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How Guadalajara's Craft Art History and Close-Knit Community Fosters Collaboration



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After a stay in Berlin, Jose Dávila decided to return to his Guadalajara hometown to continue his art practice. Here, his 2020 sculpture *Directional Energies*.

PHOTO KEVIN TODORA, 2020/COURTESY THE ARTIST AND MARFA CONTEMPORARY, DALLAS

Berlin. “Guadalajara is not controlled by institutions, collectors, or curators, as many art capitals are. [It’s] controlled by artists and production ateliers—a completely different balance.” It was not always so. “Some of the most important and relevant artists in Mexico of the last 150 years are from Guadalajara, but the city was not good to artists,” said José Noé Suro, who runs a decades-old family ceramics workshop called **Cerámica Suro**. “Everybody left as soon as they could.” But the city’s openness to different ways of working has become an asset. “It’s a city where you can afford to make a mistake,” Suro said. “You can try something and it’s not going to be crazy expensive. In Mexico City or New York, it’s too expensive for artists to make a mistake, so there’s less opportunity to experiment. Guadalajara is a small scene—if someone needs something, we call each other to try to solve the problem. There’s a spirit of collaboration at all levels.”

The nature of that collaboration has evolved. Artist **Claudia Cisneros** noted a shift in the “very strong male energy” that she traditionally associated with painters and sculptors in the city. “It was always a fight to produce here, but I feel like it’s changing,” she said of a scene seeing more and more work by women supported by curators like **Paulina Ascencio Fuentes**, an independent curator who recently finished studies at Bard College in Upstate New York, and **Lorena Peña Brito**, a curator at the well-regarded institution [PAOS GDL](#).

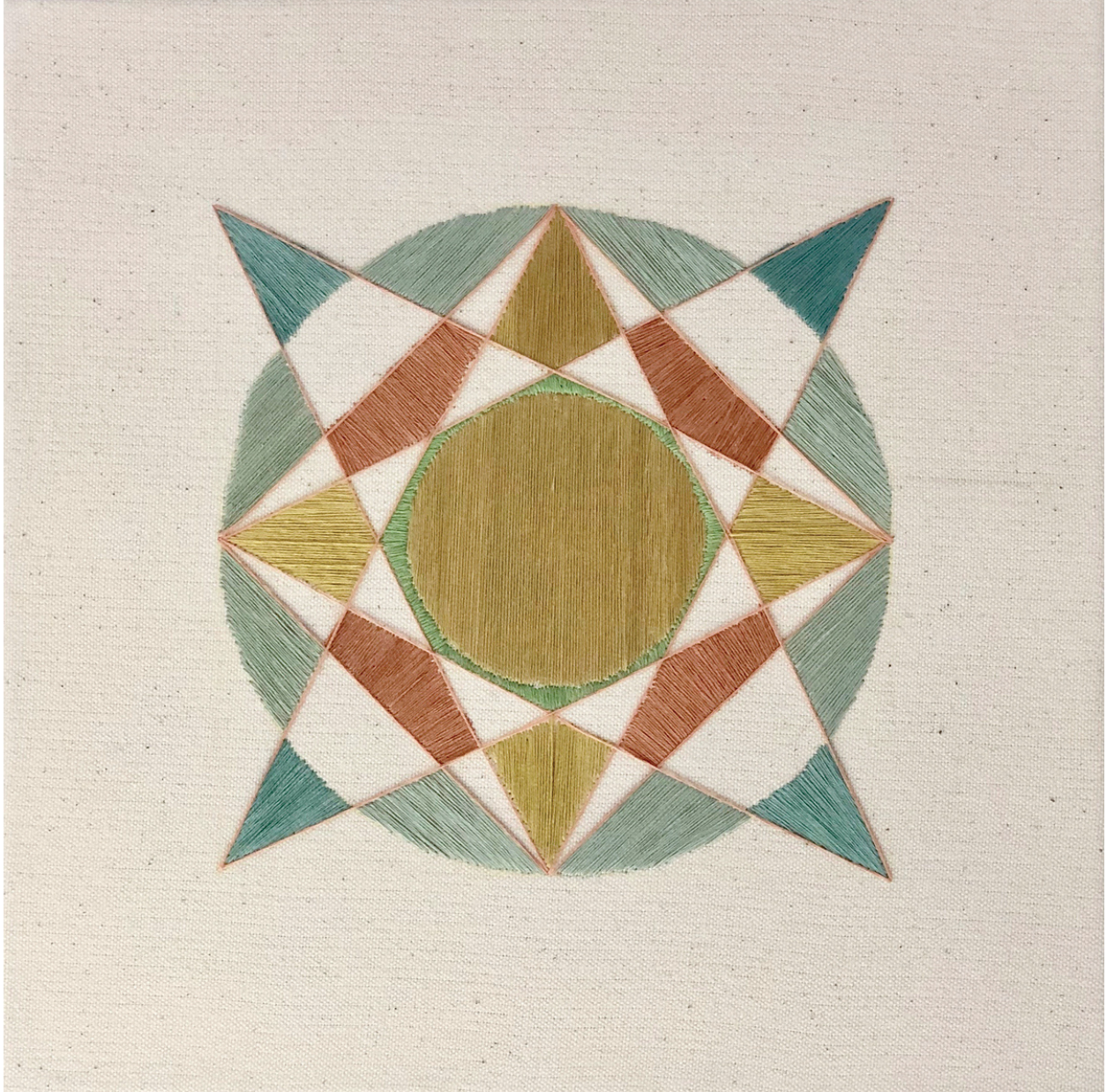
Guadalajara’s Cerámica Suro is one of the world’s most sought-after ateliers.PHOTO NEW ARTS MEDIA

Craft Connections

Guadalajara's connection to *artesanías*, or handmade crafts, is inextricable from its artistic identity, and informs the ways in which many artists in the city think and create work—with little division among the artist community between so-called fine art and traditional crafts. Founded in the 1950s and still integral today, **Cerámica Suro** is among the city's most important institutions as a world-renowned ceramics factory that also works with artists. José Noé Suro, at the helm, originally studied to be a lawyer before feeling the pull back to his family's workshop, where he had spent his free time as a kid. He told his father (the company founder) that he would like to join the business officially, on the condition that he could begin collaborating with artists. Suro started small: one artist would tell another, he said, and soon after, the word-of-mouth spread. "It was very organic, and 100 percent enthusiasm," he said. Now, 25 years later, Cerámica Suro has a long list of collaborations to tout with major artists including Jose Dávila, Jorge Pardo, Marcel Dzama, Pae White, Sarah Morris, Beatriz Milhazes, and the late Jason Rhoades, whom the workshop has assisted in fabricating large-scale mosaic and ceramic commissions. Cerámica Suro recently helped create work for the lobby of a new building in New York: in a design for Local 1199 of the Service Employees International Union, architect David Adjaye reached out to Suro to translate a trove of historic photos from the union's archive into floor-to-ceiling ceramic murals, which involved digitizing old black-and-white images and transferring them to thousands of two-inch tiles.

The influence of traditional crafts is also apparent in the work of current Guadalupe artists. **Cynthia Gutiérrez** has embedded textiles in large volcanic rocks for a series titled "Todos los siglos son un solo instante" (All centuries are a single moment), 2019, and she created sculptures with woven textiles using centuries-old techniques that were mounted on pedestals for the series "Cántico del descenso" (Canticle of the descent), 2014, which was exhibited in the 2017 Venice Biennale.

Isa Carrillo, another artist connected to *artesanías* through her parents, expressed a connection to craft. "My work is unconsciously related," she said, "because I like to work with my hands." Carrillo has been incorporating embroidery into her work over the last several years: For a 2019 series titled "Numerology. Portraits of the Psyche," Carrillo—who is also an expert in numerology and palm reading—maps the number charts of people separated by time who share the same numbers and, by extension, personality traits. (Past connections she's made include Josefa Tolrá with Hilma af Klint, and Simone Weil with Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz.) Carrillo said the process allows her to create joint portraits of notable figures while seeing "beyond the faces they have."



Isa Carrillo has recently begun incorporating embroidery into her art, as in this 2019 piece *Harmonic patterns 2. Hidden messages*. COURTESY PROXYCO GALLERY, NEW YORK

Seeds of an Ecosystem

An important catalyst for today's Guadalajara scene was **Oficina para Proyectos de Arte (OPA)**, an artist-run space opened by Gonzalo Lebrija, Fernando Palomar, and Jose Dávila that proved influential during its 2002–11 run. It brought artists like Anri Sala, Dora García, and Carlos Bunga to Guadalajara to create work, and hosted talks on contemporary art practice. "We were very aware that in order to stay in the city and be able to fulfill everything that Guadalajara offers, we needed to generate an ecosystem," Dávila said.

“For me it was very important to go to OPA’s openings because it allowed us to see how other artists worked,” said **Cynthia Gutiérrez**, who learned formative lessons there and cofounded her own (since-shuttered) artist-run space.

The spirit of artist-run spaces continues to thrive today. Since 2015, **PAOS GDL**—a self-described nonprofit “civil association that promotes different contemporary artistic manifestations, cultural research, and production”—has drawn artists to spend time in a residency program and to mount exhibitions in the late José Clemente Orozco’s home and studio. It now counts among the city’s most exciting venues for viewing new art, with recent shows by the likes of Henry Taylor, Carmen Argote, Eamon Ore-Giron, Guadalupe Rosales, and affiliates of the art publication Terremoto.

This spring, taking inspiration from the erstwhile Oficina para Proyectos de Arte (OPA), artists Gabriel Rico and Javier M. Rodríguez opened a nonprofit space called **Ayer** with an exhibition by Mexico City-based artist Melanie Smith. Set in a former Coca-Cola storage warehouse, the new space will be dedicated to moving image, video, and installation projects, with a mind toward promoting a medium that has not always been front and center in Guadalajara. “I want to give something of myself to the city,” Rodríguez said. “Here, our circumstances make us more connected—it’s a very organic way of trying to make community out of a common purpose.”



Melanie Smith’s 2018 video *Maria Elena* was featured in the inaugural exhibition of Ayer, a new artist-run space in the city. COURTESY THE ARTIST AND PROYECTO PARALELO

Fair Grounds

Another important aspect of Guadalajara's history is that it was the site of Mexico's first art fair, **Expo Arte**, which started in the early 1990s, and influenced a generation of young artists who were living in the city at the time. Each iteration of Expo Arte was accompanied by a symposium on contemporary art, and Cynthia Gutiérrez, who attended the final two versions while a student at the University of Guadalajara, described the gatherings as "a shock and a turning point for the way I thought about art at that moment."

Though the fair was short-lived, Guadalajara started the still-going annual tradition of festivities staged under the umbrella name **PreMaco** after Mexico City's Zona Maco fair launched in 2002. The week before each year's Zona Maco, Guadalajara's small group of commercial galleries (Galería Curro, Gamma Galería, Páramo, and Travesía Cuatro among them) join artist-run spaces, craft ateliers, and artists' studios in opening up to visitors to showcase the best of what the city has on offer.

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