

A Mexican Showcase for Ambition

MEXICO CITY — Churning and wired, this city is a place of many devotions. Some of them revolve around art. Worshipers throng the Señora de Guadalupe shrine to gaze on a miraculous painting of the Virgin. Secular pilgrims on the hunt for saints crowd Casa Azul, “The Blue House,” Frida Kahlo’s home. Every tourist makes a must-see stop at the National Museum of Anthropology with its hair-raising sculptures of Aztec gods.

By comparison, relatively few devotees, domestic or foreign, seem to find their way to the city’s museums of contemporary art, of which there are several. Nor are any of those museums firmly fixed on the route followed by the packs of art professionals — curators, collectors, dealers — who ritually travel the planet from one art fair or biennial to the next.

But with the recent opening of a new museum here, the Museo Jumex (pronounced WHO-mex), at least one institution may find a place on that circuit. That, at least, seems to be the hope of Eugenio López Alonso, heir to the Grupo Jumex fruit-juice empire, who conceived the Jumex as a private museum with internationalist ambitions but a style of its own.

Mr. López began to collect some two decades ago, when he was in his 20s, first buying historical pieces of 1960s art, then concentrating on Mexican and international work of his own generation, the ’90s, when Mexico City was buzzing with inventive young artists. His present contemporary collection of more than 2,700 pieces is thought to be the largest of its kind in Latin America. To accommodate it, in 2001 he carved out a display space within the vast complex of Jumex factory buildings in the rough-and-tumble suburb Ecatepec de Morelos to the north.

He set up the hangar-size white-box building, called the Galería Jumex, as a museum, and it still functions as one. It’s currently filled with a terrific corporation-needling survey of work by the Danish collective Superflex, whose members have proposed that museums should pay visitors to enter, not the other way around. The space also serves as headquarters for the Jumex Foundation, which sponsors education initiatives and distributes art grants.

But with its distant location and strict security precautions — visits are by appointment only — the Galería has attracted scant traffic. The new Museo Jumex, by contrast, is right in the center of town, open long hours and geared to walk-in trade. The old museum was an insider secret; the new one is attracting all eyes. Given this bid for high visibility, the new museum’s almost recessive exterior comes as something of a surprise. Designed by the British architect David Chipperfield, the three-story building is a plain, compact block of light travertine, unornamented apart from a saw-tooth crest on top. It’s a no-nonsense, no-ego structure that seems to look inward rather than outward.

In a way, this is understandable. The museum is dwarfed by a forest of new condominium towers behind it. And it’s visually upstaged by the look-at-me design of another museum across the street: the hourglass-shape Museo Soumaya, opened in 2011 by the Mexican billionaire Carlos Slim Helú to display his own collection, a smorgasbord of European art from the Renaissance to Rodin, with Mexican work folded in. (Mr. Slim, who owns the condo towers, sold Mr. Lopez the land that the Jumex is on.)

Interestingly, the Jumex's main two inaugural exhibitions — one drawn from the permanent collection, the other a retrospective of the North American artist James Lee Byars — sustain the building's subdued impression, suggesting a calculated effort by the museum to set itself apart, to baffle expectations. In a city renowned for homegrown architectural eccentricity, the Jumex offers a sort of British reserve. In contrast to the high-color polemical painting popularly identified with Mexican art, it gives us spare, small-scale, politically nuanced art in the opening shows.

“A Place in Two Dimensions: A Selection from Colección Jumex + Fred Sandback” on the sky-lighted third floor is advertised as two shows, but it's really just one, with seven sculptures (six on loan) by Sandback, a New York-based minimalist-conceptualist who died in 2003, interspersed among some 50 Jumex items.

Sandback's work is about as immaterial as sculpture can get. Each piece is made from a few lengths of colored yarn stretched taut between walls, ceilings and floors to trace geometric shapes and mark off space. That's it, but what is essentially a form of drawing in midair creates an illusion of volume and the illusion is captivating.

In a sense, the whole show — organized by Patrick Charpenel, the museum's director — operates on “less is more.” In an era when bigness has had value in itself, shaping museum and private collections, much of the art at the Jumex is small. Even its trophies — a 1986 Jeff Koons basketball sculpture, a Damien Hirst bull's head in formaldehyde, a blue-and-black 1964 Andy Warhol “Jackie” painting — are of modest, living-room size. There may be monster art in Mr. Lopez's holdings; the third floor gallery is spacious enough to hold some. But if so, it hasn't been brought out for the inaugural shows, which is refreshing.

Within this downsizing environment, artists whose work is characteristically understated — On Kawara, Yoshihiro Suda, R. H. Quaytman — are for once fully audible in a group conversation. And even rude little sculptures by Sarah Lucas and Paul McCarthy come across as more witty than gross. In these circumstances, knee-jerk assessments of “major” and “minor” don't matter much. What matters is what you're looking at, what it's made of, what it might mean right now.

Is it worth a trip to Mexico just to experience this companionable dynamic, one so seldom evident in our own museums? No. But it is worth traveling to see the Mexican art that has been included. It's the best stuff here.

But there isn't much of it. Of the 50 artists in the show, only 10 are Mexican (in the case of the Belgian Francis Alys, an émigré). This balance must have been tough to decide. On the one hand, the museum is positioning itself internationally and wants Mexican artists to be seen in that light, part of a big picture. At the same time, the careers of many of these artists are still based in Mexico itself and need visibility in its museums.

I think half and half would have been a just proportion, but even the small selection of Mexican work shines. A few artists, like the immensely influential Gabriel Orozco, whose interactive “Oval Billiard Table” is a centerpiece, and Damián Ortega, who has a kinetic installation on the museum's patio, are familiar in New York. Others — Eduardo Terrazas, Minerva Cuevas, Teresa Margolles — are not but should be.

Mr. Terrazas, a painter, architect and museologist now in his late 70s, is a fascinating and underknown figure. His geometric abstraction incorporates Huichol Indian yarn painting with the spirit of Malevich. A 16-panel piece by Mr. Terrazas here that moves, in a near-subliminal gradation, from pitch black to pure white is a wonder.

Ms. Cuevas, born in 1975, is one of the country's leading political artists. Her hourlong 1995 video titled “Drunker,” in which she films herself repetitively writing “I'm not drunk” while knocking back tequila until she passes out is an endurance-test performance about consumption as a form of denial.

She's one of the few women in the show. Another is Ms. Margolles, whose contribution is a gem. Titled “Es

combro” — “Rubble” — it’s a tiny box holding a sliver of wood and strip gold. The wood is from a house destroyed by the 2008 Sichuan earthquake, which the artist, who was in China on a residency, witnessed. What she’s made is a commemorative reliquary infused with layered cultural meanings. The sliver of wood has associations with the True Cross; gold was symbolic of sacredness and immortality in pre-Columbian religions.

The museum’s other main inaugural event, “James Lee Byars: ½ an Autobiography,” seems at first a curious choice. Byars, who died in 1997, had no link to Mexico, and in the United States, he was and is regarded as a marginal figure, a maverick.

But he was nothing if not a globalist. Born in Detroit in 1932, he lived at various times in Kyoto, Japan; Berlin; Bern, Switzerland; Venice; New York; Los Angeles; and Cairo, where he died. His art was a fastidiously sifted blend of Western and Asian philosophy and theology, and more about ideas, words and actions than about things. The show — organized by Magalí Arriola of the Jumex and Peter Eleey, a curator at MoMA PS1 — is super low key, with lots of ephemera: ink paintings, letters, origami-inspired folded papers.

Byars’s performances, though, as known from photographs, videos and surviving props, had a certain baroque grandeur. Mostly they were solo, silent, stylized, almost liturgical. He wore tailored suits in solid, symbolic colors — black, red or gold — like vestments. He created shrinelike enclosures in the same colors, in which he would lie “practicing death.” The example at the Jumex is sewn from red parachute fabric. Others were all gold and as resplendent, in their way, as any Mexican church altar.

With his love of ritual, his fixation on mortality and his self-identification as a mystic, Byars makes surprising sense in the context of a Roman Catholic culture. Whether he will appeal to a Mexico City audience — or, for that matter, to one at PS1, where the show will appear later this year — remains to be seen.

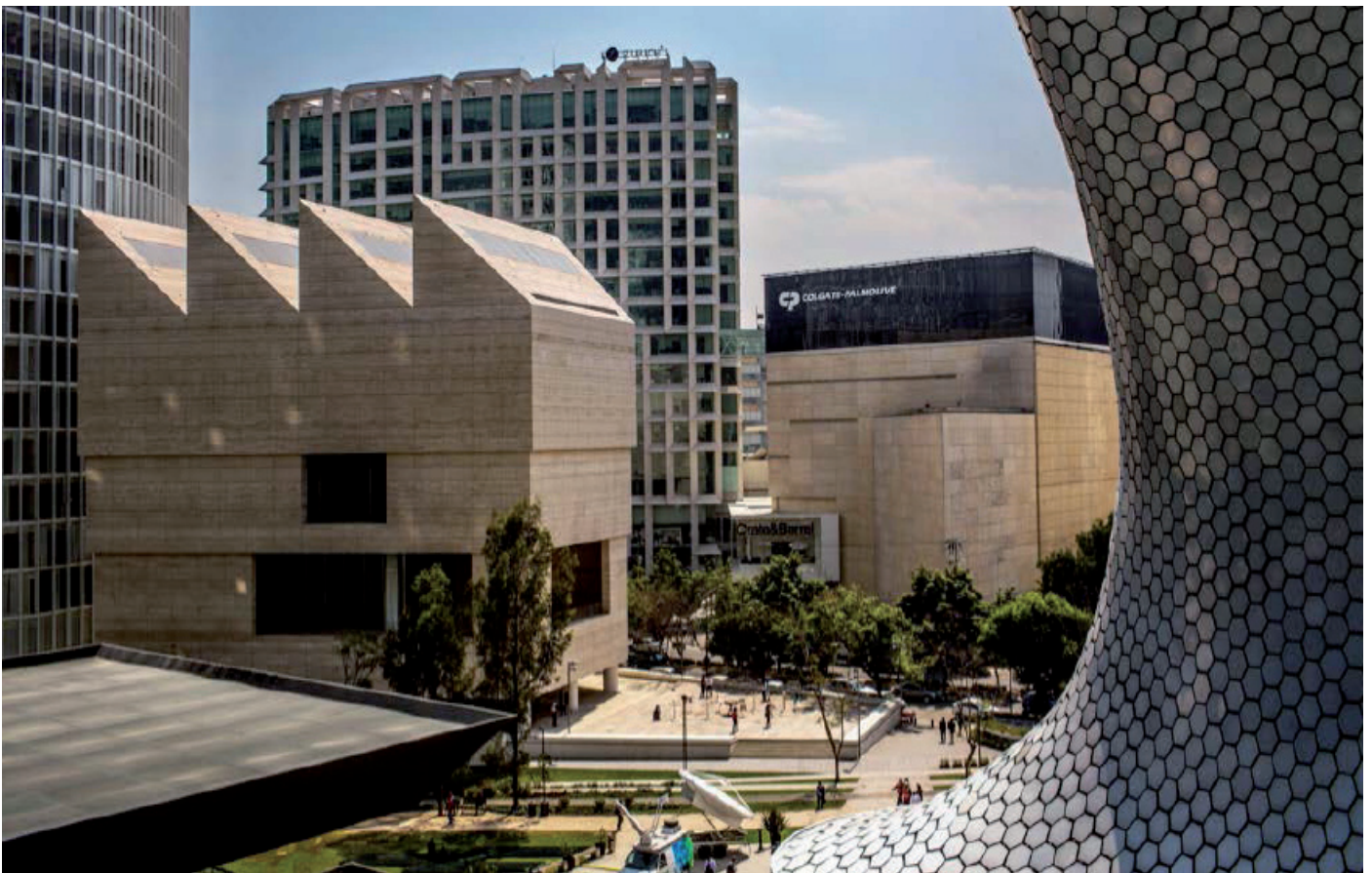
The question of target audience — local? global? both? — is, of course, a question about institutional identity, one that many small museums outside the international mainstream but with ambitions to join it must carefully weigh. The Jumex is an example.

The temptation to become part of the global art establishment, even if that means shaping yourself on the establishment’s terms — becoming a mini-MoMA, a mini-Bilbao — must be strong. The Jumex’s collaboration with MoMA on the Byars retrospective is something of a diplomatic coup, though not entirely a surprise. The jet-setting Mr. López is deeply networked into the museum world: on the board of the Museum of Contemporary Art on Los Angeles, a trustee of the New Museum in New York, and so on.

Of far more interest will be to see how the Jumex itself develops. Already it feels as if it has at least a tentative sense of self. If it can now give more attention to local artists, who will always be its most devoted audience; and if it can think hard and imaginatively with the collection it has, whatever its quality, rather than scrambling for extravagant upgrades; and if it can position itself in the context of world politics rather than art-world politics, it could be a model for the future, a place where the cosmopolitan and provincial meet. And the pilgrims will come.



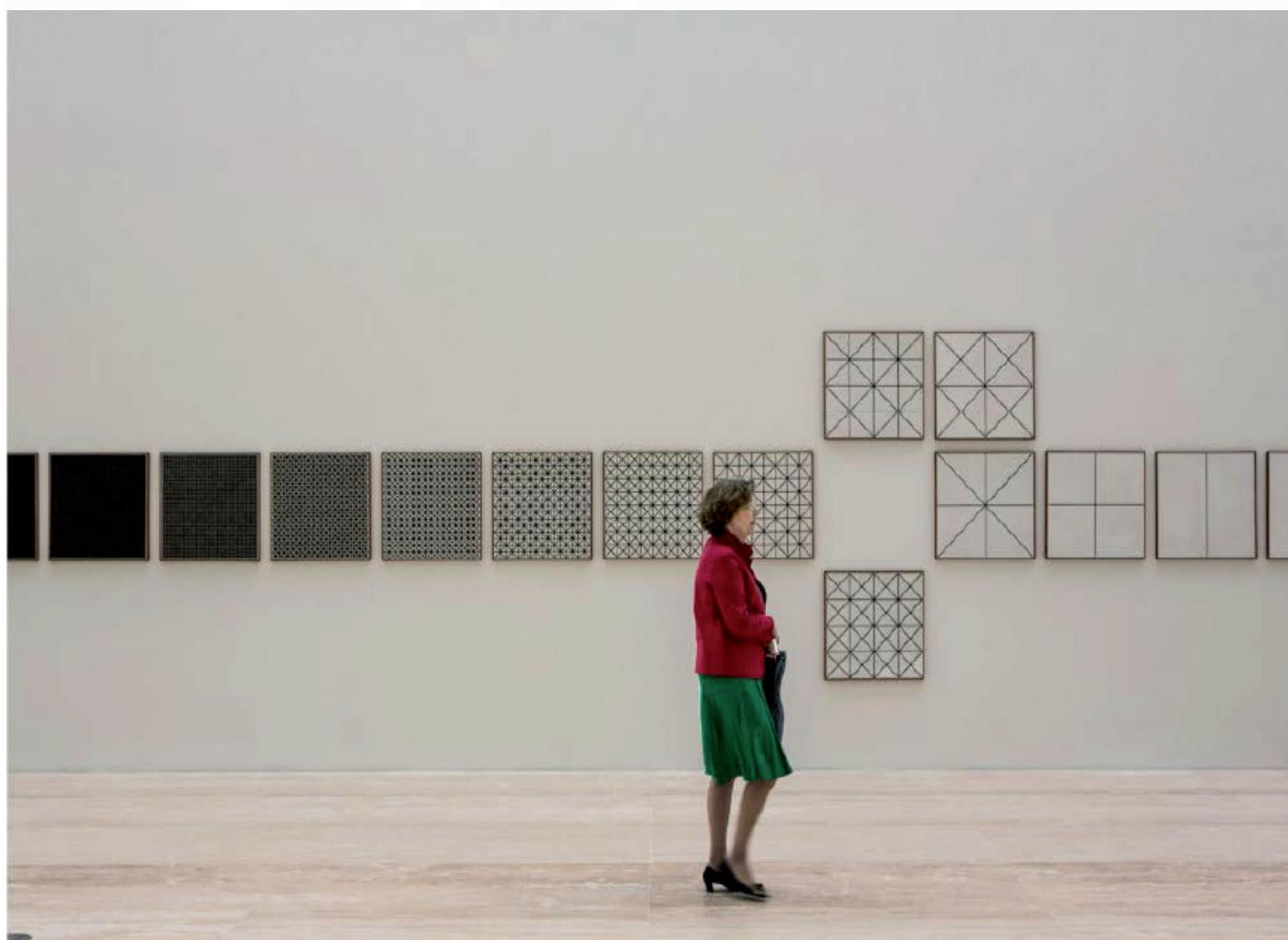
Museo Jumex, right, a contemporary art museum in Mexico City sponsored by the art patron Eugenio López Alonso, is next to the hourglass-shaped Museo Soumaya. Adriana Zehbrauskas for The New York Times



A view of the Museo Jumex from the Museo Soumaya. Adriana Zehbrauskas for The New York Times



Damián Ortega's Installation on a patio outside the Jumex. Adriana Zehbrauskas for The New York Times



A visitor takes in a multipaneled artwork by Eduardo Terrazas. Adriana Zehbrauskas for The New York Times



"Red Tent," part of the museum's exhibition of James Lee Byars works.
Adriana Zehbrauskas for The New York Times