

## Designer Kelly Wearstler Steps Into the Surrealist World of Pedro Friedeberg

The design guru encounters Mexico's first-wave surrealist and living legend, now 89, whose Hand Chair and kaleidoscopic universe continue to defy convention.



Kelly Wearstler peruses Pedro Friedeberg's studio. Photo: Karla Lisker.

Pedro Friedeberg is a living legend—one of Mexico's most irreverent and visionary artists. Rising to prominence in the 1960s as part of an avant-garde circle of expatriates and intellectuals, he shared the cultural orbit of luminaries like Leonora Carrington, Edward James, and Remedios Varo. His work defies convention—a kaleidoscopic blend of the sacred and the absurd—spanning painting, sculpture, and his iconic Hand Chair, which has become an enduring symbol of surrealist design.



Kelly Wearstler with artist Pedro Friedeberg in his Mexico City studio, surrounded by his surrealist works and collections. Photo: Karla Lisker.

After collecting his work for several years, I first met Friedeberg in Mexico City 15 years ago at Ricardo Legorreta Office when working on a project. There's a childlike wonder to him—smart, energetic, and so kind—that puts you instantly at ease. A few months ago, I spent an

afternoon with him at his home in Mexico City, surrounded by the glorious chaos of his studio. I saw pieces I'd only known from books, alongside extraordinary gifts from fellow artists—including one from Dalí. His studio is like entering an entire universe—a space where time folds, colors hum, and every object feels like it has its own secret history. I've been a fan because Pedro makes art that is both fearless and playful, deeply intelligent and wonderfully irreverent. He invites you into a world where fantasy outruns function, and beauty wears a wicked grin.

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We've stayed in touch ever since, and every conversation with him is like stepping into another dimension. This one is no exception.



Pedro Friedeberg, *Reinterpretación de los tapices de Corbusier-Lausanne*, (2021). Courtesy of the artist.

**Your work has always danced between the sacred and the surreal. When you start a piece, do you begin with chaos or control?**

I always start with chaos. Control arrives late, begrudgingly, like a monk lost in a discotheque. Chaos is divine, control is administrative.

**You once said modern architecture was like “hell for the eyes.” Do you still feel that way about contemporary design? Has anything changed your mind?**

Yes, but now it's a minimalist hell with polished concrete finishes and Scandinavian pretensions. I still abhor it.

**You've rejected functionality in favor of fantasy. If you had to design a toaster, what would it look like?**

Imagine a Hindu temple on wheels, with blinking lights, where the bread launches skyward like a canonization.

**Do you think the art world takes itself too seriously? What would you do if someone hung a “Do Not Touch” sign next to one of your pieces?**

Absolutely. If they put a “Do Not Touch” sign next to my piece, I'd add another that says, “Touch your own heart.”





Kelly Wearstler with Pedro Friedeberg at his home in Mexico City. Photo: Karla Lisker.

**How has Mexico City shaped your visual language?**

Mexico painted me with its unhinged baroque and educated me with chromatic sarcasm. Here, even tragedy is beaded with sequins.

**Is there a place in your mind that feels like “home,” or is home wherever your imagination is let loose?**

Home is where the walls let me draw on them without calling the police.

**Your work feels like a time machine crossed with a kaleidoscope. Do you think your Mexico is more past, present, or dream state?**

It's a pre-Columbian dream interrupted by a 1950s radio soap opera.

**You've described yourself as a “cat in a world of dogs.” Has that outsider spirit helped you survive—or does it get exhausting?**

It has saved me, of course. But sometimes it's exhausting to meow in a world that only barks.

**Many of your pieces feel like immersive worlds. If you had to live inside one of your own artworks for a week, which one would you choose—and why?**

“The Temple of a Thousand Mirrors.” At least there, all my reflections would keep me company.



Pedro Friedeberg, Pair of gilded Hand Chairs. Courtesy of the artist.

**What inspired your iconic hand chair—and did you know it would become such a lasting symbol?**

It was a glorious accident. A doodle between sips of coffee. I never imagined that hand would become so famous, with museums wanting to sit on it.

**Let's imagine this interview is happening in a Pedro-designed parallel universe. What would the chairs look like—and what would we be drinking?**

The chairs would have peacock legs and sphinx backs. We'd be drinking dragon fruit martinis from upside-down goblets.

**Your palette is fearless, but surely there are limits. Is there a color you can't stand? Or a material you wish the world would stop using?**  
Green. It's too content with itself, too confident. It doesn't whisper mystery or scream rebellion—it just exists, like a bureaucrat at a garden party. And Styrofoam should be banished to Dante's seventh circle.

**Are there any artists or designers whose work makes you feel a twinge of jealousy—or pure delight?**

No jealousy. But I tremble with joy at certain Max Ernst collages or Remedios Varo's drawings. If I feel jealousy, it's metaphysical jealousy.



The artist Pedro Friedeberg. Photo: Paulina Lavista, courtesy of the artist.

**You've made mandalas, altars, fantastical machines. Do you believe in magic, or are you just creating it for the rest of us to believe in?**  
Of course I believe in magic. But not as abracadabra—more like architecture of the soul.

**Compliments can be as surreal as the work itself. What's the most absurd compliment you've ever received about your work?**  
Someone once said my work cured their rheumatism. A geometric miracle.

**Your dreams must be extraordinary. Do you dream in color, form, or feeling?**

I dream in colors, but also in lines and structures. Sometimes I wake up with a dome fully formed in my head.



**Studios reveal everything and nothing. What's the strangest object in your studio—and why is it still there?**

A 1923 sphinx-shaped ashtray with real baby teeth. I never knew whose they were.



Pedro Friedeberg outside his home in Mexico City. Photo: Karla Lisker.

**Some pieces seem to hum with a private language. If one of your sculptures whispered a secret at night, what do you think it would say?**

"Thank you for freeing me from the silence of matter."

**Not every work is meant for the world. Has there ever been a project so personal, you didn't want to share it?**

Yes. A mandala I made after my mother's death. It's only for her.

**Time folds oddly in art. What would your childhood self think of what you're making now?**

He'd be amazed that I get paid to do what I once did with crayons on the wall.

**You embrace imperfection with grace. Do you believe in mistakes, or are they just part of the ritual?**

They're the real designers. Mistakes are goblins whispering better ideas.



**Even the bravest artists have hesitations. What's one thing you've always wanted to make—but haven't dared to?**

An inflatable cathedral. Still on my list.

**A sketchbook is a portal. If we opened yours right now, what would surprise us?**

Drawings of shoes, maps of nonexistent cities, and a rose jam recipe written in Hebrew.

**In a world obsessed with speed and scale... How do you protect wonder?**

I trap haste in a crystal box and throw it into the sea.



Pedro Friedberg, *La vida sexual de Isabel la Católica* (1971). Courtesy of the artist.

**Some pieces haunt their creators. Have you ever made something so strange it scared you?**

I once built an automaton that moved at night. I dismantled it wearing gloves.

**Ritual seems embedded in your process. Is there a material or object you return to like a ceremony?**

Every time I draw, I place a cup of coffee to my left and a Tibetan bell to my right. My morning mass.



**History feels alive in your work. If you could resurrect one ancient civilization just to collaborate on a piece, who would you choose?**

Byzantium. They knew how to merge delirium with dogma.

**Your pieces seem to awaken all the senses. What do you think your work smells like?**

Myrrh incense, printing ink, and library dust.

**Destruction can be its own kind of creation. Do you ever destroy your own work? If so, what does that feel like?**

Many times. It's both an act of mercy and revenge.

**Beauty often arrives unannounced. What's the most beautiful thing you've ever seen by accident?**

A shadow cast by a broken stained glass on a ruined wall.



Pedro Friedeberg, an undated sculptural clock with radiating hands and gold stars. Courtesy of the artist.

**You sculpt silence just as much as sound. Do you think silence has a shape?**

A spiral folding into the soul's center.

**Let's go celestial for a moment. If you could place one of your works on the moon, which would it be—and what message would you leave underneath it?**

My "Mandala of Disobedience." Beneath it, a note: "Return only if you've forgotten all you know."

**Freedom can be its own kind of pressure. What would you create if no one were ever going to see it?**

A clock with no hours. A tribute to lost time.

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Kelly Wearstler

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