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borders and identities at mexico city art week

As the international art world returns from a heavy week of art bingeing, we report back on the best of art fairs and gallery openings in the Mexican capital.



Every February, the art world flocks en masse to Mexico City for a week of contemporary art fairs, pop-up shows, gallery openings, and tequila-fuelled parties. But this year, the context was particularly loaded. With the Mexican peso hitting record lows, the future of NAFTA uncertain, and the Trump administration's persistent bullying of its southern neighbours, it's a peculiar time to make and look at art south of the border. And while art week (8 - 12 Feb) wasn't all political, an exciting number of galleries decided to respond to the current climate in engaging ways, both at the fairs as well as exhibitions.

A 1969 painting by American artist and feminist Nancy Spero reads "A cycle of the universe is finished". The quote from French playwright and poet Antonin Artaud resonates grimly with the pristine booths of Zona Maco's general section. But the good stuff at Latin America's biggest art fair is generally found in the curated sections.

In the New Proposals section - dedicated to emerging artists, as the name suggests - a piece by Mexican queer artist Manuel Solano at Karen Huber's booth stood out. Made in 2012, just a year before he went blind from HIV-related complications, the poetically understated painting renders a near abstract American flag in pastels. Alongside it, is a recent semi-erotic video in collaboration with filmmaker and porn actor Damien Moreau. The short film celebrates the multifaceted quality of human desire, staging an encounter between Manuel and an actor recruited on Grindr, originally for a sex party.

The other curated section, Zona Maco Sur - focusing on solo presentations - was particularly strong and didn't shy away from political narratives. Featuring installations by fictitious Mexican artist **Humberto Márquez**, New York gallery **Henrique Faria** Fine Art's booth was as fascinating as it was bonkers. Conceived by artists **Emilio Chapela** and Plinio Ávila, Márquez functions as a platform to reinterpret cultural politics and art criticism in Mexico from the 150s onwards, with a particular focus on the 1968 student movement - a tumultuous political moment that the artist suggests isn't so different from today's climate. Perhaps even more explicit is his Barbara Kruger-esque red sign reading *America Para Los Latino Americanos* - an appropriation of the Monroe Doctrine's motto, which since its first articulation in 1823 enshrined the central element of US foreign policy to block European interference, and increase its own influence, in Latin America. In the midst of Trump's "America First" rhetoric, we're left wondering which America we should be talking about.

Kruger herself wasn't far away, with the New York gallery Lévy Gorvy showing two pivotal works of hers from 1986 in the general section, complementing her current public art commission in Mexico City's metro system. The series juxtapose a black-and-white photograph of US coins with the Spanish caption *Cuando ellos hacen negocios hacen historia* ('When they do business, they make history'). While the exact meaning of the piece is left open, it may point to the early free-trade agreements anticipating NAFTA, explains a gallery representative. (Significant economic reforms in Mexico were signed into law in 1986, the same year that then-Heritage analyst Edward L. Hudgins urged the Reagan Administration to "explore further special free trade and investment arrangements" with Mexico.)

Among the obvious international art-fair favourites dotted throughout the site like Ai Weiwei, Michelangelo Pistoletto and Jeff Koons, highlights included recent photomontages by Liverpool-born collage queen Linder Sterling at Adréhn-Schiptjenko; one of Canadian artist Chloe Wise's delectable pasta sculptures at Division Gallery; sordid paintings and drawings by the twenty-something sailor-turned-artist Walter Price at Karma; and Rirkrit Tiravanija's clippings of Mexican newspapers from the day of Trump's inauguration against large, white-on-black letters reading in Spanish "Less Oil More Value" at Kurimanzutto. Concurrently, the Mexican powerhouse opened a controversial solo exhibition by Gabriel Orozco, who installed a fully functioning Oxxo convenience store inside their permanent gallery space, addressing questions about art as commodity.

Meanwhile, Material art fair kicked off its 4th edition in the Juarez neighbourhood near downtown. Looking slicker than ever, Mexico's answer to NADA expanded this year from one floor to two, playing host to some of the best emerging galleries and projects spaces around the globe. Identity politics, coupled with an overwhelming number of male genitals, took centre stage here over in-your-face political works.

Gang Gang Dance's front woman Lizzi Bougatos shared a booth with fellow New York artist-musician Sadie Laska at Galeria Mascota from Mexico City. Central to this very DIY-looking presentation were images made for the Dear Ivanka Instagram account and related protests led by the Halt Action Group. "Ivanka specifically represents a fake feminist business strategy to attract women, meanwhile she contradicts all she speaks for, supporting her father's actions," Bougatos tells us. In the backdrop are songs lyrics from the artist duo's experimental band I.U.D., and on the floor a collection of ceramics plates in tribute to now defunct NY-lesbian bars

like 'Clit Club' and 'Meow Mix', which the pair wanted to celebrate as "places that outcasts went to as a 'safe space.'"

Echoing Humberto Márquez' *America Para Los Latino Americanos* at Zona Maco, a piece by the LA-based artist Nick Herman appropriates a couple of Budweiser cans as found objects. Last summer, the US beer brand launched a slightly ill-conceived campaign replacing their logo with 'America', which Herman tweaked to read *Américas* - posing into question the use of the continent's name for the land of Uncle Sam.

Moving away from US politics and borders, an exciting assortment of edgy nudes and queer imageries dominated segments of the young fair. On the ground floor, London-based painter Celia Hempton's faceless masturbating men from her Chatrandom series adorned Galerie Sultana's booth, while German artist Birgit Megerle showed a wistful painting at Galerie Emanuel Layr of two young gay guys going down on each other. On the second floor, Montreal-based Claire Milbrath exhibited a hilarious paintings with a naive quality at Projet Pangée, featuring her recurring Little Prince-like character engaging in sex with seemingly older men. And not to be left out was an overwhelming plexiglass sculpture at Mexican gallery Yautepec's booth by Chelsea Culprit, whose work centres around the female experience, often taking sex workers as its subject. The Mexico City-based US artist also exhibited in a nearby punk-rock venue for *Dawning* - the best pop-up exhibition we saw all week, curated by Attilia Fattori and Yves Scherer.

At the other end of the spectrum, Chez Mohamed Galerie's surprising booth explored the most effectively marketed concept in human history: masculinity. The result? Balls, balls, dick, dick, balls and dick (and the occasional titties). Breaking somewhat from the 'alpha male' narrative is a striking photograph by Chinese dissident artist Ren Hang that shows a young Asian man, naked, smoking a cigarette in an auto-fellatio position your yogi friend wouldn't even dream of, while covering his anus with an ashtray. A foot seen from above - supposedly Hang's - is delicately placed on the model's feet, keeping the disparate limbs from unravelling.

More on the topic of dick and balls - a brilliant public art intervention cropped up at the storefront vitrine La Esperanza in San Miguel de Chapultepec: a text-based work originally created for the NY party Lixxxtapussy by Bill Hayden and Sam Pulitzer, in dickface typography (that's right, penis-shaped font).

In addition to the fairs, the week saw a number of excellent gallery shows opening across the city. Galeria OMR - one of Mexico's longest-running contemporary art galleries - launched *When the Queen Falls* (in reference to Hamlet's last scene), featuring works by James Turrell, Oscar Tuazon, Tatiana Trouvé and an off-site rainbow sculpture by Ugo Rondinone reading 'We Are Poems' on top of a nearby building. Another highlight was the poetic paintings of US-born Mexican artist Eduardo Sarabia at José Garcia gallery. The series, entitled *Dream of a Broken Memory*, was made post-election and depicts fantasy-like maps of the Americas, adorned by exotic birds and small fires that have come to cover the United States in an opaque smoke - "an opportunity to focus on Mexico," the artist tells us. The opening was followed by the week's wildest party at Cuauhtémoc's best-loved cantina Salón Ríos, led by the eccentric musicians of Los Master Plus. The bonkers Mexican cover-band graced us with salsa-electro Spanish-remakes of No Doubt's *Don't Speak* ('No Hable') and Daft Punk's *One More Time* ('Una Vez Mas'), all the while mescal was flowing into the small hours.

As the fairs came to close on Sunday, the art crowds woke up to a bad hangover. One that is unlikely to go away anytime soon, and one that will hopefully keep artists making engaging works, public and private organisations providing platforms and curators encouraging debates - on both sides of the fence. And while the mere politicisation of an art fair isn't quite enough, there is something to be said - and celebrated - about the persistence of a narrative of enquiry and resistance, at different levels of social life.

