

# Staying Power

At 88, the artist Pedro Friedeberg continues to dazzle and mesmerize—begrudgingly.

Written and photographed by Bryan Rindfuss

There are some terse exchanges in Liora Spilk Bialostozky's 2022 documentary *Pedro* that reveal lesser-known truths about her octogenarian subject, the esteemed Mexican artist Pedro Friedeberg. For starters, Friedeberg does not identify with the artistic movement with which he's most commonly associated. "How do you feel about being called the last Surrealist?" a young journalist asks him at the Zona Maco art fair, in Mexico City. "That's a terrible mistake," he retorts. "I'm neither a Surrealist nor the last of anything." When Bialostozky herself quizzes him about the significance of all the hands and feet in his work, Friedeberg bristles: "They have no meaning whatsoever. It's just something I came up with, and it was such a hit that I had to re-create it 17,000 times. But I've had it up to here with those chairs."

The chairs in question are iterations of the Mano-Silla (Hand-Chair) that Friedeberg designed on a whim in the early 1960s. Tasked with throwing some work to a carpenter favored by a close friend, Friedeberg asked the woodworker to carve a hand big enough to sit on. "I thought that would be funny," Friedeberg told *Architectural Digest* in 2017. The Hand-Chair took on a life of its own after the art dealer Georges Keller visited Friedeberg's studio. Upon seeing the prototype, he ordered several on the spot, later sending them to New York, Paris, and Switzerland. That pivotal commission sparked a fervor for the chair—a 1960s icon that routinely gets placed under the umbrella of Surrealism.

Giant Hand-Chairs perch like gargoyles atop prominent buildings in Mexico City. More practical versions—some in polished mahogany, others gilded in gold leaf—get snapped up on sites like 1stDibs. Interior design stars such as Kelly Wearstler count them among their prized possessions. And unauthorized reproductions abound in flea markets and antiques stores. "He was the core of the cultural landscape during the '60s," writer Déborah Holtz tells Bialostozky in *Pedro*. "Everyone had a Friedeberg at home. Everyone had a Hand-Chair."

Beyond the design-world fame the Hand-Chair brought him, Friedeberg is an accomplished visual artist who shifts between painting, sculpture, printmaking, and installation. Since his first solo show, in 1959, he has exhibited extensively across Mexico, the U.S., and Europe, and his work is held in the permanent collections of more than 50 museums—including the Museum of Modern Art, the Musée du Louvre, the Smithsonian American Art Museum, and the Los Angeles County Museum of Art. Thanks in part to *Pedro*—which can be streamed on Netflix—Friedeberg is arguably more famous than ever, and remains incredibly prolific to this day. An admitted fan of "popular art," he isn't above commercial collaborations and has created flashy commissions for the Swiss watch manufacturer Corum, the German luxury brand Montblanc, and the Mexican liquor companies Jose Cuervo and Corona. Friedeberg's latest publication, *Aterbil/Ogolatac*—an extensive artist's book compiling hundreds of fully realized sketches—will be published later this month.

Born to German-Jewish parents in 1936, Friedeberg emigrated with his family from Florence, Italy, to Mexico



Artist Pedro Friedeberg in the living room of his home in Mexico City's Colonia Roma neighborhood.



City at the onset of World War II. As a child, he found early visual inspiration in the art books on his grandmother's shelves. "My parents were minimalists," Friedeberg tells me in his Mexico City home and studio, a brimming showplace he's jokingly referred to as a museum of garbage. "There was nothing in each room—a table and four chairs and a reproduction of one painting. I liked my grandmother's house better because it was covered with horrible, bad things from two generations before. Like from 1912 or so—when art was really fun! I was only 9 or 10 years old, leafing through these books with marvelous paintings like Arnold Böcklin's *The Isle of the Dead*, from 1883. I was fascinated by that."

Encouraged by his father to become an engineer, Friedeberg studied architecture at Mexico City's Universidad Iberoamericana. Although he became disillusioned with the boxy, brutalist buildings of the era, he found great inspiration in a beloved professor, the German-born painter and sculptor Mathias Goeritz. Sparked by Goeritz and his distinctive teaching style, Friedeberg began creating untraditional renderings of buildings that could never function in the real world.

Even though he abandoned his studies, Friedeberg became a key member of Goeritz's inner circle, an influential bunch of eccentrics that included disrupters such as British expats Leonora Carrington, Edward James, and Bridget Bate Tichenor; Hungarian-born photographer Kati Horna; and Mexican art historian Ida Rodríguez Prampolini. "I was telling my parents I was studying architecture, which was a big lie," says Friedeberg. "I was just hanging around other people's houses. That's how I met Leonora and Kati and all these fascinating people." Friedeberg also worked as a chauffeur of sorts for Goeritz and his frequent collaborator, the iconic Mexican archi-

tect Luis Barragán. "I had a little Volkswagen Beetle... and I had nothing to do. Barragán didn't drive, and Mathias was used to European traffic."

Despite setting his formal studies aside, Friedeberg still designed several structures, including a towering studio for Edward James's sculpture garden Las Pozas, a fantastical complex tucked into the jungle in the town of Xilitla, in San Luis Potosí. Nodding to Victorian architecture, Friedeberg's design for what he dubbed *El Torreón del Espíritu Santo* was topped with an artichoke-like orb supported by columns sprouting giant leaves. Unfortunately, the project never made it beyond the rendering stage. "He was very selfish," Friedeberg says of James. "He only liked his own designs, which were not so good and which were mostly copied from the Royal Pavilion in Brighton, England."

In the midst of this legendary chapter of Mexico City's evolving art scene, Goeritz founded the irreverent collective *Los Hartos* (the Fed-Ups) to protest the pretensions of modern art. A key member of *Los Hartos*, Friedeberg presented a whimsical table at the group's 1961 debut, at *La Galería de Antonio Souza*; it featured wildly curved baroque legs that made it look like it was running away. Another famed member of *Los Hartos* was a hen named *Inocencia*. During the opening reception, she laid an egg, which ended up getting cracked on Goeritz's head. "Alice Rahon, a famous Surrealist painter, was jealous because she wasn't asked to join the group," recounts Friedeberg. "So she broke it on Mathias's head."

Tucked away on a side street in Mexico City's colorful *Colonia Roma* neighborhood, Friedeberg's home and studio is a decidedly maximalist affair filled with odd treasures he's collected and created over the decades. On the ground

This page: Friedeberg, sitting on one of his iconic Hand-Chairs. Opposite, from top: A corner of the living room; Friedeberg's painting *El Dinero Facilita los Negocios y el Amor*, 2022.

OPPOSITE BOTTOM: ARTWORK COURTESY OF ESTUDIO PEDRO FRIEBERBERG.

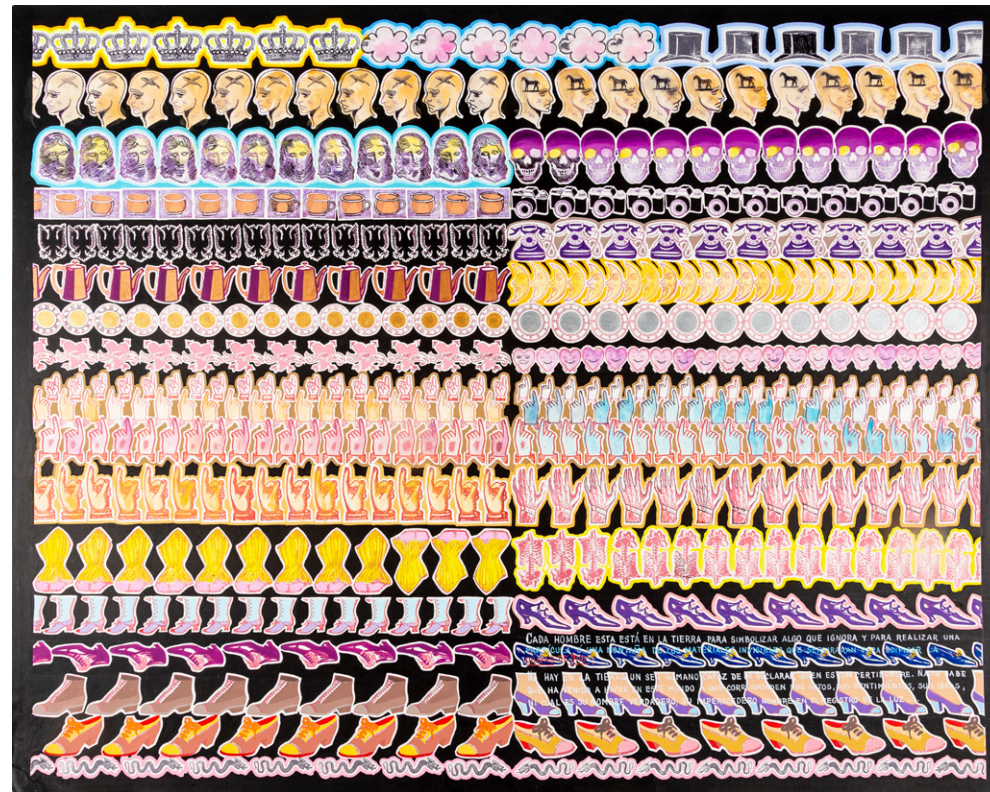


floor, tiny picture frames climb the walls alongside works by Man Ray, José Luis Cuevas, and Rufino Tamayo. Piggy banks, kitty-cat figurines, vintage wind-up toys, and toy airplanes fight for space on the coffee table. Friedeberg's most cherished bibelots line the shelves of a sprawling display case that also houses an army of miniature Hand-Chairs. One entire room functions as a de facto gallery for his multimedia artwork—absurdist paintings, wooden clocks sprouting golden hands and feet, and precarious castles made of playing cards.

Crammed bookshelves line the back wall of the upstairs studio, a sunlit room anchored by a long table filled with art supplies, sketches, and works in progress. As Friedeberg leads me up a staircase to see a supersize Hand-Chair he keeps on the roof, we pass bins filled with rubber stamps, stacks of classical CDs, and a salon-style grouping of his paintings. "This is the horrible gallery," he says with a comical look of distaste.

The interiors perfectly echo the Friedeberg aesthetic—a distinctive hybrid he once described as "neo-baroque kitsch." Sometimes taking visual cues from tarot cards, encyclopedias, antique periodicals, German fairy tales, and myriad points in between, Friedeberg typically begins his paintings by drawing the background, which he likens to a stage set. Once his backdrop is framed with a melange of columns, domes, and arches, he fills in gaps with geometric patterns, alchemical symbols, anatomical elements, repeated animal imagery, and even recognizable cartoon characters. Mickey Mouse, Felix the Cat, and Mr. Peanut are but a few of the nostalgic figures that dance through his dizzying dreamscapes. A constant throughout is a marked absence of breathing room Friedeberg chalks up to *horror vacui*—the Latin expression that translates to "fear of empty space." Out of curiosity, I ask if he's ever

From top: *Cada Hombre Está en la Tierra para Simbolizar Algo Que Ignora*, 2019; Friedeberg's anteroom, brimming with his multimedia works.



tempted to experiment with minimalism or negative space. Not a chance. "I hate minimalism," he growls.

Each day at 9 a.m., Friedeberg enters his studio and toils away until the early afternoon, typically working on four different pieces at once. Each one takes about a week to complete, he estimates. Playfully self-deprecating, he sums up his work as pastiche and likens his subjects to logotypes. "All I do is simplify 19th-century art—of animals and fairy-tale beings, and mostly architecture," he says. "I like elephants for their shape, their silhouette. But it's really just an aesthetic kick; it has nothing to do with symbolism. I do use horses a lot, because even an ugly horse is interesting to look at. Horses are never quite ugly—unless they are donkeys." Musing about his fascination with eras past, Friedeberg adds, "Maybe, really, I belong more to 100 years ago, to the epoch of Aubrey Beardsley or the beginning of Dadaism. I really like that epoch. I would have liked to live in 1915 in Paris and known Gertrude Stein. I admire Gertrude Stein very much."

Curiously, Friedeberg has long avoided using the color green. "I think it's one color too much," he says. "Actually, I like black and white the best, but people wouldn't buy paintings that are just black and white. You need at least two more colors." Sorting through a pile of works in progress, he continues, "I like series of things. I'll make one in black, one in blue, one in red." Looking up with a smirk, he confesses, "There's some green here—I'm ashamed."

Flipping through one of the overstuffed sketchbooks on his long studio table, Friedeberg shows me a drawing from 2011 that he recently translated into a full-scale piece. "Sometimes I get inspired by myself," he says. Gazing lazily, as if he's seen all this before, Friedeberg's talkative tabby, Netflix, looks completely at home sprawled out among the drawings, colored pencils, books, and assorted sources of inspiration. When asked if Netflix's name precedes the doc *Pedro*, Friedeberg shrugs it off. "I thought it was a nice name. I didn't know what Netflix meant—but it ended in 'x.' I've painted a few pictures of Felix the Cat, which also ends in 'x.' I think all cats' names should end in 'x.'"

In one of Netflix the cat's finest Instagram moments, he looks like a giant atop an elaborate, large-format chessboard that Friedeberg designed and still uses every Sunday morning. "Usually, a rabbi comes over—a rabbi who's a very good chess player," he says. "Or my son, David, who's also a very good player. I used to beat him, and now he beats me."

Although Friedeberg identifies chiefly as a painter, his sculptures are truly something to behold. Harking back to the illogical architectural renderings he began creating while studying under Goeritz, his three-dimensional works often take the shape of "impossible buildings"—skeletal structures that defy practicality and borrow from a broad range of architectural styles. Incorporating everything from striped columns and gold domes to animals and body parts, these fanciful creations bring to mind churches, cathedrals, and mosques—albeit in an ancient, mythical city. Ironically—and "by the grace of god," as he puts it—Friedeberg is profoundly atheist. "I think architecture is a very good field for making fun of things," he says.

As he's explained many times, he stopped studying architecture because he was bored by the geniuses of the 1950s and their proclivity for 90-degree angles. Two architects he does not find boring, however, are Facteur Cheval, the French postman who spent 33 years building the sandcastle-like Palais Idéal, in Hauterives, France; and Simon Rodia, the Italian artist who similarly spent 33 years building the 17 structures that make up the Watts Towers, in Los Angeles. As our visit winds down, I ask Friedeberg if he might've pursued such a lifelong labor of love if he'd remained in architecture. "Well, nobody would have paid me for it," he replies. "I would've starved to death." ♦



THIS PAGE, TOP: ARTWORK COURTESY OF ESTUDIO PEDRO FRIEBERBERG; SPECIAL THANKS TO PATRICIA RUIZ-HEALY OF RUIZ-HEALY ART, NEW YORK/SAN ANTONIO, TEXAS.

Friedeberg, holding one of his steel sculptures, on the terrace with his cat, Netflix. Behind him is one of his giant Hand-Chairs.