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Art in the Heartland

Central Mexico is leading the country’s rapidly developing and internationally engaged art scene

Evan Moffitt

Legend has it that the state of Aguascalientes was born from a kiss. The plains country region that surrounds the eponymous city, a sleepy colonial town at the geographic heart of Mexico, was once a dependency of its neighbour state, Zacatecas. When Antonio López de Santa Anna – the country’s eighth president and an infamous womanizer – attended a dinner party in Aguascalientes in 1835, he became captivated by Maria Luisa Villa, the wife of a local landowner, and offered her anything she wished in exchange for a kiss. She shrewdly kissed his cheek and informed the other guests that el Presidente had granted their territory the status of statehood. A pair of ruby-red lips still adorns the Aguascalientes state seal.

Affectionate independence from the national capital, Mexico City, has long characterized this region of central Mexico. While it can be hard to resist the magnetic pull of the Distrito Federal (Federal District) – the designated centre of culture and government – the country’s heartland is now at the forefront of Mexico’s rapidly developing and internationally engaged art scene.

A colossal cultural initiative promises to draw artists from around the world to the town that once drew Santa Anna. Not far from the historic plaza of Aguascalientes, the Macro Espacio para la Cultura y las Artes (Macro Space for Culture and Art, or MECA) has taken over a sprawling, 200-acre former railway factory. As of this month, the complex includes a university, art school, print workshop, dance conservatory, art library and a contemporary art museum, the Museo Espacio. The local government, drawing on both public and private investment, hopes MECA can be the Mexican equivalent of Canada’s world-renowned Banff Art Centre. The recently opened print shop – so big it could swallow several New York galleries – is fully equipped to produce everything from lithographs and aquatints to etchings and digital prints. In a bid to score international credibility, Museo Espacio is focusing on a programme of historically important, late-career artists: the museum inaugurated its hulking, no-frills industrial space with a Jannis Kounellis retrospective, followed by an installation of Daniel Buren’s monumental building-block set, Like Child’s Play (2014–16). Although all the works shown had already been presented abroad, the exhibitions were firsts for local crowds, whose previous access to art had been limited to a few municipal galleries that mostly show regional work. If Museo Espacio gives MECA a global identity and a local audience, then the facilities surrounding it will draw artists from further afield (or so its founders hope).

A three-hour drive south of MECA, across the volcanic plains of Jalisco state, lies Guadalajara, its black rock carpeted in greenery and slender saguaro cacti. Not a small town but a sprawling metropolis, it is Mexico’s second-largest city, and home to the country’s greatest muralist, José Clemente Orozco. Now, like its neighbour to the north, Guadalajara is one of the country’s industrial powerhouses, manufacturing everything from cars
Unlike their old-world predecessors, Taller weavers do not dye the yarn to achieve their final colours, but weave together several hues for greater chromatic vibrancy; the process inspired textile artist Sheila Hicks during her time living in nearby Guerrero.

Artists with other interests can visit PAOS, a residency programme located in an airy modernist home originally built for Orozco. Founded by artist Eduardo Sarabia, the programme also hosts talks, film screenings and small exhibitions. When I visited the space, The Propeller Group, a Ho Chi Minh City-based filmmaking collective, were showing recent work and Javier M. Rodríguez, a Guadalajara-based multimedia artist, was working on a piece that would cover the building’s window panels with time-lapse projections of passing daylight. His temporary studio, equipped with humming projectors and overlooking Orozco’s towering (and bracingly anticapitalist) unfinished painting *La buena vida* (The Good Life, 1944–45) — a withdrawn commission for an upmarket Manhattan restaurant — almost appeared to collapse the city’s art history into a single frame.

In the absence of a large local gallery scene, most of the works made in these studios have been shipped out of Guadalajara for exhibition in Europe and the US. Travesía Cuatro, founded in 2003, represents the city’s biggest stars — Jose Dávila, Gonzalo Lebrija and Jorge Méndez Blake — and exhibits their work regularly alongside that of artists from abroad. In 2015, Páramo Galería inaugurated their exhibition space with work by international artists, such as Amanda Ross-Ho and Naama Tsabar, alongside the Guadalajara-based Daniel Guzmán and Emanuel Tovar. Both galleries have become fixtures on the international art-fair circuit and anchors for a community that has since grown quickly. This past summer, Páramo partnered with The Mistake Room in Los Angeles on an exhibition of Guadalajara artist collective Gabinete Homo-Estratéistre. In August, Méndez Blake and Travesía’s former director, Geovana Ibarra, opened the nonprofit space Ladera Oeste. Located in the open-plan suite of a travertine-clad office tower, the gallery’s opening show included works by Pia Camil, Fiona Connor, Karl Holmqvist and Allen Ruppersberg, set against Guadalajara’s sprawling skyline, visible through a white metal grill and floor-to-ceiling windows. An annex on the ground floor, pinched between the building and a service corridor — originally intended as a landlord’s office, I was told — held a single sound work by Vito Acconci (*Antarctica*, 2011); his deep baritone echoed ominously against the stone tile. Barely two weeks later, and mere blocks away, Gamma Galería opened in a pristine space with a show featuring Asger Carlsen, Hannah Perry, Hayal Pozanti, Martin Soto Climent and Kate Steciw. If Páramo and Travesía Cuatro have paved the way for Guadalajara’s increasing internationalism, these newer spaces are making even bolder appeals to audiences outside Mexico’s borders.

At first glance, this may not seem to be offering new avenues for exhibition to local artists, who may be as likely to show in the capital as they are in Guadalajara. The growing presence of contemporary art outside of Mexico City’s orbit may be just one result of gentrification there; a fast-growing expatriciate community of creative professionals in the federal district has increased demand for housing near the city centre, and with it the cost of living. As more artists from New York, London and Paris flock to Mexico City, more Mexican artists are turning to Guadalajara. Such displacement may also reflect the interests of artists who prefer to work away from the commercial pressures of the capital’s bustling gallery scene. But positive growth — growth that supports local communities while building bridges across continents — is always a question of balance and, if MECA and Guadalajara’s young spaces are any indication, there is plenty of it to be found in Mexico’s heartland.

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Daniel Guzmán

*Vivimos en la obscenidad. Hacemos lo que podemos a pesar de la demencia de ... We Work in the Dark, We Do what We Can, the Rest is the Madness of ...*, 2016

*Courtesy the artist and Kurimanzutto, Mexico City*