

A new read on Jewish life

Tablet

ARTS & LETTERS

10,000 Hard-Boiled Eggs and the Art of Pedro Friedeberg

At 82, the Mexican artist isn't done collecting junk in his irrational house

BY ALAN GRABINSKY

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PHOTO COURTESY GALERIA CASA DIANA

MOST SUNDAYS, PEDRO FRIEDEBERG SPENDS \$50 TO \$100 BUYING JUNK IN LA LAGUNILLA, MEXICO City’s massive flea market. Whatever he happens to find there—let’s say, a teeny Superman figure or a *Simpsons*-themed chess-set—will either be dismembered or placed into whatever nook is left among the doll heads, cabalistic drawings, I-Ching books, hand-shaped chairs, and other objects populating his house. At 82, he realizes he will never be able to organize his “collection,” though perhaps his son will be up to it. Or “he will throw it all to the trash.”

Friedeberg is one of Latin America’s most prominent artists. His work is listed as part of the public collections of the Museum of Contemporary Art in Chicago, and he has been featured in exhibitions at MoMA and San Francisco’s Museum of Modern Art. His paintings draw from a variety of indigenous, mystic, and modern influences. His Escher-esque and Baroque scenes are saturated with tarot cards, Hebrew symbols, and Chinese typography. He is mostly known for his 1960s hand-chair, a massive gold-plated upward-facing palm with long upward-stretched fingers. Produced in batches, signed and special editions sell for more than \$20,000 in art marketplaces like 1stDibs. “Hand-chair” is how Google autocompletes an online search of Friedeberg’s name. But he hates how the chair’s popularity has reduced him to seeming like a one-hit wonder, and how it overshadows his other interior-design pieces. Actually, Friedeberg just recently had a solo show at Mexico City’s Museo Franz Mayer featuring 40 years of his furniture and sculpture. It was called *Irrational House*, which might as well be the name of his actual home, located in the trendy neighborhood of La Roma.

When I rang the doorbell of the cream-colored house recently I half-expected a man in a purple cape throwing serpentine pieces in the air to emerge. Instead, Friedeberg turned out be more of a cranky-grandfather-type.

Dressed in a khaki sweater, khaki socks, and khaki pants, he frowned as a motorcycle passed by: “I hate the damn things” were the first words he said.

It was hard, once inside, not to bump into the chairs with elephant legs stacked with Vishnu-like sculptures or to step on the paintings of castles made of psychedelic visions that were sitting on the floor, and against the wall. The house was crammed with stuff—chairs with floating heads; sketches of trees with labyrinthine branches extending to the sky; little vehicles, composed of limbs, making their way across a chessboard floor, like armies ready to attack. With a shrug, Friedeberg confessed he needed more space for this “junk”—one day, maybe, he said, he will buy the two adjacent houses. Or the whole block.

Friedeberg’s second-floor studio—where he sits from 6 a.m. to 2:30 p.m. every day sketching, fixing paintings, or designing bizarre toys—is a spacious room crammed with art and thousands of books. A black-and-gold human skeleton hangs from the ceiling. During our hourlong conversation in Spanish, there, he sat across a long wooden table filled with snippets of magazines, watercolors, books, and notebooks, while a small cat played with an unfinished drawing on the floor. Friedeberg talked without looking up from his notepad, in which he was idly sketching a façade of a Greek building.

While Friedeberg’s paintings have never been political, he seems nostalgic for the great Mexican communist artists like Diego Rivera and David Alfaro Siqueiros, who used painting as a vehicle for social critique. “Painting has lost its relevance,” he said. “I would love to paint a picture of the White House with a pig inside, but then I might want to go to the United States and they might say, ‘You painted that, you can’t come in,’ ” he added, laughing. “ ‘We are going to shoot you.’ ”

Friedeberg told me he doesn’t know how to look up something on the internet but he loves encyclopedias—his son just bought him the 1911 Encyclopedia Britannica. He has no television, no mobile phone, and no computer: He loathes machines, except his electric pencil sharpener. When his daily eight-hour work session is over, Friedeberg

likes to engage in small pleasures—“like alcohol, conversation, and the education of cats!!!” he screamed, as the rebellious kitten bounced from the table to his lap.

Friedeberg was born in 1936 in Florence, Italy. He never met his father, but his mother, who was German and Jewish, had to flee Europe in one of the last ships from Hamburg to Mexico in 1939. He arrived in the port of Veracruz, which was overcrowded with refugees from the Spanish Civil War.

His mother and stepfather hated Judaism. They were proud atheists from a long line of assimilated Jews and looked down on what they considered the outdated, clannish attitude of the Jewish community. They never told him he was Jewish. It was only later that he found out, when his professor and later friend, German modernist sculptor Mathias Goeritz, told him.

The mezuzah on his front door was given to him by a rabbi who is intent on bringing Friedeberg into the tribe (and has, according to the artist, bought 1 million pesos’ worth of his paintings). The Hebrew letters in his paintings do not have a particular meaning. They are just randomly selected. Religious talk is irrelevant for him, he said. “I’m not really mystical.”

Friedeberg’s maternal grandmother escaped the Nazis in 1941. She traveled from Germany across Poland, Russia, Manchuria, Korea, Japan, and the Pacific Ocean carrying 30 trunks full of Persian rugs and foldable art-deco chairs. On the boat across the ocean, there was nothing to eat “except 10,000 hard-boiled eggs, which eventually rotted and smelled horrible.” When she finally arrived, she got off at the wrong port and had to communicate by hand gestures to get to the nation’s capital. One of Friedeberg’s only memories of the scale of the European tragedy was a scene of her going through thousands of classified ads in a German newspaper, reading about lost family members or loved ones.

Pedro's stepfather had emigrated to Mexico with his family in the 1920s and eventually became wealthy through commerce. According to his official biography, *On Vacation Through Life*, he and his mother made sure that the old-continent rigor flourished in Aztec grounds. Friedeberg was raised in a highly disciplined and intellectually stimulating environment. He attended the most enlightened private schools of the time, which had been established by American liberals and Spanish republicans.

Like other European emigres, the Friedebergs were actively engaged in the intellectual life of Mexico, and it was through the small bourgeoisie that they eventually became friends with emerging artists and designers. Eventually, they bought a piece of property in what was at that time the outskirts on the city. To build it, they turned to renowned architect Max Cetto; the gardens were designed by architectural superstar Luis Barragan.

Like Cetto, Pedro Friedeberg was set to become an architect: He enrolled in the Universidad Iberoamericana, which is where he met Goeritz—yet he found his true calling illustrating for the cultural magazine *Mexico This Month*. It was Anita Brenner, the editor, and Goeritz who pushed him into art—the credit for his first solo show, though, goes to the Spanish painter Remedios Varo, who recommended his work to the owners of Galeria Casa Diana in 1959.

In the 1960s, when Mexican surrealism was at its zenith, a young Friedeberg established friendships with Leonora Carrington, the acclaimed English-Mexican painter of magical scenes known for her extreme neurosis, and Sir Edward James, the English aristocrat who built an ecological surrealist hideaway called Las Pozas, still standing in Xilitla, 250 miles north of Mexico City.

By the time he was producing his own art, though, surrealism was giving way to modernism, with figures like Goeritz and the sculptor Sebastián dominating the scene. In this context, he said, his art was dismissed as too baroque, and even antiquated: The recent renewed interest in him, he thinks, is due to a new generation of people who are, as he put it, “sick of this abstract art.”

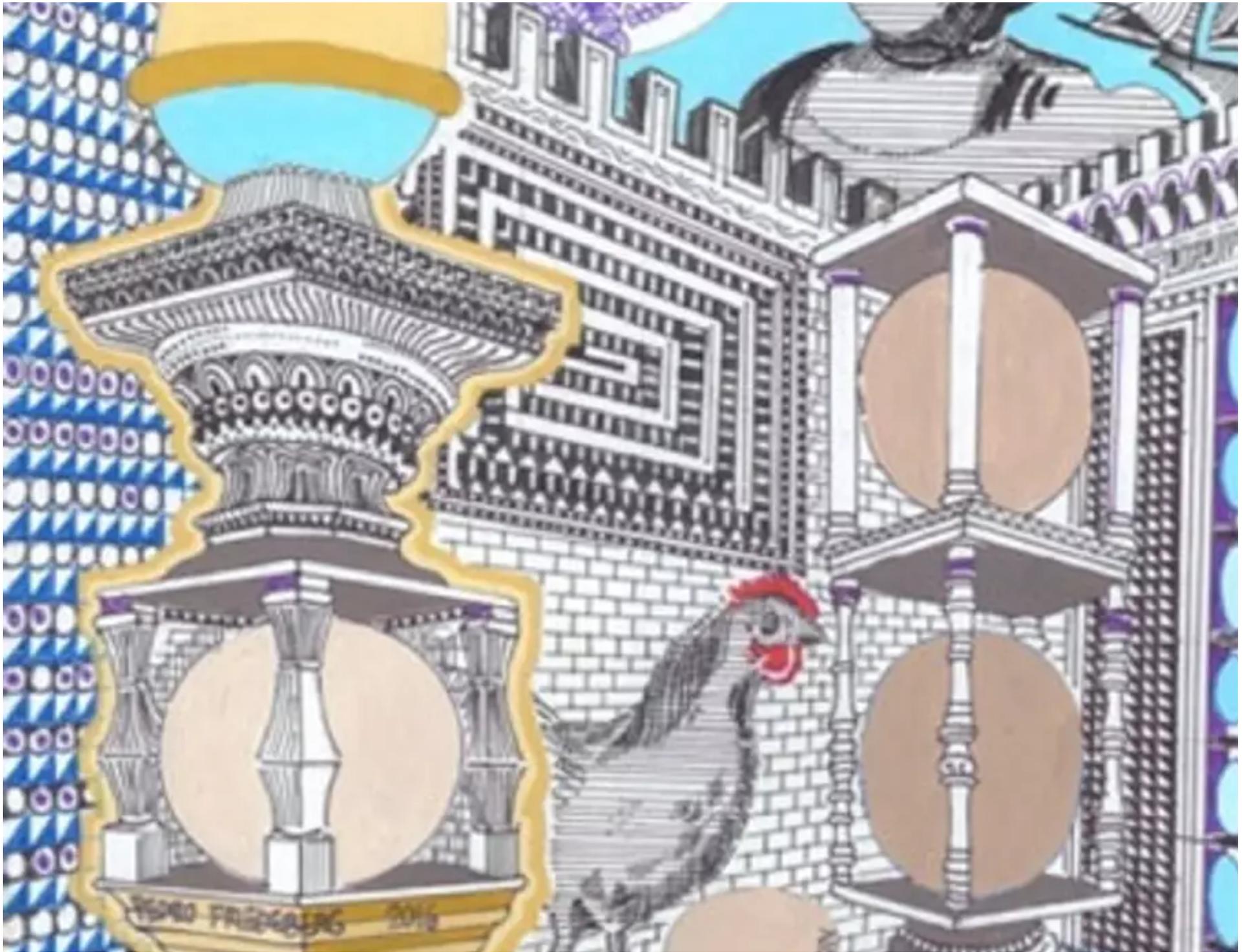
In fact, interest in Friedeberg never fully waned: He won the Argentina Triennale in 1979, and the Special Award in the XI Biennale of Graphic Works in Tokyo in 1984, to name a few of his honors. In 2009, the Mexican Palace of Fine Arts hosted a blockbuster career retrospective, and Friedeberg remains a house presence in Zona MACO, Mexico's most important contemporary-art fair.

Perhaps the renewed interest in Friedeberg's work might have something to do with the absurdity of the times. His wacky sceneries might feel closer to us now that the world seems out of whack to him. After sharpening his pencil to continue his drawing, he suggested a final flourish: Trump, he believes, is the most Dadaist of presidents. "That is what Dadaism was," he said. "Total confusion."

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'El huevo de Colón' from the series 'El elogio de la locura II,' 2016.

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