

GOOD

Mexico City Is Quickly Becoming A Major Player For Global Artists

by [William Savinar](#)

THE GOOD NEWS:

The contemporary art world is expanding far beyond cities that have traditionally been centers for creative output.

Frontón Mexico has lived many lives. Built in 1929, the art deco building served as an event space and jai alai venue. It once hosted a farewell party for poet Pablo Neruda in 1943, and in 1968, it even held events when Mexico City was home to the Olympic Games. After the building closed in 1996, it became abandoned for many years. But today, Frontón Mexico has returned to the glory of its heyday, keeping its original color and features intact after a recent renovation by the National Institute of Bellas Artes. It was a fitting venue for the fifth edition of the [Material Art Fair](#), a massive event that winds through ramps spanning three levels in a dizzying layout of 75 different gallery booths from 33 cities in 18 countries.

Mexico City has long been a home to the arts, but it has only been in the last few years that it has garnered such astounding levels of international attention for contemporary art and design by international committees and publications. The International Council of Societies of Industrial Design [designated Mexico City the world design capital for 2018](#), stating, “Mexico City has a powerful story to share on the world stage, as a model for other megacities around the world using design to tackle the challenges of urbanization and ensure a more livable city.” The New York Times listed Mexico City as number one on their list of “[52 Places to Go in 2016](#),” regrettably citing “the Mexican peso hitting record lows against the dollar” as a reason for visiting.

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These accolades, of course, contrast with what many still think of Mexico — a country plagued by a troubling drug war — even though, for over a decade, Mexico City has not seen levels of violence comparable to other regions of Mexico. It is the seat of the federal

government, a no-go zone for perpetrators of violence elsewhere. Although a few areas of the city experience a degree of crime, including the disappearance of women and journalists, those are not the areas where internationally recognized contemporary art is on display.

“The center of art is moving to the edge [of the world]. The center is no longer New York or London, it is Mexico City,” says Arturo Delgado, founder of the gallery Almanaque Fotografica, in the bohemian neighborhood of Roma. “This event represents committed projects by committed artists beyond old boundaries of nationalism.”



David Castillo Gallery from Miami, Florida, featured at the Material Art Fair. Photo by Mallika Vora.

The tradition of art inhabiting formerly abandoned structures like Frontón has been common in Mexico City, where underground art spaces can be found in dilapidated buildings in neighborhoods that are often overlooked, such as Doctores, Obrera, and the edge of the city’s historic downtown. They are often operated by artists whose buildings and art events risk being condemned or shut down by police.

Smaller independent contemporary art galleries in Mexico City can be seen in neighborhoods, such as Roma and Condesa, several of which were represented at the Material Art Fair. Francisco Cordero-Oceguera, founder of Lodos gallery, says the fair is “a Mexico City art event, [that’s] definitely good for the art scene.” Founder of Lulu gallery, Chris Sharp, agrees. “The fair is for discovering new, emerging artists. People

get to see artists here that they wouldn't otherwise encounter. There is a raw energy here," Sharp says.

One would find it difficult to disagree. The fair is an impressive display of artistic talent, offering techniques and mediums ranging from performance to sculpture to installation, photography, painting, multimedia, and collage.

One highlight was "Carne de Ataúd" [Meat Coffin], a book of 24 collages by the Mexican artist Moris, presented by Rolando Anselmi Gallery from Berlin, Germany. The book contains pornographic images of women with their bodies cut out to reveal black and white newspaper images of what appears to be the 1985 Mexico City earthquake. The jarring juxtaposition in the collages plays with ideas of representations of sex and disaster, which can lead the viewer to examine the images we are exposed to every day and how they relate to our own psyche. They are reminiscent of daily newspapers, prevalent in Mexico City and around the world, that display horrific violence on the front page and women posing nearly naked on the back.

Another artist exploring a similar theme is Annika Rauhala with MUU Galleria in Helsinki, Finland. Her piece "Riot Police" is a six-and-a-half-minute video that, according to her artist statement, "deals with the militarization of Finnish riot police in the context of broader social change ... a brazen reversal of roles that turns an ultra masculine subject into an object for the sexualizing gaze."

The "Untitled" series by Spanish artist José Lerma, presented by Roberto Paradise Gallery from San Juan, Puerto Rico, was another standout. The works consist of different cartoonish portraits on a large scale, some of them with text and some of them with a skewed perspective showing both eyes on one side of their face or a man with four eyes.

There is a self-referential humor in these works that complicates the craft itself. Using bathmats as a canvas, Lerma pokes fun at the fine-art establishment, and one piece even mentions the color of ink to be used. His artist statement says his work seeks to "reveal both the process and the illusion of painting."

While Material Art Fair offers a new mix of contemporary global artists, Mexico City's support for the arts is steadfast. The capital hosts arguably the most art museums in the world by volume per capita and inherits hundreds of years of artistic tradition. The National Institute of Fine Arts is a major financial contributor to the arts; it funds and oversees educational arts opportunities as well as the operation of galleries, museums, and historic buildings, including the one hosting the Material Art Fair.

The National Autonomous University of Mexico also operates many major museums in the city, including the Museo Universitario Arte Contemporáneo on the campus and the

Museo Universitario del Chopo, another contemporary art museum located near the center of the city in Santa María La Ribera. Many of these museums and city's projects are funded by the National Council for Culture and Arts, giving Mexico City a reputation of openness towards artistic endeavors amid political and social turmoil.

The Material Art Fair does represent a more global vision of contemporary art, but does this vision gloss over Mexico's sociopolitical problems for the sake of international reputation? Perhaps. But it is an international art event celebrating freedom of expression under a government that regularly censors the media and in a country where refusal of public funding leads to many difficulties for artists. At the same time, it seems to present a sanitized version of Mexico City to woo international press and visitors, in an attempt to disassociate the city from its problems. It may be these contradictions that make Material Art Fair an accomplishment.