

The persistence of Mexico

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“Often, in times of crisis, the arts produce more,” says Gerardo Suter, one of Mexico’s leading contemporary photographers. “In the last economic crisis, artists, filmmakers, writers and photographers continued producing, and with more energy and vitality than before.”

Amid the after-effects of a major currency devaluation and the resulting instability of the Mexican economy, the Mexican art world is taking a collective breath as it awaits the decline of government and private-sector arts support. “At the end of each presidential administration, everything comes to a halt as funding and leadership changes alter arts institutions and planned projects,” says Pilar García, an art historian and member of the Mexico City arts think tank CURARE. “But this time, after six years of more projects, more scholarships, and more private-sector and government arts initiatives than ever before, the harsh economic reality suggests that the next year for the arts will stand in bleak contrast to the preceding ones.”

Nonetheless, artists, dealers and curators alike judge the situation as temporary, and believe that past

momentum will continue to propel upcoming exhibitions and projects. Armando Colina, director of Arvil Gallery in Mexico City, which shows modern masters such as Frida Kahlo, Diego Rivera, and José Clemente Orozco, is celebrating the gallery’s 25th anniversary with a

series of ten historical exhibitions. “Here in Mexico we have lived through these crises before and things continue,” says Colina. “There is a dynamic in the art world that you cannot stop; you must continue creating, organizing, and presenting, regardless.”



Gerardo Suter, *Tlálloc*, 1991.

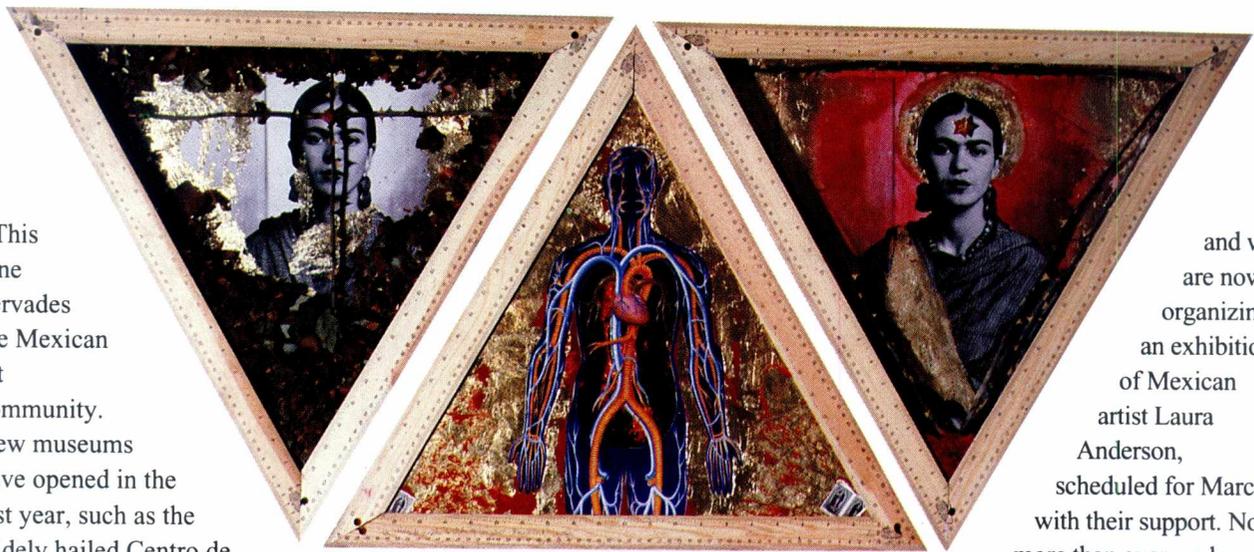
First published in *ARTnews*, April, 1995.

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This tone pervades the Mexican art community. New museums have opened in the last year, such as the widely hailed Centro de la Imagen photography museum and the Dolores Olmedo Museum, housing Olmedo's impressive collection of Rivera and Kahlo works; and others are being proposed, such as a center for contemporary art in Guadalajara, currently undergoing a feasibility study.

Rafael Tovar y de Teresa, the president of the National Council for Culture and Arts, stated last January that cultural priorities and objectives would be redefined without severely diminishing the budget. According to the Mexico City daily *La Jornada*, Tovar y de Teresa pledged continued support for artists' scholarships, arts projects, the Centro de la Imagen, and the National Center for the Arts, inaugurated by President Salinas in November 1994, which includes the schools of visual arts, dance, theater and film.

Realistically, though, the art community anticipates cutbacks. Funds for culture cannot continue at the levels prior to the devaluation. Teresa del Conde, director of the Museum of Modern Art in Mexico City, explains the steps she has taken to assure the continuity of her programs. "We established a Friends Society, which



Adolfo Patiño, *Santa Frida*, 1988.

runs our bookstore. The revenues earned from this store are used to support, for example, the museum's education programs, ranging from youth studio courses to advanced theory programs in which students can earn their diploma." Regarding exhibitions, Del Conde continues: "American Express has funded some, namely the Giorgio de Chirico and Remedios Varo exhibitions,



Sergio Hernández, *Untitled*, 1989.

and we are now organizing an exhibition of Mexican artist Laura Anderson, scheduled for March, with their support. Now more than ever we have to find business sponsors to fund exhibitions."

Even private museums such as the Centro Cultural de Arte Contemporáneo, funded by the international telecommunications giant Televisa, feel the effects of the weak economy. "Due to the devaluation, we have had to cancel all but two of the international exhibitions planned for 1995 — 'Vestiges of the Holy Land: Selections from the Israel Museum in Jerusalem' and 'Ikko Tanaka: Art of the Japanese Poster,' " according to a curator at the museum. "But we have scheduled a beautiful exhibition of Rufino Tamayo's paintings from 1920 to '50 and a wonderful exhibition of Mexican exvotos, both of which will draw large audiences and generate national pride."

On a different note, Magda Carranza —another curator at the museum— adds: "Although it is a difficult economic moment, it provides a great opportunity for foreigners to import art and artists from Mexico." Given the peso's devaluation, Mexican art is now inexpensive in foreign markets and provides an extraordinary opportunity for willing buyers.

From the gallery side, dealers concur and are looking to foreign markets and collectors for salvation. As Monterrey's dynamic gallery owner Ramis Barquet explains: "Since the peso fell, I began changing my life. Now is the time for Mexican dealers to go international and export Mexican artists. Like any other business, we have to look for markets in dollars in other countries. I plan to attend five international art fairs this year —Miami, Madrid, Barcelona, Caracas and Chicago. Fortunately, there are collectors buying now in Colombia, Peru, Costa Rica, Panama, and the U.S." Barquet does not seem daunted by the search for new collectors. "I'm about to open a new gallery space, and will show Ray Smith and Julian Schnabel."

Other dealers, such as Cuban-born Nina Menocal of Galeria Nina Menocal

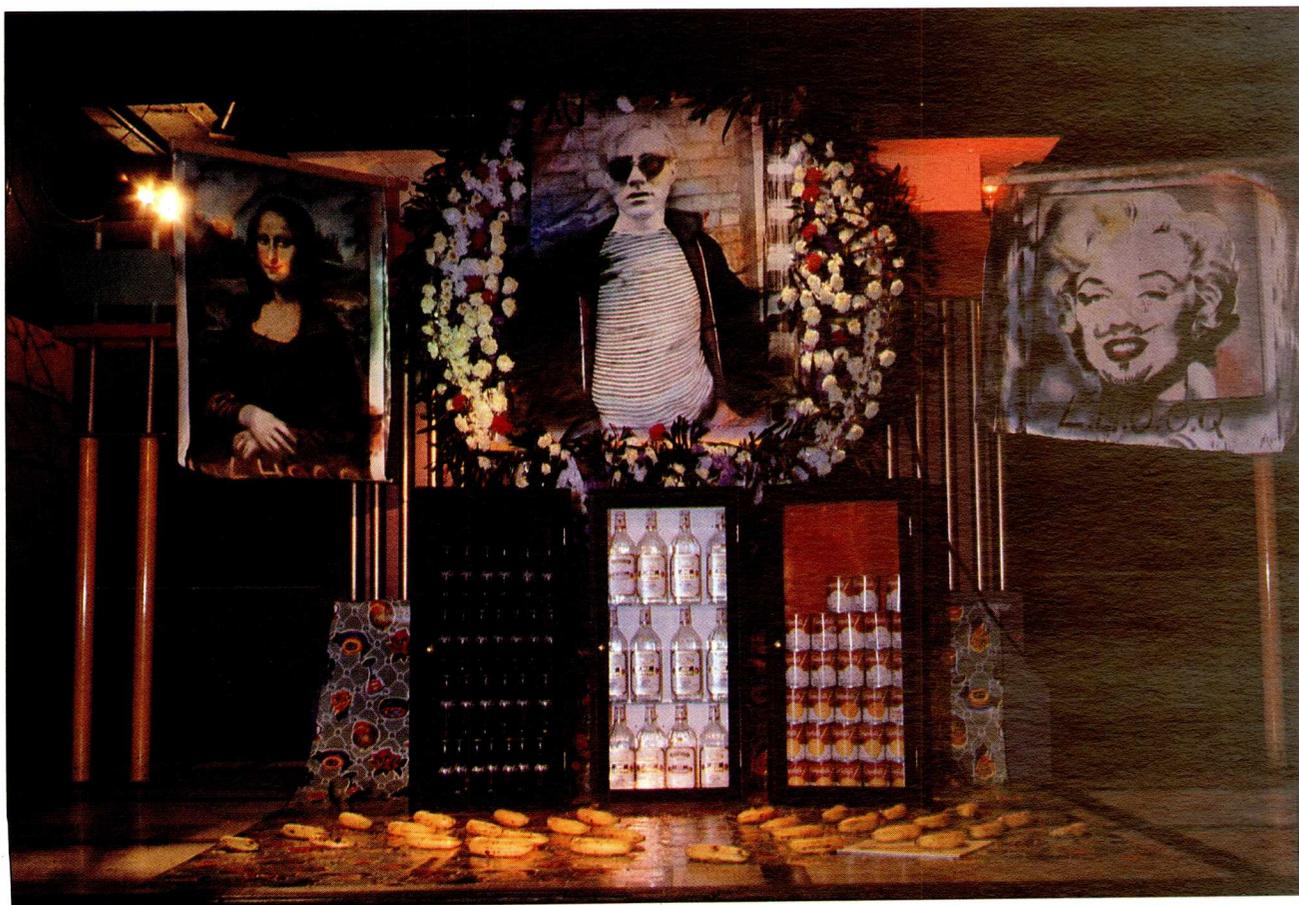
in Mexico City, count on sales to foreign clients. "I love contemporary art," Menocal says. "My problem is to stay loyal to my mission, to present really contemporary art and not follow the market. We have to be careful with prices. People are scared, so perhaps we won't sell for six months. In the meantime I have clients outside Mexico."

Outside is where art will be sold for the next few months, agrees Rafael Matos, director of the Rafael Matos Moctezuma Auction House in Mexico City. In his experience, the majority of people buying Mexican art in the United States and abroad are still Mexicans. "People who want to sell Mexican masters will do so in New York, and wealthy Mexicans with their money in United States banks will be

the ones to buy. The effect will be to segment the market. The rich will still buy, and the middle class will not."

One Mexico City curator remarked confidentially to *ARTnews*: "I received two offers from people selling a Diego Rivera and a Leonora Carrington, within two weeks after the devaluation. These are pieces never before available on the market. We're going to see great works of art for sale by people who need money." As Matos concludes, "Art always has a market. Even Nicaragua sold art during their civil war. Art is noble and can be defended during the worst of times."

Jaime Riestra, codirector of the contemporary art gallery OMR in Mexico City, has gone ahead and planned a provocative exhibition schedule for 1995 featuring two new



Adolfo Patiño, *Offering to Andy Warhol*, 1987.



Leonora Carrington, *At Eo, Quod*, 1956.

artists. "In addition to going to ARCO in February," he says, "we have programmed some great exhibitions: Arturo Elizondo, a Mexican who lives in New York and sells a lot in Europe; Guillermo Pérez Villalta, a Spaniard who has a big European following; and an emerging artist, Ishai Jusidman, who will present objects and installations."

As far as Mexican artists themselves are concerned, the

economy seems to have had little immediate effect on them. Although some receive government scholarships or have patrons, most do not earn steady incomes, anyway. But they will eventually feel the pain if the economy continues on its present course, since they have to sell to make a living.

Government scholarships are an integral part of an artist's development. If they are eliminated, one likely effect is the politicization of

art. CURARE's curator and director, Olivier Debroise, says, "Many criticize the government's artist-scholarship system, but I believe that, at the risk of creating an official art, it is a good structure. Each person receives his piece of the pie and cannot win it again, so the awards are spread among many artists."

Adolfo Patino, a Mexican artist who works with emerging talents, says, "At this moment there isn't political art precisely because the state is paying artists not to protest. The same was true in the 1920s when the government paid artists to paint public murals rather than anti-government images." Remove official support in a climate of economic and social uncertainty, and Mexican artists may very well create a politically volatile art.

Some of the most independent artists in Mexico formed artist-run alternative spaces in the early '90s, such as ZONA and Temístocles 44. Both places have struggled, with the latter ultimately disbanding. Fortunately, a surprisingly large number of government-run and private art institutions exist, providing a backbone and outlet for contemporary art. They range from the richly appointed, like the beautiful Museum of Contemporary Art in Monterrey, to the bare-bones spaces where artists must paint the walls and change light bulbs.

In Mexico City, six institutions offer exhibition space to contemporary artists. The Siqueiros Poliforum, for example, is a private cultural center directed by María Teresa Márquez. "I receive support from the Government Arts Council, CONACULTA, and have to raise the rest," she says. "To this end, I planned a February 14 'Love of Art' dance, where masks painted by Mexican masters such as

Vicente Rojo and José Luis Cuevas were auctioned to raise money.”

The Rufino Tamayo Museum and the Museum of Modern Art, across from each other in Chapultepec Park, exhibit established contemporary artists. The Tamayo specializes in international contemporary art, and the Museum of Modern Art combines international and Mexican art, but neither museum is readily available for solo exhibitions by most contemporary artists. As collector Sergio Autrey says, “An artist must pass through many stages, beginning with the Casa de Cultura of San Angel or any of the other *casas de cultura* in the country, then the Museo Carrillo Gil, next the Museum of Modern Art, before he reaches the National Museum of Art.”

Three government museums show the work of very contemporary artists. The Museo Carrillo Gil mounts exhibitions of installations, sculptures, objects and paintings by such young talents as Diego Toledo, Nestor Quinones, and Silvia Gruner. The museum’s “Encuentro Nacional de Arte Joven,” combining paintings, graphic art, photography and objects, is a type of salon for emerging talents and, after 14 years, an important fixture in the contemporary art scene. Although much of the art presented is painfully weak, the forum and experience it provides are invaluable.

The Museo del Chopo, part of the National University system in Mexico City, is another lively center for contemporary art. It is described as both a university and an alternative museum for those lacking access to exhibition space. The not-always-cogent but provocative exhibitions mounted there include the annual group show “Cultural Fight Against AIDS.”

Finally, the X’Teresa Alternative Art Center is an unusual space in the Old Temple of Saint Teresa located in the heart of Mexico City. Although this awe-inspiring, vaulted space has seen some interesting avant-garde exhibitions and events—such as the Mexican/U.S. Latino Artists’ performance exchange and the International Forum of Contemporary Art Theory with the director of the 1997 Documenta, Catherine David—the administration of X’Teresa has alienated much of the Mexican arts community. Artists, curators, and art historians alike, who requested that their names be withheld, have complained that this potentially vital space for contemporary art is underutilized due to friction within the administration.

Besides these established structures, there are so-called art promoters, supported by private enterprise, such as La Vaca Independiente [The Independent Cow], which was founded in 1991 by Claudia Madrazo. She describes the purpose of La Vaca Independiente as threefold: “One is to promote education for children—interactive children’s books and programs for schools. Two, to promote emerging, young Mexican artists and Mexican design. Our third priority is to provide consulting services for organizing exhibitions.” La Vaca Independiente’s next big project is to copublish with Harry N. Abrams in New York *The Diary of Frida Kahlo: An Intimate Self-Portrait*, scheduled for release in September 1995.

Each exhibition and project Madrazo’s group produces requires private funding, which, she admits, will be harder to come by. Nonetheless, she remains determined. “The great talent and energies of Mexico can work to do many things,”

she says. “We need to think beyond the next six to eight months.”

Despite the unease generated by economic uncertainty, the Mexican art world is taking the situation in stride, remaining stoically optimistic and confident that a year from now more exhibitions will be arranged internationally, more art will sell, and more funding will exist for scholarships and projects. In the meantime, Mexico will reexamine and celebrate its rich artistic heritage as well as the contemporary visions of its many artists.

Gerardo Suter echoes the thoughts of many of the country’s artists when he says, “It’s going to be difficult without government and private support. But we have to try harder to create. The economic problems both burden and behoove us to produce more.”

Sergio Hernández: dragon lizards and dancing skeletons

“One paints for a sense of magic, of fear,” explains Sergio Hernández, the 37-year-old artist from Oaxaca. The southern Mexican state that many consider Mexico’s cultural capital was also the birthplace of Rufino Tamayo. Hernández is known for his richly colored and textured semi-abstract paintings and sculptures of mythical creatures—hybrids born of Zapotecan Indian legends and Egyptian and European voyages. He was one of the few contemporary artists included in the 1991 Metropolitan Museum of Art block-buster exhibition “Thirty Centuries of Mexican Art,” and his work figures in most public and private collections in Mexico, such as the Centro Cultural de Arte Contemporáneo and the Museum of Modern Art in Mexico City.

Hernández’s images—ranging from primitive dragon lizards to

dancing skeletons— are provocative, technically interesting, and at once personal and universal. He attributes his esthetic sensibility to his native Oaxaca: “It is a culture full of images, of figures that arouse fear and respect in people. There are countless ephemeral events using dance, music, textiles, and art that celebrate and preserve our culture. One example is the annual radish carving on November 23. Large, pinkish radishes are carved into fantastic figures and spread on tables in the city square. Each day these creatures, somehow imbued with magic, evolve as the vegetables dry. It is a Oaxacan custom, a ritual transformation. Lately I’ve been trying to capture it on canvas.”

Hernández’s father, an artisan who made furniture, transplanted his six children to Mexico City when Hernández was about 13, so that they

would receive an education. “My father placed me as an apprentice with the master wood carver hired by Diego Rivera,” Hernández recalls. “As a teenager from the provinces living in the city, my life was intense. Daily I was influenced by the murals by Rivera’s students I saw in the market across the street.” After two years of apprenticeship, he went to the government arts academies, first San Carlos and later the Esmeralda, where he studied drawing and painting with Mexican masters like Luis Nichizawa and Gilberto Aceves Navarro and tried to read the required art historical and philosophical texts. “But I had been barely educated until age 12 in Oaxaca, and I could not read or write. I didn’t understand a word.”

In the early 1980s, Hernández won a series of scholarships from the Mexican government, which placed his

work in the National Collection. This allowed him to travel to New York and, in 1986, to Paris, where he lived for a year and presented an exhibition at the Mexican Cultural Center in Paris. “It was a difficult year. I was assaulted by terrorists during a bank heist, hospitalized, and worked little. The following year I returned to Oaxaca.”

Ironically, Hernández’s return to his roots prompted his move into other media and exposure to outside influences. “I always wanted to work in ceramics, and in Oaxaca I can and have since my return. I use the ovens used by Oaxacan artisans, identical to those excavated near Monte Albán dating from 200 B.C.,” he exclaims. He also enjoyed exposure to international artists. “Oaxaca attracts people from everywhere—cinematographers, Mexican masters such as Armando Morales, and, two years ago, Anselm Kiefer, who is a sensitive, down-to-earth person. During a visit to my studio he remarked that my casual sketches on clay pots were more direct and convincing than many images on canvas I had planned and reworked time and again.”

Represented by the Galeria Quetzalli in Oaxaca City, Hernández has not had a solo exhibition for three years, nor is one planned. “Fortunately I have no problem selling. What is most important to me is to create without responsibility. I won’t have a solo exhibition until I find an idea uniting my images.”

Dressed in a tweed sports coat and linen shirt, but possessing a soulful quality decidedly detached from urban chaos, Hernández is of his own world but of our world, too. He says defiantly, “I dislike the term ‘Latin American.’ It assigns a place to an art. Above all a painting is by a man, not a Latin American or an Egyptian, and it is an expression for men everywhere.” ❧



Sergio Hernández, *Toy Horses*, 1993.