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ESSAY:

SYBARITE'S MONASTERY: The Reyes Residence, Mexico City

By Roberto Tejada

I keep catching our reflection as it warps across the blown-glass orbs arranged into silver clusters throughout the room—on top of porcelain vases or suspended from a wooden beam in the ceiling. David Reyes is leading me through the house he shares with his sister Margarita, the home originally designed by his great uncle, the late painter, aesthete and collector Jesús Reyes Ferreira. “Chucho” Reyes, as he was known to his friends, lived here from the early 1930s to his death in 1977. It’s a quarter to noon on a June morning, the beginning of what seems to be a fairly typical day for David. In a low scratchy voice, between puffs on a Marlboro Light, he explains the origins of these spheres. “Originally, you see, they were designed in France to decorate churches. But in the nineteenth century, during our own sort of *belle époque*, these ornaments made their way to Mexico where they were used in cantinas and saloons—a kind of rear-view mirror to spot a potential assailant if you were standing at the bar with your back to the door.”

In one of the central areas on the second floor of the house, a prominent silver sphere protrudes from the center of a round oak table orbited by satellites of weighty telescope lenses, smaller globes, glass cruets, empty inkwells and crystal balls. The round mirrored surfaces collapse an interior already tangled in space and time. It’s an eclectic gathering of objects and artworks, both secular and sacred: vice-regal inlaid cabinets, writing desks, painted trunks, missal stands, monastery armchairs and assorted lecterns. And resting on these, or lined across the walls, is an array of blue-and-white majolica jars and bowls from Puebla, ivory figures from the Philippines, and depictions of the Virgin Mary or of the tortured figure of Christ.

We’ve made it past the anteroom, literal and otherwise, of this initial meeting. David is waiting to see when I’ll bring up the open secret of Chucho Reyes’s personal life. And we’re both letting hints drop. David quips: “The minimalist in him was almost always outrivaled by the antique collector. But I think that’s what gives the house its sensuality.”

At odds with that excess—where Catholic piety collides with the drawing room or gentleman’s parlor—is the monastic severity of the stairwell we’ve just ascended. Only minutes ago, with the door closing behind on the snarl of the street (a car alarm accidentally set off by one of Mexico City’s throng of corner car attendants), David has ushered me up to the second floor. Braving the wooden staircase and banister up this narrow entrance, a yellow panel at the top of the flight confuses any certainty of depth and volume. We turn through a passageway onto the interior balcony overlooking a fern-filled courtyard where Reyes spent hours painting the child-like gouaches for which he came to be known. The lush plant-life hides a series of quarry stone archangels and pre-Columbian figures against the walls painted chalk blue.

Contrasts of this kind are now synonymous with a sort of countrified modernism, a style prevalent in Mexico, and even well beyond its borders. In its diluted form, pre-Hispanic artifacts are set against monochrome backdrops in weathered tones of blue, pink and yellow. Colonial or folk paintings, handmade toys, and other manual crafts vie with a host of interna-

tional *objets* found at flea markets and antique shops, like those that comprise La Lagunilla in Mexico City. And it is Reyes who is increasingly recognized as the mastermind behind this sensibility, a verve informing subsequent aesthetics, including that of architect Luis Barragán.

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To fully grasp how this man and his house came to influence an entire style of Mexican design and architecture, we'd have to turn to the 1920s, the decade that followed the armed conflict of Mexico's revolution and its aftermath: a cultural renaissance in which the national ethos was reinvented as something serviceable. It was a climate that favored the evidence of Mexico's pre-Hispanic past, its indigenous present, the vernacular arts, the country's abrupt landscapes, its mythologies ancient and modern, and the ideologies that had fueled the revolution to begin with. One upshot of the military campaigns of that period, especially in the northwestern regions of Mexico (and relevant as far as Reyes Ferreira is concerned) was the sudden circulation of antiques, art objects and colonial Catholic iconography that had been ransacked from private homes, haciendas and churches. And with this came a new elite of antique dealers, booksellers and heirloom brokers, each one a figure ingrained in Mexican art and culture.

Reyes Ferreira was born into the provincial elite of Jalisco and its capital, Guadalajara, where he spent much of his adult life until an abrupt move brought him to the country's cosmopolitan center in Mexico City. Jalisco, in contrast to the renewed celebration of indigenous and pre-colonial histories in the rest of Mexico, insisted on its traditional (but often imaginary) links to a Spanish aristocracy. Proud of its dubious ethnic purity, the region and especially the capital, Guadalajara, exhibited many provincial misgivings about modern life—an inflated sense of regional genius, bloodline, extreme Catholic devotion and suspiciously overstated gender roles.

To get a glimpse of this provincial enclave after the revolution, the world that formed Chucho Reyes, I've paid a visit to his former disciple and dear friend, the venerated painter Juan Soriano. There's a weightlessness and giddy indulgence to the way he talks of Reyes Ferreira. Soriano's dour good looks and unabashed charm hardly point to his 79 years. In the crispness of his white long-sleeve shirt, he seems a cross between a schoolboy and Latin American tycoon. His animated storytelling becomes its own sophisticated form of seduction.

"Chucho came into a sizable inheritance of antiques and art objects when he was in his early thirties. He worked at an artist supply store in charge of designing the window displays. And he lent his services dressing church altars for special Masses or holidays. If there was a wedding, he'd be commissioned to create the table arrangements and decorations. Soon he became the unofficial fashion consultant to Guadalajara's genteel society, advising women as to what hairstyle best suited them, and how to perfect their posture and diction. Guadalajara was so pretentious: it was about respectable families, very amiable and all, but hypocrites no matter how much they engaged in every kind of depravity. They lived three or four lives at a time; charming perhaps, but they were so invested in a false sense of noblesse, fortunes they never amassed, education they never received. They'd even speak in French without really knowing the language.

"Chucho lived a fairly cautious life with his two sisters—one was tiny, the other incredibly tall—delightful, both of them. They lived on the second story and Chucho lived on the ground floor. The sisters were always there to help entertain. It was marvelous really. The house in Guadalajara—and later the one in Mexico City—was always filled with a sparkling

assembly of people: the best dressed, the most refined. Chucho was never a puritan. I don't know how he managed. There was no tolerance whatsoever, though people did what they wanted, regardless. Anything suspicious minds didn't know got invented, and what they concocted was usually out of some novel—it's no wonder Reyes was fond of Proust.

"Conversations in Guadalajara eternally revolved, still revolve, around who is or isn't the legitimate daughter of so-and-so, and who is or isn't a *puto*, or *invertido*: the socially acceptable term of the time. Guadalajara's like that. It's an obsession. If the police decided two men were huddled a little too close together at a movie house or street corner, they'd come around to badger them. There were also two infamous high-society fags, Gabriel Orendáin and Guillermo Hermosillo—now they got away with a lot! They attended bullfights all dressed in lavender cottons and neckerchiefs. At sports events, even to this day, a famous cheer is called out at their expense, whose English translation might be simplified to the shorthand of 'go g-i-r-r-l-s...!!' And then there's this whole issue of the macho *probado*—that straight guy who keeps having to try it to make sure he doesn't like it. There's a lot of that in Mexico, especially in Guadalajara.

"I was a boy when Reyes took me under his wing. Others—some my age, some older—would drop by to look through the score of magazines he owned. He'd have us make tiny altarpieces or we'd help him paint the patterns for his decorations. There was a small circle of bohemians and artists in Guadalajara. For live drawing class, at a place called La Evolución, we'd take turns posing nude for each other, the women too. Social gatherings involved a great deal of alcohol, and an occasional pinch of cocaine. Two of my sisters were lesbians—a fact transformed by respectable society into a reputation for being sluts. They had friends who were these very erudite women and they'd all meet at our house to read their steamy poetry. Visitors would often leave their cars several blocks away to avoid guilt by association. For a while, Chucho even had a long-term companion named Jorge Palomín—a very distinguished man in Guadalajara, because he and his family had a very lively demeanor and a remarkable gift for language.

"Even so, there was always some sort of persecution or another—as Chucho, unfortunately, later found out. You see, there was this incredibly good-looking young man named Álvaro Matute. He had green eyes—very valuable currency in Guadalajara—but he was a drinker and ne'er-do-well. He'd often pay social calls to Chucho's house, where they'd serve tequila, rum punch or iced hibiscus tea. Visitors were always welcome. I didn't know Álvaro then. But Chucho was spending a great deal of time with him and a group of other young men. One evening, the police arrested Chucho (in his mid-forties at the time), Álvaro, and who knows how many others at a gathering, on trumped-up charges of indecency. They were severely beaten and publicly humiliated." (According to one version, the following day, all those arrested were forced to sweep the streets leading from the precinct to the city jail: a code used to broadcast that the culprits were queer.) "After this humiliation, Chucho left Guadalajara for Mexico City. His sisters saw to selling the house, and when the time came, they too moved to the capital."

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"So you spoke to Juanito, hmm?" David inquires with raised eyebrow. "Reyes was very sweet on him you know." In exchange for some of Soriano's narrative, David fills me in on the story

of Chucho's arrival in the capital.

After staying with friends, Reyes first took up residence in the Hotel de Iturbe, a former palace in the historic center of Mexico City, and within walking distance to the antique shops and flea market of La Lagunilla. At first a single room, then a dozen other adjoining rooms as they became available, these new living quarters were turned into an emporium from which Reyes continued to buy and sell. His flat was filled with furniture, relics, paintings, sculptures, lamps, and other assorted antiques; as well as a cavalcade of hunky young men from Mexico City's slightly more liberal-minded social elite. They came to consort or cruise, and sometimes they lent themselves to posing nude for the maestro. (Soriano: "He liked them young. Sometimes younger.")

His career as a self-taught painter had taken off, thanks to the encouragement of colleague-friends and a fortuitous brush with the cosmetics industry. An antique dealer, Reyes wrapped the smaller objects he sold in tissue paper he painted with spirited patterns and motifs. On a trip to Mexico, Helena Rubenstein discovered this gouache-trimmed paper and, buying Reyes out by the bundle, she began to use them to dress window displays and for wrapping products. Seeing how they would be mounted as artworks in beautiful gold-leaf frames, she began buying more and more of them, and they increased in value. Reyes produced these "sheets" by the hundreds for the remainder of his life: archangels, devils, Christ figures, Adam-and-Eves, clowns, nudes, skeletons, flowers and still lifes; a kind of outsider art produced by a half-sanctioned darling of Mexico City's salon society.

Chucho Reyes wanted a provincial house in the city, one that would resemble his former home in Guadalajara. Having found an 1850 residence on calle Milán in the Juárez district, one of the first things he did was to cover the windowpanes throughout the house with a coat of yellow paint, even carving small openings out of the original shutters that give onto the street and interior courtyard, and building lattice-work doors for them. It cast a very mellow light throughout the house—a sort of Mediterranean glow that blocked the eyesores of the city outside. The house served as a studio until he finally ran out of room at the Hotel de Iturbe.

When his personal dealer, Inés Amor, opened her Galería de Arte Mexicano next door, Reyes finally made the house his permanent address. Visitors included the usual suspects: Frida Kahlo, David Alfaro Siqueiros and Diego Rivera (David Reyes: "I was very small but I remember hiding from him, he was so unsightly"), and also the fearlessly effeminate Salvador Novo, pioneering poet and poof of literary Mexico. I imagine him needling an impeccable and mortified Reyes, still anxious about his possible exclusion from the inner social circles of Mexico City's cultural elite. This might explain, in part, how the house became a celebrated gathering place for the foreign beau monde of Rockefellers and d'Harnoncourts.

A genuine collector is always haunted by the potential reality that out there—somewhere—lies an item other hands will get to first. Reyes religiously read the obituaries and employed a tactic that played on the norms of Mexican hospitality. Having spotted a coveted piece in someone's private home, Reyes would offer to organize a social event or celebration for the household, making arrangements for a wedding, or dressing the church altar for the dearly departed. He'd hear nothing of payment (*jno, no, en absoluto!*) but he couldn't help noticing that rare eighteenth-century crucifix—his face dissolving now—Where on earth had they acquired it?

"He purchased more things than he ever sell," remembers Soriano. "I don't know how many

times he would let the weeks go by without paying the bills, or how many times he was menaced with having the house repossessed. It was something completely irrational; it's why he never got rich. And naturally, the house on Milán began to brim with increasingly more objects until he had to move a whole lot of them outside into the courtyard."

It's this stride between accumulation and purging that determines the personality of the house and its owner. In what David calls the "blue room," light from the courtyard is diffused by a row of cobalt-colored bottles on a window ledge above the French doors that open into a sitting parlor. Around a pair of purple-upholstered Victorian armchairs radiate miniature oil portraits, glass plates, bell jars, a nineteenth-century mahogany escritorio from Puebla, hand-painted glassware from La Granja, Spain, and a table covered with Bristol blueware. (Incidentally, that's an early Soriano on the wall.) Then there's the bathroom Reyes entered by way of a spiral staircase descending from a hatch door in his bedroom. It leads to a veritable Roman spa lined in bare ceramic tiles with scarcely an ornament to speak of: two paintings by Reyes Ferreira himself and a pair of wrought-iron chastity belts.

One side of this split personality had an undeniable influence on architect Luis Barragán, with whom Reyes worked as a professional associate for many years. The use of garrets, ante-rooms and screens; latticework, louvers and color-play to create shifting light; lecterns, mirrored spheres and prominent staircases. "One look at Barragán's residence in Tacubaya and you realize the ideas are all here. It's all informed by Reyes," adds David with more than a shred of possessiveness.

A Catholic puritan at heart (though alleged to have occasionally donned a friar's habit to have sex with female prostitutes), Barragán once referred condescendingly to Reyes as the man who taught him "the difficult art of seeing with innocence." And this, to say nothing of the still unanswered question of who shafted whom on the Satélite Towers and Pedregal, the two final collaborations that ended their friendship. (The elements are there, ripe for psychoanalysis and queer theories alike.) To be sure, Barragán at least filtered much of his elder's sway between pleasure and prohibition into his own achievement, where imposing walls in color and half-light foreground the temporal aspect of space and habitat.

An arbiter of taste, Reyes Ferreira was invariably esteemed for his "infallible aesthetic sensibility." Comfortably situated in metropolitan Mexico, no doubt he was also seen with a certain amount of suspicion. But his patrician bearing and the aristocratic content of the house were challenged, at least in part, by tireless public transactions as he scoured the downtown streets of the city to satisfy his habit. In later years, he began sporting a black beret, owlish poindexter glasses, shoulder-length silver hair and a goatee. Part sybarite, part cleric, today his scant visibility is the fault of a temperament that simply preferred decorum to disclosure.

There's still more to be written about the tenuous relationship between exile and collecting. Scandalously dismissed from the tight hold of provincial life, Reyes Ferreira spent the remainder of his years perhaps too preoccupied with social standing and bienséance. But through his personal aesthetic and public lifestyle, he managed to break down some barriers that persist to this day in Mexico between bourgeois reserve, national purpose and the contradictions of modern life.