abandoned them, but to me this seems like a valuable genre, which I’m interested in collecting. Some that you see now were saved from the flood we had here in the house in 1981; others are from later on.

In August of 1991, Feliciano Béjar suffered a nervous breakdown due to the kidnapping of a member of his family. His doctor decided to commit him to the Mendao Institute Psychiatric Hospital. The artist was confined there from August 29 to September 17, 1991. The "treatment" cost him one million old pesos (over 300 dollars) per day, despite the vexations and abuses he suffered in that institution. He is now suing the hospital and the psychiatrist who serves as its director. If he wins the lawsuit he will donate the proceeds (3 million new pesos, almost one million dollars) to the program for treating children with cancer and a project for renovating the pavilion of the Health Secretariat's Manuel Ramírez Moreno Psychiatric Hospital.



Elsa Escamilla

*The most interesting thing in life is to experiment.*

The artist sits on the floor, the position he most often works in.

—I had polio as a child, he explains, and since then, I don't know why, but I'm comfortable like this, on my heels.

—Did you stop working only during the period you were confined?— I ask this man of 73 years, straight body and jovial laughter.

—Yes. It's the only time in my life I haven't worked. This shows the bad planning of the system in psychiatric hospitals. They play fifteen hours of rock and roll every day; they say that's what the patients ask for. In fact, the majority are young people who are there due to drug problems. But apart from listening to rock and roll, there is absolutely nothing to do... nothing. Once in a while some people would go do dance therapy. On one occasion a person arrived and tried to have us do theater, but only a few people participated. Regarding myself, I fell into a severe depression because I couldn't work. I made the suggestion... but if they see you're interested in something, they disapprove of it. They don't want you to get well. While you're there, that means money. There are young girls who have been confined for ten years. I hope the authorities find a way to pay unplanned visits to these hospitals, so they can see how they really are.

—Maestro, how do you divide your time between such diverse expressions: magicscopes, sculpture, prints...?

**El recogedor de soles**

(The Collector of Suns)

Martin Foley

Centro Cultural San Angel  
Mexico City, 1992. 165 pp.

Feliciano Béjar's family moved to Jiquilpan in the state of Michoacán shortly before he was born, in an attempt to escape the arson and looting their hometown, Cotija, suffered during the Revolution. "We were always outsiders in Jiquilpan," the painter recalls, although his family was well-loved in the village that gave them refuge.

From the time he was born in 1920, Feliciano was destined to become a prolific artist with the ability to use the most varied materials to express himself. The son of a "vendor of illusions" (who sold mirrors, ribbons, perfume and love letters), as a child Feliciano used to decorate, with multicolored drawings, the traditional letters that circulated among the young people of Jiquilpan.

His "formal" education was limited to two years of elementary school, and a further two when he was a boarder at the Italian School of Arts and Crafts in Guadalajara. In 1933 and 1934, Feliciano held an exhibition of his works and obtained the prize for painting awarded by that school. Very soon, however, the course of his life was to change: in 1934, the school was closed for political and religious reasons, and Béjar returned to Jiquilpan to work at his parents' store, called "El Porvenir" (The Future).

Despite these ups and downs, Feliciano was always at work on some artistic creation. He is a person who has managed to forge deep links with nature, readily embracing an ecological view of life, which he projects as much in his work as in his relation with the rest of the world.

At the age of eight, he was stricken with an acute attack of polio. His mother took on the task of rehabilitating him. She would bury him in hot sand, make him move his legs for several hours in hot water, massage his muscles with a mixture made from "ferocious ants, scorpions and marijuana" and take him to the corn mill to be given electric shocks. This went on for four years. In 1949, the tenacity of both mother and son enabled Feliciano to go on a cycling trip across Europe which went on for two years.

When he was about thirteen, Béjar, leaning on crutches, used to accompany his sisters to embroidery classes together with "La China" Cervantes, an Indian woman who knew a lot or a little about just about everything. There he developed a love and respect for materials, which was instilled in him by "La China" with an almost religious fervor.

She taught Feliciano to mix colors, prepare cloth, bake clay and make papier mâché sculptures; her influence was a decisive factor in his artistic education. The English critic Edward Lucie-Smith summarizes this as follows: "Feliciano Béjar's great achievement is that he has managed to keep one foot in the world of artisans and another in the world of art."

Of the numerous books tracing Béjar's development as an artist and an outstanding person, Martin Foley's *El recogedor de soles* (The Collector of Suns) occupies a special position.

The author, the artist's close friend and representative, talks readily about the book and how it survived a flood:

"Sergio Galindo originally asked me to write the text, which was to be published by the University of Veracruz. It would only have had eight or ten pages of photos. I initially turned Sergio's invitation down, because I felt I was too close to Feliciano to be able to write about him, but Sergio saw this as an advantage. This closeness was precisely what he was looking for. 'Feliciano is not a person who should be treated as a clinical case, coldly analyzed and virtually dissected,' Galindo told me. He knew that the book would be very subjective, but thought that would be a valuable thing.

"So I started to write... and found it very hard. I was involved in so many aspects of Feliciano's life that, in the beginning, the book was virtually an autobiography. At the same time, I wanted to make it quite clear to the reader that our relationship prevented me from being objective. Once the book was finished, I included a highly personal prologue, describing my initial reaction to Feliciano when I first met him and how I became involved in his work and life. Once this was established, I decided to 'disappear' from the book forever."

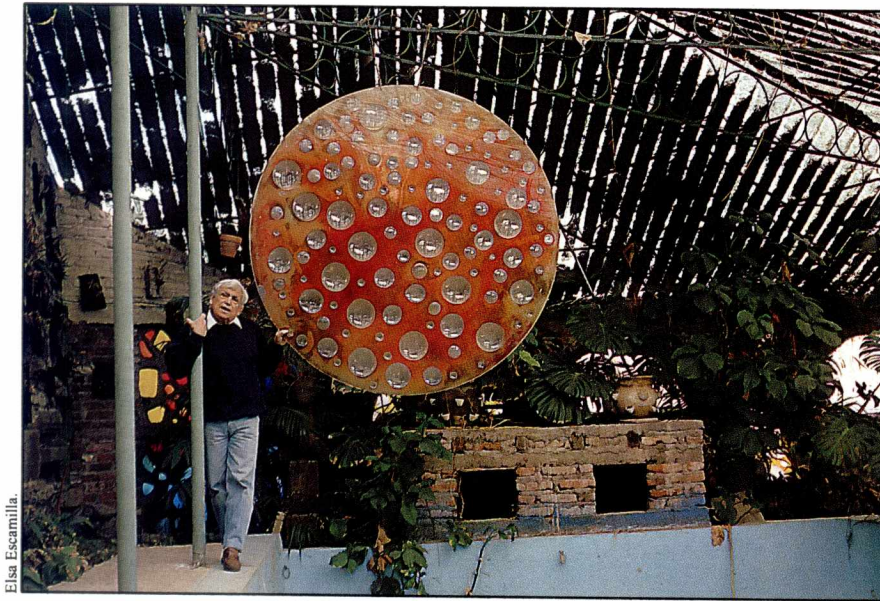
Martin Foley wrote *El recogedor de soles* in Spanish. He thought it would be absurd to write down Feliciano Béjar's ideas in English and then have them translated. Spanish captured the original flavor of the artist's language. The book was a learning experience in which Foley was helped by first one and then another copy editor. He got along better with the second one, who was very respectful of Foley's work. However, it fell to the first corrector to save the book from being lost forever.

Sergio Galindo commissioned the book in the late '70s. Foley began writing it in 1980, and when a lot of work had already been done on the manuscript, there was a flood which destroyed much of Feliciano Béjar's house and work. Pages of the text were floating in the garden, but Martin felt that, of all the losses, this was the least important. David, the corrector, rescued as many pages as he could and set about reconstructing the book, until one day he was able to hand Martin a clean copy.

"A funny thing happened," says Foley. "The flood marked the end of a period in Feliciano's life. I felt that the book's approach should change. The events in his life remained the same, but the interpretation I gave them later was very different. The original manuscript was kept for ten years, until 1990, when the Del Carmen Museum wanted to hold an exhibition to celebrate Feliciano's 70th birthday.

"The curator, Juan Carlos Ruiz, asked me so many questions that I decided to lend him the manuscript so he could find out about Feliciano's life. Both Juan Carlos and the museum's director were very enthusiastic about the book. It was thanks to their intervention that the San Angel Cultural Center decided to publish it. It was my job to add the ten years that had elapsed since the first manuscript was finished, and then shorten the text and work against the clock so the book could be taken to the printer. I handed it in exactly on the date we had set."

Feliciano Béjar's personality, works and house are skillfully captured in Martin Foley's *El recogedor de soles*, a lavishly illustrated book that demands to be read.



Elsa Escamilla.

*The pool welcomes visitors with scents of fragrant wood.*

—I believe there is an error in the present definition of what an artist is. Long ago, during the Renaissance for example, the concept of an artist was different. Michelangelo was a man who cultivated sculpture, painting, architecture and also poetry. To me, what is most interesting in life is to experiment. My work is constantly changing and, despite my age, I believe the changes will continue. I'm currently working on sculptures which resemble sea shells or which are based on the erosions of the earth. There is a paradox here: the erosions of the earth are very beautiful and at the same time very destructive. It is very pleasant to see or photograph them.

—How many hours do you work a day?

—I begin around 7:30 in the morning and take a break around two in the afternoon, when the kids return from school. We eat together and I return to work at 5:00 in the evening or I receive visitors or reporters.

Feliciano Béjar has a cold, which makes his voice even deeper. I ask how his health influences his creative work.

—I work every day, even when I feel very sick. The difference is that I reduce the number of hours.

There's a lot of the artisan in what I do. The days when I'm not well I use for the artisan part of my work. When you arrived I was polishing a magic scope. I say that on Saturdays I'm a Christian and on Sundays I'm Jewish. That way I'm able to work seven days a week. On the weekends I go to the country, to Llano Grande, where I work as a farmhand: I plant trees, rake the ground, whatever needs doing. But I've installed a fabulous

studio there for painting. It's better than any other: windows make up the bulk of both floors, and a marvelous light comes in. I think these are two things that go together completely: creative work and the preservation of the environment. My maternal grandmother was Indian and taught me a lot about the kind of work people do in the countryside. She had an enormous knowledge of herbs and plants, something which, sadly, I did not learn. When we were out together, if I complained of a pain, my grandmother would say: "Pick this little plant and chew it," and the pain would go away.

—Despite the remarks you've made at various times on the existence of artistic mafias in Mexico, you yourself are an outstanding and well-known creator. Does this mean that it's possible to excel without group support?

—For some reason, in recent years I haven't been invited to participate in anything. I'm referring to the Fine Arts and Modern Art Museums, among other institutions. But I believe what has helped most in my career was precisely living for years outside my country, which



Elsa Escamilla.

*Some of his works emerge from amongst the plants.*

provided me with a very large foreign audience. I also believe that whatever I do may or may not be well-received, but it is different from what other artists produce. One of the biggest examples of what the art mafias represent are the awards given by the National System of Creators. It seems like an insult to me, because the majority of those favored are not young. Besides their age, they have greater economic possibilities and they should not be granted life-long economic support. It also appears to me that there is a lack of dignity in some artists' acceptance of these awards. For me the concept of scholarships involves young people, without economic resources. There is an interesting point I would like to make: among the few young people who have received this or that scholarship from the National Council for Culture and the Arts, there are children from very wealthy families who don't need monetary help to carry out their work. Something else: very few of the students awarded scholarships come from the provinces, and very few are women. This is clearly scandalous. This scandal continues, and hopefully the time will



Elsa Escamilla.

*His open-air theater resembles a Roman forum left to the whims of nature.*

come when the people who distribute that money will really think things over. The fact that there is no money to maintain works of art strikes me as an insult to the people of Mexico. There is no money to be found for restoration, among other things, while on the other hand they award scholarships to people who are fabulously wealthy.

—In the distribution of these awards, Béjar continues, the idea of

“buying” artists was imposed. For example, since I started writing Thursday editorials dealing with various topics, affirming truths that certain people don't like, many people from the current government have called me up to discuss recently-published articles. They give their points of view, but don't try to get revenge or act hateful because I said this, that or the other. They're not all like that. There is a large number whose only concern is that you speak well of the government and current situation in Mexico, even if you're lying. They are interested in having artists on their side. And you see this in what Mexico has faced in Chiapas. If the government had not allowed itself to be deceived, or if they did not want to be deceived, maybe history would be different. Last year, after visiting Chiapas, I wrote an article which said something very serious was going to happen. You could see it. You would have to be blind not to realize it would happen. But, in truth, the authorities prefer not to pay heed to this type of warning.

These artistic mafias have inflicted serious damage on Mexico. I say this over and over. When we talk about painting's three greats, that was



Elsa Escamilla.

*My work is constantly changing.*

a time when the country had a whole group of people with enormous talent, but nonetheless they were all forgotten. Only three are recognized: Rivera, Siqueiros and Orozco. But there were also Montenegro, Castellanos, María Izquierdo.... Given time, I could make a list of 25 or 30 great artists who are now beginning to be "revived," but sadly they're already dead. Now they're trying to promote María Izquierdo and Castellanos. It's sad to see that Castellanos' greatest works are in Philadelphia, not in Mexico, and this is because he was ignored. I believe the same thing is happening right now.

I'm very distant, a bit on purpose, from the artistic movement, because it's so frustrating to see the envy and the intrigues, and I don't have time to waste out of the few years I have left in my life. I think when you analyze things, there must be a great number of artists today with a lot of talent who are completely ignored and forgotten. It's because for some reason Mexican politicians have frequently used the intellectuals. Politicians who have no culture whatsoever, at the moment



Elsa Escamilla

*He uses the most varied materials to express himself.*

they rise to a higher position want to be surrounded by intellectual people, as if to be legitimized. It's as if they said: "These important people are on my side. They support me". To me, it's a sorry fact that in every six-year presidential term talented artists (I'm not going to name names) allow themselves to be bought off. And they sell themselves for oddly low prices. Because receiving a scholarship, or even an ambassadorship, is not enough to silence their consciences... which they should have, I believe.

—What distinguishes Feliciano Béjar from other artists?



Elsa Escamilla

*A magicoscope by "the collector of suns."*

—That I not only speak and write, but am also doing things. I've been very involved with the Indians of the Tarahumara mountain range for about fourteen years, and this year it was my pleasure to make a considerable donation for building a shelter for the children of that region. My own children are Indian and I am very proud to be able to send them to excellent schools. They also receive music classes three times a week and have already given concerts, including outside of Mexico.



Elsa Escamilla

*Béjar has one foot in the world of artisans and another in the world of art.*

Béjar moves happily around the garden of his house-sculpture, showing us the works that emerge from amongst the plants, like another manifestation of nature. He explains the way he uses scraps in his works; he speaks of his first paintings, "necessarily" linked to Catholicism; he leads us to the marvelous open-air theater, where performances used to be held, which now bears a certain resemblance to a Roman forum left to the whims of nature. At every step there is the footprint of this artist's explosive creativity, from the interior pool which used to be filled with rainwater to the main entrance door which welcomes visitors with its scent of fragrant wood.

Béjar, the magician, is understandable perhaps only through the lens of his magicscopes. Feliciano, the fighter to whom defeat is unknown. A good man with whom one would like to spend many an hour, reconciling oneself with the worth of those beings and things which the rhythm of present-day life is leaving in oblivion ❧

*Gabriela Rábago Palafox*  
Staff Writer.