

# PIN-UP

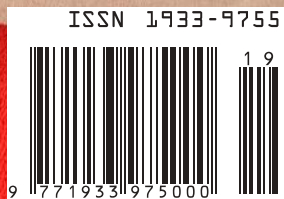
MAGAZINE FOR  
ARCHITECTURAL  
ENTERTAINMENT  
ISSUE 19

**Featuring**  
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**Wendy Goodman, Pedro**  
**Friedeberg, Trix and**  
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**THE GREAT INDOORS**

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**Fall Winter 2015/16**



USD 20.00



Interview

Michael Bullock

Portraits

Daniel Trese

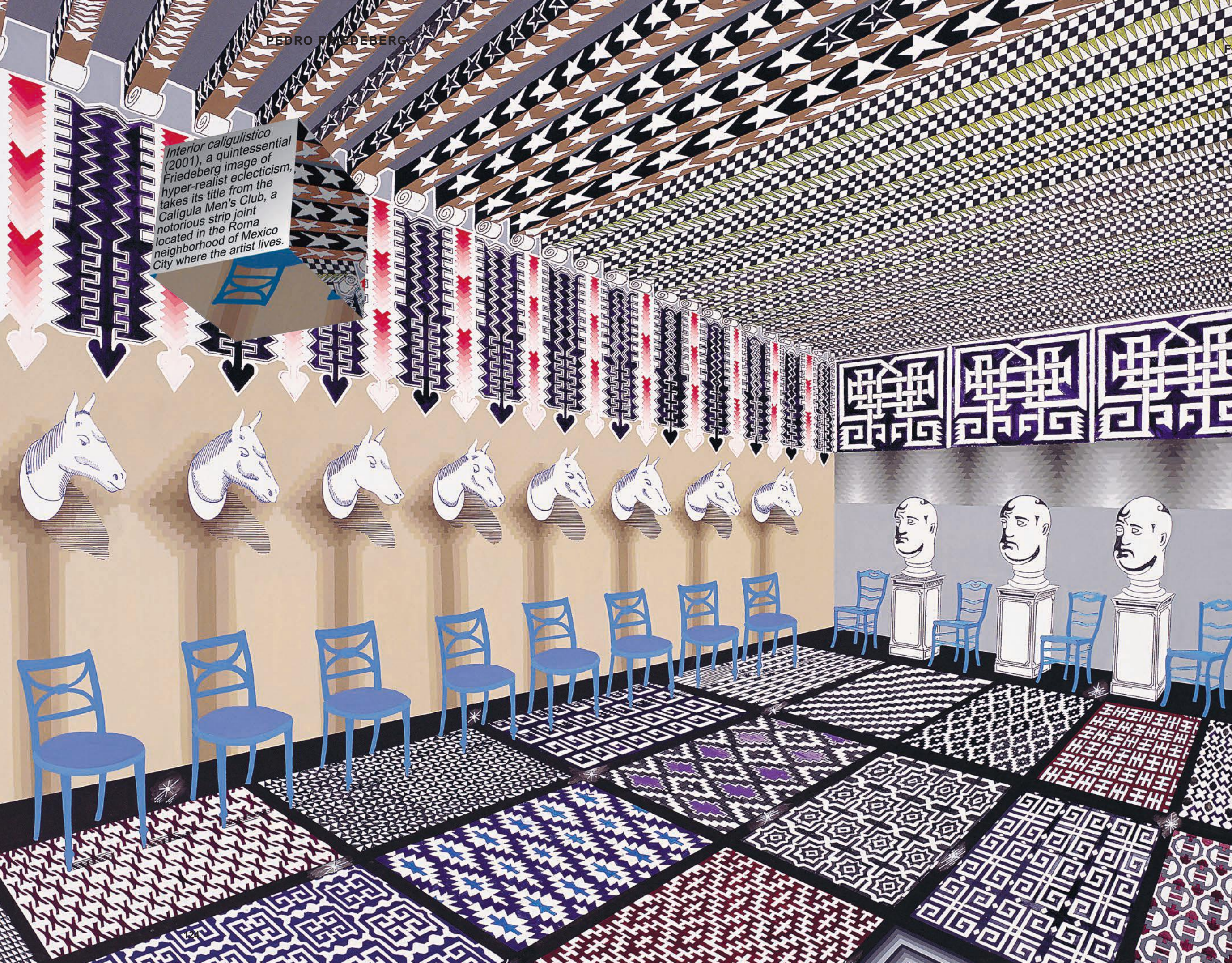
FEATURE

*Fittingly for a student of alchemy, the septuagenarian wild child has a knack for transmuting various iconographies and artistic inspirations — Pop, Surrealism, and Mexican vernacular — into magical architectural tableaux. A polymath's polymath, he is also obsessed with astrology, history, occultism, witchcraft, butterflies, and unicorns. Oh, and he invented the Hand chair...*

**Pedro**

**Friedeberg**





## FEATURE

The image of the Hand chair is so ubiquitous that it almost seems its typology was passed down unauthored from an ancient civilization, and few people seem to know its real origins. But the truth behind the myth is that this internationally acclaimed design icon was brought into the world in 1962 thanks to the exuberantly eccentric imagination of Mexican artist Pedro Friedeberg. A still very active 79-year-old, Friedeberg has produced a wide-ranging body of work that can only be understood by considering his early life and the unique forces — people, countries, and cultural movements — that formed his vivid mind and prolific practice. His parents were German Jews who fled Europe in 1939, when he was three, and his early life as an artist is a story of exceptional creative mentorship by two distinct and seemingly opposing camps in Mexico City's most vibrant creative scenes: Modernist architecture and Surrealism. As an architecture student, he was taught by Mathias Goeritz, a German-born sculptor who was a friend and collaborator of the legendary Luis Barragán. That experience dovetailed with being the baby on the Mexican Surrealist scene at a time when the movement's leader, André Breton, famously deemed the country "the spiritual home of Surrealism." Friedeberg was influenced by a whole circle of Surrealists that included acclaimed painter Leonora Carrington and the poet and flamboyant art patron Edward James. Being a product of such diverse cultures, Friedeberg's work logically followed suit: the geometry and endless pattern of Modernist Op Art merge with the illustrative narrative qualities and absurdity of Surrealism in a grand smorgasbord of Italian and Portuguese Baroque, ancient-Egyptian motifs, Art Deco, American Gothic, and, of course, native-Mexican imagery. If he was once Surrealism's grandson — his work having been recognized, in a letter from Breton, as "participating in the Surrealist intention, being one of its most notable expressions" — Friedeberg is now arguably its doyen, even if he modestly claims to have arrived on the scene too late. For PIN-UP, he recounted his fantastic journey through life's absurdities with humor and good-hearted sarcasm, all the while drawing tigers in his magically decorated home and studio in the leafy Roma neighborhood of Mexico City.

Michael Bullock: Your website credits you with inventing two salads and one religion.  
Pedro Friedeberg: I was just trying to be funny. But trying to be funny in 1961 is different than trying to be funny in... What year are we now? 2025 or something?



MB: So the religion was also part of the joke?  
PF: I guess. That’s when people were starting all this guru business.  
MB: Your parents were German Jews living in Mexico.  
PF: Yes. But they never practiced any religion. We were all healthy atheists and we will all die healthy atheists. And we’ll go to heaven anyway.  
MB: Was being an atheist unusual at the time?  
PF: No. In fact it was more common. Many well-thinking people were socialists and atheists.  
MB: How come your parents gave you a Spanish name?  
PF: I was born in Italy so my original name was Pietro. When we lived in Germany I was called Peter. And when we left from Hamburg to Veracruz I was called Pedro. Same name, three different languages.



MB: Did your parents encourage you to become an architect?  
PF: My father did. But I was very bad at math. He thought I should first study engineering. So he tried to send me to MIT, but I wasn’t good enough, so I had to go to a preparatory school. I lived in Boston through one horrible winter. I came back to Mexico and they put me in a nice school called the Universidad Iberoamericana. That’s where I met Mathias Goeritz.

MB: Would you describe Goeritz as your mentor?  
PF: He influenced me a great deal. He was my professor and he was an architect too. He told me not to listen to my parents. “Your parents had fun making you, but you don’t have to listen to them. Do as you please,” he would say.  
MB: Did Goeritz help you move from architecture to art?  
PF: No. When I was 20 years old I worked at a book and record store called Sala Margolin, and the owner, Walter Gruen, was the husband of Remedios Varo, the famous Surrealist painter. She saw my imitation Art Nouveau drawings and thought they were very nice. So she invited me to exhibit them at the gallery she showed at [the Galería Diana]. I had my first exhibition there in 1959 when I was, like, 21 years old.  
MB: What did Mexicans think of Art Nouveau at that time?  
PF: Well, everybody hated it. [Laughs.] Everything had to be more like Mies van der Rohe or Le Corbusier. Everything had to be glass, glass, glass — glass boxes like all over downtown Mexico City. I thought there could be something else to architecture. Barragán wasn’t yet popular.  
MB: But Barragán eventually became a huge star.  
PF: Yes, an icon. But his career was very gradual. Frida Kahlo’s was much quicker. I guess he had wealth of his own, so he didn’t have to work too hard. My parents were considering hiring him for a house in Pedregal, but then they ended up using Max Cetto instead. But Barragán did do some landscape gardening for my mother. He did it in five minutes. He said, “Dynamite this, plant that tree here, some cactus here,” etc.  
MB: What was Barragán’s personality like?  
PF: When I was a student he was already in his 50s. I remember him being a very devout Catholic. That’s why he built that famous building for the nuns for free [the chapel of the Convento de las Capuchinas Sacramentarias, Mexico City, 1952–55].  
MB: I thought Barragán was gay?  
PF: Can’t you be both? In those days Guadalajara was a very arty town, people had a lot of talent there. Everyone from Guadalajara was gay.  
MB: Openly gay?  
PF: No one was openly gay. Everyone had a lady friend or two. We all knew but you didn’t talk about it. Anyway, I think it was Barragán who took Mathias Goeritz back to Europe again for the first time after he’d left.

Friedeberg designed his first *Hand* chair in 1962. Since then he has made hundreds of versions of it, including in plastic or wood painted in gold.



FEATURE

MB: You started your career working for Goeritz.  
PF: While he was my teacher we became very good friends. He was originally from Germany so he liked to speak German with me. He wrote a manifesto about emotional architecture [*Manifiesto de la Arquitectura Emocional*, 1953] because he hated Mies van der Rohe. He was more influenced by Barragán. Their work was similar, but Goeritz’s walls were always a bit more crooked. It looked like the German sculpture of that period.  
MB: Can you explain the emotional part?  
PF: He wanted architecture not to feel like a machine. Le Corbusier said a house was a machine for living in; Mathias would say, “A house is a thing to pray in.” He was a really funny person. He was always very devout — for Barragán he was a devout Christian, and for his Jewish clients he was a devout Jew. [Laughs.] He did a lot of sculptures for synagogues, enormous Stars of David.  
MB: Goeritz also founded the collective Los Hartos [the “The Fed-Ups”], which claimed to be fed up with logic and reason. Were you a member?  
PF: Yes. But we were Surrealists, not Dadaists. It started with being fed up with the

narcissism of Modern Art. Mathias felt art should shouldn’t be just a modest pastime, or be used to make the artist more famous or a lot of money. He thought art should be like a prayer, or community service. He was a big thinker, and he invited me because he said I was a bright student. In architecture school everyone was really square and they’ve remained square ever since. Mathias told me that if I joined Los Hartos, I had to plan a house for his wife. So I drew a Victorian-Gothic villa with a spiral. I was making fun of the Guggenheim Museum, which was very new then.  
MB: Were any of your building designs actually realized?  
PF: Well, I built a little pavilion in San Miguel. And I built many fireplaces.  
MB: The lion-face fireplace is incredible!  
PF: That’s in my old house. I must have designed like six fireplaces in San Miguel. There’s a fireplace with cats, one with elephants, and those Aztec stairs, and then there was a dollhouse for my daughter. Although it’s not really a dollhouse, because you can walk into it. [Laughs.] What else? Some chimneys... Only architectural details, never a whole house.





PEDRO FRIEDEBERG

Friedeberg's art is rife with Pop humor and irony, architectural references, and Surrealist symbolism. Clockwise from top left: Orfanatorio para tehuanas (1968); Mixed media on cardboard; 29.9 x 39.8 inches. Bienestar social (2000); Mixed media on cardboard; 31.5 x 39.4 inches. Laboratorio de la Inquisición (1999); Mixed media on cardboard; 19.7 x 15.7 inches. Antecámara de la duquesa con celulitis (1999); Mixed media on cardboard; 30.7 x 34.6 inches. Königliches Badezimmer (1999); Mixed media on cardboard 19.7 x 15.7 inches. Bodega coronaria (1999); Mixed media on cardboard; 19.7 x 15.7 inches.



MB: I read that Goeritz told you that it would be more modern not to include people in your drawings. Why did he consider that modern?

PF: He thought it helped create a metaphysical air. When you add people, it looks like an architecture project. I don't totally agree. Collectors won't buy a painting if you put pigs in it, but if you add people looking at the stars, suddenly you can sell it for 10,000 dollars. That's fascinating to me. Look at this painting, for example. It has monkeys in it. It's a collage with the Hebrew alphabet. I found these old stamps in Naples, and then I found this beautiful image of monkeys, so I thought that would go with the color. It's a lot of junk. [Laughs.]

MB: Do you still draw every day?  
PF: Yes. That's what I like to do all morning long.  
MB: At what point did you start designing furniture?  
PF: That was also Mathias's fault. Before he went on

his European honeymoon for six months, he said, "I have this wonderful wood carver and I don't want to lose him. Why don't you give him a job so that he's busy while I'm gone?" So first I made two tables that looked like they're running away. And then I had the idea for the *Hand* chair. First with a regular base, not with the foot base. And then came the idea for the *Butterfly* chair... When Mathias came back from Europe, he brought along with him a very famous art collector and dealer from Switzerland. They came to my house and Mathias asked if I'd made something new while he was gone. I was living with this lady who thought the *Hand* chairs were horrible, and she'd hidden them upstairs. But luckily she wasn't there at the moment of their visit.

MB: Boy was she wrong!  
PF: No, she was right. They looked horrible in her place. Her house was very proper and they looked so out of place. I realized that this man from Switzerland had a sense of humor, and Mathias, of course, also had a great sense of humor, so I said, "I'll show you this new chair that I've done." I took the *Hand* out and the art dealer said, "These are wonderful! These are fantastic! I want four. No, I want six! I want two for New York, two for Switzerland, and two for L.A." So I made six *Hand* chairs. He was my first client, and he popularized them.

MB: Were they instant icons?  
PF: It happened slowly, over the years. Last year there was an exhibition here in Mexico City where they invited 186 artists to paint

the *Hand* chair or to do something else with it [*Manos por México*, Museo Franz Mayer]. It was a very nice show and some of those chairs were very beautiful. The idea was to auction them off, but then the organizers decided not to because everybody loved the show, and they want to keep them together and have the show travel. The original show was supposed to last three months, but it went on for almost six.

MB: I was told that if I asked you about the meaning of the *Hand* chair you'd get very mad.

PF: That was a joke. But so many people ask. People want to know why a hand. So I've made a list of all the things a hand means. There are like 60 meanings of a hand: loyalty, goodness, generosity, power, talent, work, etc., etc.



Like the peacock and the unicorn, the butterfly is a recurring symbol in Friedeberg's oeuvre. He created the deliciously camp *Butterfly* chair in the mid-1960s, at a time when the International Style reigned supreme in the world of architecture and design.

MB: Meanwhile your new teapots prominently feature another body part...  
PF: You mean the phallic teapot? Yes, I don't know why I did those. They're from two years ago. There's a very old factory in Puebla that makes ceramics. Besides making sets of plates, cups, and conventional ceramics, they also invite artists to do sculptures. Since I started making these phallic shapes they sometimes call me to say the penis is falling off. [Laughs.]

MB: Is the penis too delicate?  
PF: If they raise the temperature too much it somehow gets damaged.  
MB: After the *Hand* chair, did you continue to design furniture?

PF: In the late 1970s I made the *Butterfly* bed. It was a commission from Baron Ricky di Portanova. He wanted a very original suite in his house where everything would be butterflies. There was also a butterfly backgammon set, a butterfly chess set, a butterfly vanity table — everything butterfly! It was very popular. Henry Kissinger even stayed in that suite. He hated it. He thought it was very corny, but other people loved it. The baron died, his wife died too, but the house is still there. It's called Villa Arabesque, and at one point it was the biggest house in Acapulco. That's when the town was still a beautiful place to go. Now it's become dangerous.

MB: Do you consider your work part of the Surrealist movement?  
PF: I was too late. When I came around the Surrealist movement had already ended. But one of my closest friends was Leonora Carrington. She was the most famous female Surrealist painter. She was born in 1917.  
MB: She was already established when you were starting out.

*Since I started making phallic teapots the factory sometimes calls me to say the penis is falling off.*

PF: Yes. Although she hated the establishment. She didn't care for money, she lived like a hippie. She had nothing except a naked light bulb and a table and there was always a bottle of vodka and a lot of cigarettes. She was British and she had this wonderful sense of humor. I have some drawings of hers downstairs.  
MB: Your studio manager showed me the one she did of your brain.  
PF: Ah, yes. It's a Surrealist game. I asked her once to do a portrait of me for a magazine, and she said, "I don't feel like doing a portrait today. But I will draw your brain." So she put my head in a pail of dirty water and then pressed my head on a piece of paper, like a Rorschach test. That's the idea of Surrealism, to twist things, to make you see them in a ridiculous way. I suppose I inherited that from my mother. She could be very mean, but at the same time she had a wicked sense of humor.

MB: What about Edward James?  
PF: Edward James was a great Surrealist because of his connection to Surrealism in England. He was from an old English family, with lots of money, and he was gay. In those days we still lived by writing real letters, not like your generation with the click, click, click. When he started living in Mexico, Edward didn't receive any letters for three weeks and he got very worried. So he went to the post office and there he saw this beautiful boy sleeping on top of a huge pile of letters. Well at least that was Edward's version. He woke the boy up and said, "Where are my letters?" And the boy said, "Oh, here they are, sir." And they got talking, and Edward invited him to his house, and then the boy became his lover, and the boy said there's this marvelous place in San Luis Potosí with waterfalls, in the middle of the jungle. So he took Edward there and he fell in love with the place and started building the gardens of Las Pozas. First a little house, then a bigger house, then adding one Surrealist cliché after another — towers,

columns, stairs that lead nowhere...  
MB: Did he commission you to make anything for Las Pozas?  
PF: I made some cement hands for him. But I only went there twice. It was very hard to get there in the 60s — it took more than ten hours by car. You could also take a plane, but then you still had to drive four hours. Edward also sponsored a magazine called *Minotaure*. Have you heard of it? It came out in the mid 1930s and only ran for a few years, but it was a very famous, very expensive magazine. The first cover was done by Picasso, the second cover by Magritte, and the third cover by André Masson, or someone like that. Edward always lost money on these projects, of course, but he didn't care.  
MB: So you were kind of the baby in that group...  
PF: I wasn't even born yet! This was way before my time. Leonora Carrington didn't introduce me to Edward until much later, in the 1960s.



[Laughs.] There was another painter who painted nothing but cats, and she had been a girlfriend of Picasso's. They all came to Mexico. I guess it was very cheap to live here then, and you could have a nice house with a garden if you wanted, and the food was quite good, and the climate was nice, so that's what attracted a lot of artists. There's a lot of freedom here in the sense that nobody bothers you too much, so you can do as you please — if you don't bother anybody else.

MB: What are your thoughts about the boundaries between art and design?

PF: I hate the word design. Everybody's become so self-conscious about all these *Barcelona* chairs and Noguchi tables. I was always more interested in literature, like that William Blake poem, "Tyger! Tyger! burning bright," or something like that. So for me the concept of "design" is ridiculous. People during the Renaissance or the Gothic period made things without thinking about good taste or bad taste, or being in or being out. Before we came to Mexico, my mother thought she would become an interior decorator. But once she was here she thought Mexicans had the worst taste. "Don't even look at their houses, they're horrible!", she'd say. "They have all these religious sculptures and they have pseudo-colonial furniture." My mother only liked Swedish furniture, so what bothered me from a very early age was her distinction between good and bad taste. I always thought bad taste was much more fun!

MB: She must really not have liked your work then?

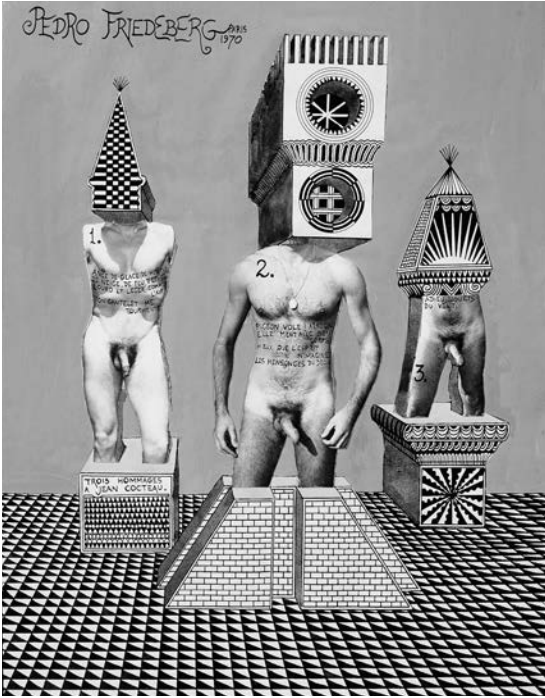
PF: She never said so. But I also never showed her that much because I knew she'd disapprove. She disapproved of almost everything. It reminds me of Stravinsky. He once took his mother to a concert of his music, and she said to him, "Why can't you write music like Scriabin?" That's what my mother was like. She disapproved of almost everything I did.

MB: Where does your relentless pursuit of ornamentation come from?

PF: I think that's because my mother hated it. [Laughs.] In the 30s or 40s, ornament was a crime, because of Loos, and Mondrian, and the Minimalists from way back. But I love ornament! I'm fascinated by it. I have three bookcases with books about ornament, and I use a lot of Aztec, Gothic, Renaissance, and Baroque. Everything altogether. One big cultural mish mash, a pastiche.

MB: Your work is so psychedelic. Did you ever try acid?

PF: Oh yeah. Edward James loved to eat mushrooms. He said, "If you hear of someone who sells mushrooms, bring them." So I did. Edward was much older than me, so he couldn't take a big quantity, and I had never taken them before. He proposed to be... What did he call it? Not a copilot, somebody who helps you through, like a guide. Maybe a chaperone? Anyway, he ate three mushrooms and he wanted me to eat ten. I only ate seven and I had wonderful, beautiful visions. Twice we did that, once here in the city and once in Las Pozas, in the jungle.



*Trois hommages à Jean Cockteau* (1970) pays tribute to one of Friedeberg's idols using cut-outs from gay porn magazines. All the images of Friedeberg's work in this feature were taken from the book *Pedro Friedeberg* (inset right), beautifully edited by Deborah Holtz and Juan Carlos Mena. © Trilce Ediciones, 2010.

MB: And it didn't become part of your practice?

PF: Actually I think it's a big waste of time.

MB: But it sounds like you enjoyed it?

PF: Yes. But it takes you like a whole day to get into it. It was taken very seriously. You couldn't eat that day. You could only drink tea, then, at 5:00 p.m., you would take the mushrooms. I suppose by 7:00 p.m. you would start seeing things, like books moving around. What fascinated me was the music. I learned that Tchaikovsky was on mushrooms when he wrote *The Nutcracker*. Of course he was! All those little bells — da da ding ding — that's very psychedelic. That's the discovery I made.

MB: That makes perfect sense!

PF: Yes. But then you have the hangover the next day and you can't work. That's why if you take drugs you become a mess. I don't need them. I'm psychedelic anyway!

