



Frida Escobedo, *Creek Chair*, 2022, stainless steel structure, nickel ball chain, 23.75 x 22 x 11.25 inches, photo by Studio C129, courtesy of Friedman Benda and Frida Escobedo.

# “EVERYTHING HERE IS VOLCANIC”

Mario Ballesteros curates a group show of Mexican artists, designers, and makers at Friedman Benda in New York.

By Elizabeth Williamson

The work of Aldo Álvarez Tostado, Víctor Barragán, Frida Escobedo, Fernando Laposse, Pedro Reyes, SANGREE, Andrés Souto, and more are brought together in the group show “Everything Here Is Volcanic” at Friedman Benda in New York. The exhibition is curated by the independent curator, editor, and researcher Mario Ballesteros, and is on view from January 12 to February 18, 2023.

Ballesteros selected a range of Mexican creatives and makers from around the country, working across mediums and categories. Playing with the idea of the traditional Mexican domestic sphere, where the kitchen is central and living spaces are communal, several new and commissioned works mark what may be several firsts in terms of objects shown in the gallery—things like a working grill or a horse saddle. Utterly unique interpretations of cultural imagery appear in mosaics, ceramics, stones, wood, leather, concrete, and even cactus, exemplifying the renegade approach of the artists whose work is on view.

*Whitewall* spoke with Ballesteros about capturing a slice of the

Mexican contemporary art and design scene today.

**WHITEWALL:** *What was the starting point for this show at Friedman Benda?*

**MARIO BALLESTEROS:** It started with a conversation with Marc Benda around two years ago. He was very interested in what was going on in Mexico and had this idea of doing something in the gallery related to Mexican design and contemporary material culture.

In Mexico, design is in an uncomfortable middle place where it’s not really considered a cultural sphere, so you don’t get all the support that other types of artistic practices get from the government or institutions. There’s something lacking in terms of support and context. At the same time, there’s an incredible creative energy. We have such a deep-rooted material culture of craft. I’ve always felt that my calling is to help get the word for younger talents to fulfill their potential here.



Portrait of Mario Ballesteros, courtesy of Friedman Benda.

**WW:** *So how did you arrive at the theme and title of the show, “Everything Here Is Volcanic”?*

**MB:** I think there is a lack of knowledge of what Mexico really is. People have these images in their head of what this country is like. And usually whenever they come here they are surprised to find a very different reality.

The title point of departure is this very beautiful phrase by Hannes Meyer, who was a radical architect, and former director of the Bauhaus. Very few people know that he traveled to Mexico in the late thirties to set up an urban planning institute and he ended up staying ten years. His phrase “everything here is volcanic” is not only referring to the geography of Mexico, but also the instability, the organic nature, of how culture and life works here. I think that really captures the essence of something that’s atemporal, that’s not necessarily tied to a specific place in time, but really an abstract energy that I still think represents how Mexico functions today.

**WW:** *Who are some of the artists whose work we’ll see?*

**MB:** It was also important for it to be a group of artists that, even though they are quite young, are coming into their own very strong identity. They are developing a particular perspective in terms of materials, in terms of formal identity, and in terms of the way they understand what I like to call “mutant material culture,” because it’s really a mix of art, design, architecture, and fashion. I don’t think anyone in this show is comfortable with labels.

I think they’re all little renegades. You have people like Bárbara Sánchez-Kane, who trained as an engineer and is now in fashion and has moved into contemporary arts. People like Aldo Álvarez Tostado, who studied architecture and teaches architecture but his practice is more about object-oriented Conceptual work.

And the people in the show come from such diverse backgrounds and geographies. I didn’t want it to be solely focused on Mexico City. And I did find, especially in terms of education, these people are either self-taught or really twisting what they learned in school and what they’re taught about design. People like Víctor Barragán has training in industrial design, but then he left school and learned how to sew, and that’s when he really found his creative vocation in fashion. And now he’s going back to more furniture or objects.

For me, that’s super interesting to see that all of these very successful talented people are still challenging and questioning themselves as to what a relevant creative practice can be today.

**WW:** *What are some of the objects that were commissioned for the show?*

**MB:** Most of those that are commissioned work for the show is work that these designers wouldn’t necessarily be able to produce if it wasn’t for an opportunity like the exhibition. I like playing with the idea of the typical living unit, which is something Hannes Meyer was interested in. If you go back to the first histories of living and dwelling in Mexico, you have a very different notion of home and what the center of the home is—you have single room units with the kitchen at the center, all of the domestic and social activities were exchangeable, and there was a big communal aspect outside of the house. I like the idea of playing with this and thinking of what could be this new post-domestic space.

We have some fantastic stone and ceramic sculptures from SANGREE, a really interesting young artist duo of sculptors from Mexico City that play with pre-Hispanic imagery, branding, and skate culture. We have a fantastic piece, which is a kitchen grill by Tezontle. I’m super excited about that piece. We have a beautiful ceramics and textile piece by Lorena Ancona, who is an artist from Quintana Roo in the Yucatán peninsula. Her studio is in the jungle, and she works with native clays and natural pigments. She’s doing this beautiful beaded ceramic curtain that will be part of the show.

And then we have some really young, very radical pieces in the show. There’s a beautiful lamp by Fernando Laposse—it’s going to be a cactus skeleton with a real cactus structure and sculpted wooden leaves, and 3D-printed bulbs that look like blown glass.

We have a gorgeous horse saddle by Aldo Álvarez Tostado, from Guadalajara, that takes the masculine aesthetics of ranching culture and horse riding, but because he’s queer he turns them on its head a little bit. The horse saddle has these encrypted phrases from gay dating apps chiseled into the leather.

**WW:** *What understanding of Mexico’s creative scene do you want visitors to walk away with?*

**MB:** We’re playing with the fuzzy and difficult-to-pin-down conditions that are very present in Mexico and in the culture. We’re playing with concepts like ritual, like gathering, like dreaming. I hope that translates in that there’s a bit of wonder, there’s a bit of shock, there is a bit of something very familiar and very homey. I hope that in everything together really transports you to that reality here.