

September 22, 2010

There's a great line in Carlos Fuentes's 1958 novel, "Where the Air Is Clear," describing Mexico City as a "city new upon sculptured dust." And if you sit in the library of Labor, a contemporary art gallery that opened in the noble old Roma district last fall, you'll understand what Fuentes means. The building used to house a run-down pool hall and an outlaw band space where Pamela Echeverría, the gallery's owner, remembers spending many a late night of her youth at the tocadás, or gigs, the decrepit floors a chronicle of "years and years condensed in a thousand thin layers of dry beer and cigarette ash."

Now the building looks like a little dream of Chelsea. Or what lots of Chelsea gallery owners would dream of doing if they had Echeverría's

space — expanses of polished concrete beneath a soaring ceiling, the bright but ever-grayish light of Mexico City sifting down on the kind of tough, savvy art that seems to be coming out of the city's pores these days, turning it into a compulsory stop on the international art circuit.

"Mexico City is like Disneyland for artists right now," Echeverría said, describing a place a little like 1970s New York — dirty and dangerous, yes, but comparatively cheap, majestic in its disarray and bursting with the energy of reinvention.

And so the city has also become a kind of Disneyland for a wave of travelers who have been seeking it out recently (despite headlines about the battles farther north between the government and drug traffickers) for its art, its fiercely ambitious food scene and a local film industry that has incubated directors like Alejandro González Iñárritu ("Babel") and Carlos Reygadas ("Silent Light").

"Culturally, this is a place where a lot is happening," said Monica Manzutto, one of the founders of Kurimanzutto, probably the city's most influential gallery, representing artists like Rirkrit Tiravanija and Gabriel Orozco. She explained this to me while sitting in the gallery's sprawling communal kitchen. "It's probably the most important part of the gallery," she said. "This is where all the ideas come from."

It's also a perfect emblem of the way Mexico City's cultural commerce is conducted at its best — art bubbling up out of good food and drink and the seemingly endless spool of talk that ties together many of the city's creative communities. The spring night I arrived I went to dinner in the upscale Polanco district at Pujol, one of the city's finest restaurants for a decade now, where I had the most memorable dish of my trip, a semi-deconstructed tamale, its flavor deepened with dried cuitlacoche, or corn "truffle," coating the bowl.

The restaurant's founder and chef, Enrique Olvera, drew inspiration for the look of one of his newest taco dishes from the work of Gabriel Orozco. He invited me to breakfast the next morning and then, while trying to reach a curator friend to show me some art, took me to one of the Valhallas of his culinary universe, La Merced, the teeming public market near the Palacio Nacional. He zigzagged like a tailback through stands piled high with cheap toys and oozing fruit and chicharrón (fried pork skin). We ended up at one of his favorite places to eat in the city, no more than a gas griddle, tended by three small, smiling women who prepared a knockout version of a Mexico City street-food classic: handmade blue-corn-tortilla quesadillas filled with zucchini flowers, Oaxacan cheese and the earthy herb epazote. We ate them standing up, dodging the crates of goat heads being wheeled past at perilous speed.

“For me, this is Mexico City,” Olvera said.

Rafael Micha, one of the capital's boutique-hotel pioneers — he and his partners now operate three popular Mexico City hotels, including the always bustling Condesa DF — says the city is trying to become known for attracting more than just business travelers, a mission that restaurants, contemporary art and film are all starting to accomplish. The owners of the new Hotel Brick in the Roma district are now working — with backers including the actors Gael García Bernal and Diego Luna — to open a movie theater with two restaurants on a street nearby.

Besides the recent openings of two buzz-worthy contemporary galleries — Gaga (no relation to the Lady) and Proyectos Monclova — the venerable Museo Tamayo, with the solid Modernist collection of its namesake, the painter Rufino Tamayo, has begun to reinvent itself, sketching out a big expansion and hiring Sofia Hernández Chong Cuy, a talented young Mexican-born New York curator, as its new director. (Museums, controlled by the state, have long been the weak links in the city's art resurgence, but there's hope that this is changing.)

Hovering over all this activity are the plans of the city's two mega-collectors. Carlos Slim Helú, the telecommunications magnate and one of the world's richest men (he's also a partial owner of this newspaper), has begun construction on a striking torqued aluminum tower to house his old masters and Rodins. And the Jumex collection of contemporary art, Latin America's most important — masterminded by Eugenio López Alonso, an heir to the Jumex juice-company fortune — is designing a new space in Polanco (next to Slim's), transplanting the art from its current home on the grounds of the company's factory an hour north of downtown. (Or, if you hit the city's nightmarish traffic, two hours or more; Carlos Fuentes also aptly called Mexico City a “city of motionless pain.”)

The life of Mexico City's cultural world, Manzutto said, has long thrived on its loner status, its sense of being “way outside the center, far from New York and London.” But the

city may now be on the way to becoming a center of its own. “When we started, it was impossible to think that we could survive here selling art, that anyone would want it or come here to see it,” she said, smiling. “I’d say a lot has changed.”

ESSENTIALS MEXICO CITY

Hotels: In addition to brands like St. Regis (starwoodhotels.com), Four Seasons (fourseasons.com) and W (starwoodhotels.com), there are interesting local options. Brick A newer boutique hotel . Orizaba 95; 011-52-55-5525-1100; hotelbrick.com; doubles from about \$240. Camino Real Bedecked in Pop Art colors. Mariano Escobedo 700; 011-52-55-5263-8888; caminoreal.com; doubles from \$200. Condesa DF Turquoise walls and curvy furniture. Avenida Veracruz 102; 011-52-55-5241-2600; condesadf.com; doubles from \$240. Habita Designed by Enrique Nortén. Avenida Masaryk 201; 011-52-55-5282-3100; hotelhabita.com; doubles from \$215.

Restaurants: Café Azul y Oro Ricardo Muñoz Zurita creates culinary wonders. Centro Cultural Universitario; 011-52-55-5622-7135; entrees from \$30. El Bajío A cornerstone of traditional fare. Avenida Cuitláhuac 2709; carnitaselbajio.com.mx; 011-52-55-5234-3763; entrees from \$7. Biko A Basque-influenced newcomer. Avenida Masaryk 407; 011-52-55-5282-2064; biko.com.mx; entrees from \$24. Pujol Elevated nueva cocina Mexicana. Francisco Petrarca 254; 011-52-55-5545-4111; pujol.com.mx; entrees from \$15.

Galleries: Gaga A mix of local and international artists. Durango 204; 011-52-55-5525-1435. Hilario Galguera Shows blue-chip artists like Damien Hirst. Francisco Pimentel 3; 011-52-55-5546-6703; hilariogalguera.com. Kurimanzutto Has nurtured stars like Gabriel Orozco. Rafael Rebollar 94; 011-52-55-5256-2408; kurimanzutto.com. Labor A new space that supports noncommercial projects. Colima 55; 011-52-55-5208-5579; labor.org.mx. Luis Adelantado Shows youngsters and vets alike. Lagune de Términos 260; 011-52-55-5545-6645; luisadelantadomexico.com. OMR One of the first contemporary galleries. Plaza Río de Janeiro 54; 011-52-55-5511-1179; galeriaomr.com. Proyectos Monclova Focuses on emerging local talent. Gral León 31; 011-52-55-4754-3546; proyectosmonclova.com.