

# London's Mexican melting pot

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**JOHANNA ZULETA** is the Founder of La Zuleta, a PR, Cultural Production & Media consulting agency. She has lived in Colombia, the USA and France, and has been based in London since 2002. Johanna has pioneered the development and integration of the arts and culture between Latin America and the UK, originating various media projects with UK's leading cultural institutions such as the Tate, Barbican, South Bank Centre and the British Council, as well as working with independent artists and government bodies. [www.LaZuleta.com](http://www.LaZuleta.com)

Royal Academy Curator, Dr Adrian Locke refers to our view of Mexico as “Britain’s Four Hundred Year Old Fascination.” However, Latin American artists have only begun to be widely recognised in the UK in the last 15 years. From the beginning of Spanish colonisation in 1519 until Mexican independence in 1821, Madrid was the main port of call for Latin American connections with Europe. Nevertheless, when Mexico declared independence, its first recognition of sovereignty by a major power came from Britain.

The very first artistic link between the UK and Mexico is the Codex of Mendoza, a unique manuscript combining Aztec pictorial and glyphic images with written text in Nahuatl and Spanish. Being one of the major sources of Aztec history, the equivalent of the Rosetta stone for Mesoamerican studies. Commissioned about twenty years after the conquest, around 1540s, for presentation to Emperor Charles V of Spain by the Viceroy of Mexico, Antonio de Mendoza. It is known as “the first colonial manuscript painted according to a new style influenced by European art.”

When the Codex was sent by ship to Spain, French privateers attacked the fleet, taking it to France, where it later came into the possession of André Thévet (1516-1590, a Franciscan priest, explorer, and cosmographer to King Henry II of France). Thévet drew on it for his books of cosmography. Unfortunately for him, after a difficult situation where his scholarly reputation was decaying and his health weakened, he sold it three years before his death in 1587 to Richard Hakluyt (1552-1616, a geographer, editor and Anglican Minister), then chaplain to the British ambassador in Paris. When Hakluyt bought it, he began studying it as part of the research for his collection of English travel accounts, in the hope of finding further information regarding the Spanish empire in America. After Hakluyt passed away he left the document to Anglican pastor Samuel Purchas (1577-1626, an English essayist and compiler of travel and discovery writings). Hakluyt and Purchas met after the extremely successful publication of ‘Purchas his pilgrimage’. Purchas continued Hakluyt’s work and published it in 1625 as a compilation of travel accounts of universal history. When Purchas died he left the document to his son, who then passed it to John Selden (1584-1654, the greatest historian of English law, jurist and polymath). Selden later assembled a famous library

including a wide selection of Greek, Arabic, Hebrew and Latin works, among them the Codex Mendoza. His library became part of the Bodleian Library’s collections (Oxford) in 1659 where the Codex Mendoza remains.

Mexico has always been an international destination and represents the spirit of adventure. It is the number 1 spot for honeymooners, and has beaches (think Los Cabos!) that are regularly voted in the world’s top ten. It is the 14th largest economy in the world and boasts a rich pre-Columbian history of indigenous culture and popular art. It has led the way in several artistic movements. Muralism, for example, and the 1960s Generación de la Ruptura (Breakaway Generation). Mexico also fostered the development of Surrealism, welcomed exiled artists from the war, and embraced the British artist Leonora Carrington (whose retrospective will open on 6th March at the Tate in Liverpool).

Mexico is also the Latin American country that has drawn the largest fellowship of major British writers: D.H. Lawrence, Aldous Huxley, Malcolm Lowry and Graham Greene, for example, have all lived in Mexico.

We can’t talk about Mexican culture in the UK today though without mentioning Manuel Díaz-Cebrián. Manuel was Director of the Mexico Tourism Board in the UK and Europe for over 10 years, and was instrumental in the success of Frida Kahlo at the Tate Modern, The Aztecs at The Royal Academy, Moctezuma at the British Museum and Tina Modotti at the Barbican, among others. During this time he has fostered a passion to showcase contemporary Mexican design in the UK. Three years ago, he created Pinta Design, which he curates. Parallel to this he runs his consultancy, 110Perceb. Currently he is the consultant for The Year of Mexico in the UK.

To celebrate this exciting new era in UK-Mexico relations, the two governments have agreed to designate this year as The Year of the UK in Mexico and The Year of Mexico in the UK. In 2014, in the run-up to this planned year of collaboration and event integration, artists, designers, galleries and universities began a number of exhibitions and fairs, including *Design Week* in Mexico, for which, for example, Laurence Llewelyn-Bowen and Tom Dixon designed rooms in a specially curated ‘Design House’.

Someone Manuel works closely with in Mexico is the design curator Ana Elena Mallet. She believes that there is a unique movement in Mexico, involving the marriage

of the traditional and the avant-garde in design, and that these new ideas and methods should put Mexican designers where they deserve to be on the world stage. Mexican designers in London are, accordingly, beginning to make a name for themselves.

**Valentina González Wohlers** (b. Mexico City, 1977) is an interior designer and product designer, based in London, who always tells a story through her designs. Her 'Prickly Pear' chairs, that resemble cactuses, have been on the front cover of *Marie Claire*. A harmonisation of tongue-in-cheek English style in their use of formal fabric and design references and Mexican in their iconic and idiosyncratic form. The chairs are both frivolous and provocative of reflection and acceptance. Karl Lagerfeld first bought some, after which she was commissioned to do a new version of Philippe Starck's 'ghost chair'. A faint sheet, immaterial and partly transparent, drapes gently over a Louis XV chair, falling over its soft curves and stylish armrest, reaching the floor with beautiful pleats, full of implied movement. "Ghosts have almost always been implausible," she says. [www.valentinagw.com](http://www.valentinagw.com)

**Liliana Ovalle's** (b. Mexico City, 1977) award-winning work is also a fusion of the two countries' contrasting cultures. Her product and furniture design reflects 'incomplete' and 'unrehearsed' aspects of urban life. She has been exhibited in several major art museums and fairs worldwide, including: the Museum of Art and Design, New York; The Museo Poldi Pezzoli, Milan; Zona Maco, Mexico City; The London Design Festival and Depot Basel. She currently works in research at Goldsmith's and is part of the Okay Studio design collective. Her hot-pot stand *Small Flame*, displayed at the the British Council event, *Salome del Mobile di Milano*, she says, was "inspired by my Mexican background," and reflects "continuous adversity... seen as an opportunity." Her work emanates serenity, but their beauty does perhaps stem from anguish.

For *Sinkhole Vessels* she collaborated with artists and artisans in Oaxaca, revitalising indigenous ceramic techniques. Sinkholes represent extinction – the sense that what we know and learn is always falling into a void. [www.lilianaovalle.com](http://www.lilianaovalle.com)

**H Furniture.** Alejandro Villarreal (b. Mexico City, 1973) started Hierve, a boutique design consultancy based in Mexico City and London in 1999, with the purpose of serving society through

high-quality projects in architecture, product design, visual arts and service design. In 2013, Hierve collaborated with British furniture company Case Furniture designing the Vitrina Collection, winning them the Homes & Gardens award for Best Furniture Designer. Villarreal then launched H in 2014, a new London-based furniture company with Mexican origins, merging history with new ideas while being detailed and responsible. H's collection *Loom* was presented in ICFF New York and The London Design Festival. H Furniture also offers bespoke services. [www.hfurniture.co](http://www.hfurniture.co)

**Felipe Ehrenberg** (b. Mexico City, 1943) is a painter, printmaker, performance artist, writer, teacher, and publisher. He is internationally recognised as a multidisciplinary artist. His career spans over fifty years of drawing and painting, including the conceptual art of the seventies, performance, mail art and mimeograph, he is also a pioneer of neographic art. His work addresses sculpture, graphic design 3-D work, installation, sound poetry, object art, and photography. He has presented over 70 solo exhibitions and participated in over 200 group exhibitions. Ehrenberg lived in England from 1968 to 1972, where, with the architect Martha Hellion and the critic and historian David Mayor, he founded the Beau Geste Press/Libro Acción Libre in Devon to propagate the work of artists involved with the Fluxus movement.

During this time he made the film *La Poubelle* about his garbage walks around London at the time of the strikes in 1970. The duration is 16 min 48 sec. The Tate Gallery keeps record of his life and works here. [www.tate.org.uk/context-comment/video/felipe-ehrenberg-la-poubelle](http://www.tate.org.uk/context-comment/video/felipe-ehrenberg-la-poubelle)

**Tupac Martir** (b. 1977, Reading) is a lighting designer, Conceptual Artist, Production Designer, Creator & Basketweaver. Tupac has provided production design, visuals and lighting direction to artists such as Elton John, Sting, and Beyoncé. He is equally renowned within the fashion industry having worked for fashion shows with Alexander McQueen, Stella McCartney and Vivienne Westwood. In the art world, one of his most recent collaborations was supporting Conrad

The artistic links between the UK and Mexico date back 400 years, to the Codex of Mendoza, the 'Rosetta Stone' of Mesoamerican studies



**FIRST**

There is a new and unique movement in Mexico, involving the marriage of the traditional and the avant-garde in design

Shawcross during Frieze 2014 in The ADA Project, The Vinyl Factory at Brewer Street Car Park, London.

Tupac won an official entry for the Morelia Film Festival with his multidisciplinary piece *The Gentleman, The Mermaid, Mexican Cinema, Loteria!!!* originally created for the British Council as part of the Cultural Olimpiad during London 2012. [www.tupacmartir.com](http://www.tupacmartir.com)

**Pedro Reyes** (b. Mexico, 1972) uses sculpture, architecture, video, performance plus viewer participation. He has won international attention for large-scale projects that imagine solutions for a happier world. His politics and his use of found materials connect him with Arte Povera, particularly in his tackling of gun culture in Mexico. In *Palas por Pistolas* (2008), Reyes worked with local authorities in Culiacán, Mexico, to melt down guns and make them into shovels for tree planting. For *Disarm* (2013) the Mexican government passed over 6,700 confiscated firearms for Reyes to turn into mechanical musical instruments, which play a delightful, but emotionally raw, even surreal, sound loop. Other works tackle first world problems through participatory techniques. *Sanatorium* (2011) invites visitors to sign up for a 'temporary clinic', with the mission of treating various kinds of urban malaise. The Sanatorium manifesto mixes Reyes' huge ambition with a healthy sense of the absurd. [www.lissongallery.com/artists/pedro-reyes](http://www.lissongallery.com/artists/pedro-reyes)

**Pia Camil** (b. Mexico City, 1980) is currently the editor in chief of *Celeste* Magazine in Mexico, DF. Her work includes interaction of sculpture and performance. She investigates the basics of architecture and destabilises the typical dialectic between private and public. Although still a young artist, she has exhibited at the Bogotá Contemporary Art Fair, ART-RIO, Zona Maco Sur, Popo Paris, Proyectos Ultravioleta, to name a few. She has been selected for the second edition of Saatchi Gallery's show *Pangaea: New Art From Latin America and Africa* opening in March. [www.saatchigallery.com/artists/pia\\_camil.htm](http://www.saatchigallery.com/artists/pia_camil.htm)

**Alejandro Pintado** (b. Mexico City, 1973) came to London to do his MFA at Goldsmith's. He returned to Mexico in 2001 but has continued to spend time abroad in France, England and the United States, where he was offered the prestigious Skowhegan residency in 2007. His work reflects upon the historical memory of landscape and how this is transformed over time, it is also an exploration of the "fourth dimension". Solo shows include *Medición del vacío (Vacuum Measure)*, Drexel Gallery, Monterrey, Mexico, *Trayectoria del conocimiento (Path of Knowledge)*, dialogue with *José María Velasco* and the Art Project – Pinta Art Fair; curated by Pablo León de la Barra, London. Pintado is represented in London by the [www.PostBoxGallery.com](http://www.PostBoxGallery.com)

**Lourdes Almeida** (b. Mexico, 1952) studied photography in the 1970s in Florence, and is considered the master of experimental Polaroid photography in Mexico. She has won many awards, including a bronze medal in the UNESCO World Photo Contest, 1993. Her work was first exhibited in London at the Pinta Art Fair by the Gallery Oscar Roman. In 2014 she also contributed to the exhibition *Made in Mexico: The Rebozo in Art, Culture & Fashion* organised by Hilary Simon; hosted by the Fashion and Textile Museum. Almeida's photography portrays both reality and fantasy. In her work we can find portraits of rural people, animals, insects, circus scenes, religious images or aspiring presidents in Latin America. [www.LourdesAlmeida.com](http://www.LourdesAlmeida.com)

Oscar Roman has also been responsible for many other happy findings, such as Pilar Enrich, who lives and works in London, based here for more than 20 years. She started her career as an artist after winning the honorary prize in 1993 at the Art Students League in New York. She has also studied in Mexico, Washington, Paris and London. Pilar collaborated as a museum manager with the British Museum for the opening of their Mexican Gallery.

For her series *enrich<sup>2</sup>: ex-photos*, she worked in collaboration with her sister, Cristina, a photographer. The pieces are a mix between specific childhood photographs and her favourite places in London. She joins memories of past times with enjoyment of present locations, adding a personal touch, somehow missing in digital work, such as with handwriting. Enrich is continuously involved in charitable work, supporting several foundations. [www.pilarenrich.com](http://www.pilarenrich.com)

**Fernando Palma Rodríguez's** (b. Mexico, 1957) work combines sculpture and Electronic Engineering. He has exhibited in the Conran Shop in London, as well as in Paris and New York. Fernando works with machines he develops, builds and programs himself. These are often activated by the viewer and react and to their movements through light and presence detectors. Through his work, he makes a critical remark about the way that cities are related to environment. He highlights his native indigenous community, exploring the Nahuatl myths and philosophy of this endangered language. He is represented by the Mexican gallery [www.houseofgaga.com](http://www.houseofgaga.com)

**Pablo Delgado** (b. Curnavaca, 1979) is a young Mexican artist, who came to prominence in 2011 after bringing his narrative to the walls of the East End with his miniature figures, full of life and shadows. He was later commissioned to open the first East Wing Courtauld biennale, and is now represented by the Howard Griffin Gallery [www.howardgriffingallery.com/artists/pablo-delgado](http://www.howardgriffingallery.com/artists/pablo-delgado) **F**





Valentina González Wohlers: The Ghost Chair



Liliana Orvalle: Sinkhole Vessels



Lourdes Almeida: La creación, 2011



Pilar Enrich:  
Mi Corazón

Tupac Martir



Alexander McQueen's catwalk show, production design by Tupac Martir

