

Ruiz-Healy Art spotlights work by noted Mexican surrealist

Mexican artist's iconic work part of exhibit at Ruiz-Healy

By Elda Silva | May 6, 2016



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Mexican surrealist artist Pedro Friedeberg sits in one of his Hand Chairs in an exhibit at Ruiz-Healy Art. Tuesday, April 26, 2016.

After more than 50 years, Pedro Friedeberg is pretty tired of his iconic creation, the hand-chair, but the Mexican surrealist artist and designer can't seem to, well, shake it.

"I've told (my assistant) many times: 'Please, no more chairs,' but nobody pays attention to me," said the 80-year-old artist with a slight shrug.

Indeed, there are two mahogany hand-chairs — one covered in gold leaf — in his latest show, "Praise of Folly" now on view at Ruiz-Healy Art.

Since 1962, thousands of copies of the sculptural piece have been sold. As art critic Dan Cameron points out in the exhibition catalog, it is a "classic case of an artwork that for a majority of viewers may be more famous than its maker."

If that irks Friedeberg, it doesn't show when he is asked to take a seat in one for a photograph. A dapper figure in a neatly pressed blue checked shirt, khaki slacks and a straw fedora, he eases himself into the palm, reclines against the fingers that form the back of the chair and lets the camera click.

“Many (artists) become known for one (thing), because people need an anchor,” said Friedeberg, his voice gravelly and low. “Like Tamayo was very well known for his watermelons. Duchamp is, of course, well known for his pissoir. Miró is known for his amoebas. And, of course, Botero is known for his fat people.”

Born in Florence, Italy, to German-Jewish parents, Friedeberg grew up in Mexico. He was studying to be an architect when he met artist Mathias Goeritz, who encouraged him to pursue art. Friedeberg became part of an influential group of surrealist artists that included painters Remedios Varo and Leonora Carrington. He had his first solo exhibition at the age of 22.

His work is in the collection of more than 50 international museums, including the Museum of Modern Art in New York, the Musee d'Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris and the Los Angeles Contemporary Museum of Art. There has been renewed interest in Friedeberg's work in recent years, thanks in part to a retrospective at the Palacio de Bellas Artes in Mexico City in 2009. Friedeberg's work continues to influence younger artists, said gallerist Patricia Ruiz-Healy.

“He (was) a multidisciplinary artist before it was a trend,” she said. “And by that I mean he has been involved in architecture, with theater design, with ballet design, besides being a visual artist.”

“Praise of Folly” reflects the eclecticism of his career with a mix of works that includes handwoven textiles, paintings, sculptures and prints.

Roughly half of the pieces in the show were created within the past three years, including an assortment of paintings and prints characterized by dizzying, interlocking geometric patterns that create a shadowbox-like frame for architectural structures and abstract forms. A prolific artist, Friedeberg works on multiple paintings at a time.

“Usually the pattern is I start one painting, and then it bores me or I forget it, and I put it away and start a new thing,” he said. “I have about 25 started paintings, like less than halfway done. But I think that’s the best way to paint. Sometimes the great idea doesn’t come until you have put it away.”

A collage he created for an exhibition at the Museo de Filatelia in Oaxaca, Mexico, features a pyramid, the levels made out of strips of stamps from different countries. It is surrounded by images of serpents and rifles.

“I hate guns, but as an abstract shape, I like it,” Friedeberg said. “It’s very striking. Anybody can identify it.”

The sculpture in the exhibition includes a clock with hands to mark the time, the number of fingers on each corresponding to the hour, and, of course, the hand-chairs.

“Well, because people like them,” Friedeberg said.

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