

# AUTRE

The Last Living Surrealist: Pedro Friedeberg  
and Ariana Papademetropoulos in conversation

Issue 7: Spring, 2019

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Living Surrealist

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It may take a thousand years of art historical knowledge to understand the work of the last living Surrealist, Pedro Friedeberg. Toiling away in a metaphysical terrain of mental mazes and stairways to nowhere, Friedeberg is on a constant archaeological dig to mine his own vast and dreamlike mise-en-scènes. His work, which spans multiple movements— from painting, to sculpture, to functional objects, and from Judeo-Christian ecclesiastic symbology, to Pop Art, to Neo-Baroque—is evidence of this personal expedition through the Amazon of his unconscious. Born in Florence to German-Jewish parents during Mussolini's dictatorship, his family escaped to Mexico when he was only three years old, where the young Friedeberg liberated himself with the quiet rebellion of his imagination. Through a journeyed life of bohemia, which has included marriages to countesses and mystical affairs, Friedeberg has arrived in the twenty-first century with a sage perspective on a fragmented world. Over the last few years, he has been extremely productive—first, with a solo exhibition at M+B Gallery in Los Angeles in 2017, and later this year, a museum exhibition at MAIA Contemporary in Mexico City during the fall of 2019. In search of answers, we sent Los Angeles-based artist, Ariana Papademetropoulos to Friedeberg's studio in Mexico City to learn more.







ARIANA PAPADEMETROPOULOS

**Papademetropoulos** Your drawings are described as non-fictional, and I feel as if your world is a real world. Where does this place exist?

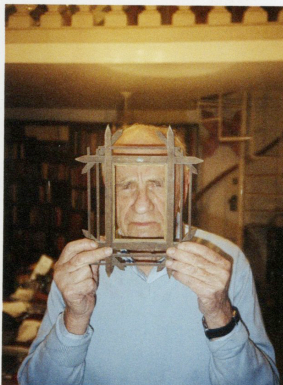
**Friedeberg** Many of them are based on seventeenth-century stage sets, which I love...which nobody looks at anymore. But you find a lot in Italy and Germany, in the old palaces, because people had their own operas and plays so they had stage designers with perspective. For example, there is a city called Vicenza in Italy, and there is a beautiful stage set by Andrea Palladio and it never moves, no matter what; if you played a tragedy, or in a forest, a mountain, or in a palace, it was always the same stage set.

**PAPADEMETROPOULOS** I feel like you combine elements of different religions in your work, for instance Masonry, with the checkered floors and the columns. I am just wondering, since they all exist in harmony within the work, if you believe in what Carl Jung called a "collective unconscious"—that all these religions are connected in some way?

**FRIEDEBERG** Of course, yes. There is a common denominator to everything and everybody. Or at least everything that is worth the trouble. Because most people nowadays are too stupid.

**PAPADEMETROPOULOS** Why is that?

**FRIEDEBERG** They become stupid



because their life has become too comfortable. All they do is press a button and they are on a different planet. They don't have to think anymore. They just watch



television and everything is pre-digested. No one has to think, or create, or wonder. Before, life used to be a fantastic puzzle, now everything is figured out for them. That's why there is so much unrest and people are very unhappy, don't you think? Everyone has a hundred pairs of shoes. Life has lost all its magic for these Millennials and these

young people. It's not their fault, it's like a natural outcome.

**Papademetropoulos** You think this smartphone thing is very bad for creativity? Or wellbeing?

**Friedeberg** No, it's terrible. I don't know how to use it, maybe that's why I hate it. I still write letters by hand. I think art



View from the courtyard of Galeria Casa Diana into the second room exhibiting a permanent collection of Pedro Friedeberg artworks

Pedro Friedeberg  
The Last Living SURREALIST



Blue Butterfly Chair, 2013 Painted wood and gold leaf  
Courtesy of the artist and M+B, Los Angeles





should be created. It should have to do with beauty and intelligence. Now they make a huge fuss—like someone spills a bottle of anything—and they call it Conceptual art. They don't even have names for things.

**Papademetropoulos** Do you think going to art school is absurd in a way? Should artists be in their own realm and figure out their own ideas?

**Friedeberg** I belong to the old-fashioned school. You went to an academy. First, you draw a hand and a foot. And then, the next year, a knee and a nose. And after ten years, you drew a whole body, and you made it beautifully...perfectly. But, people became tired with that, I suppose.

**PAPADEMETROPOULOS** Now it's more about concepts.

**FRIEDEBERG** Art is just a cocktail party...it is just an excuse to have a cocktail party. You can show anything. You can show your baby's diapers and nobody will notice.

**Papademetropoulos** I understand. Your sculptures feel like artifacts—taken from this world you have created.

**Friedeberg** That is because I am in love with the old; the architecture of the past. I used to work a lot with substitutes for Lego. Many years ago, there were not Legos yet. I used to build castles, and palaces, and structures of Surrealist imagination. Castles in Spain!

**PAPADEMETROPOULOS** In a way, I feel like the furniture is alive—in the same way Art Nouveau is alive, or the medieval gargoyles on a church! I am very drawn to this, and am

curious about the way your furniture often features human attributes.

**FRIEDEBERG** The hand was just a joke. It is not really my style. It was the only thing I did having to do with anatomy. Everything else I did was very architectural and very structured. Later, we go and see some.

**PAPADEMETROPOULOS** Would you have wanted to be an architect? I know you went to architecture school.

**Friedeberg** When I started studying architecture, I discovered Gaudi and thought he was the only good architect ever—alive after the Gothic cathedrals, of course. But, nobody wanted to do things like that because people were starting to do very social architecture—poor architecture, where a whole family has to live in a room



IN CONVERSATION  
With Ariana Papademetropoulos





and a half—that kind of architecture. When I was very young, there were no skyscrapers, yet. Now all the cities have skyscrapers, but people are getting bored with the sixty, seventy-story straight line.

**Papademetropoulos** If you could build anything you wanted, like a theme park, or a church, what would it be?

**FRIEDEBERG** It would be like the Cathedral of Milan, maybe bent on one side. I think it's such a pity that all the things from the past have gone to waste.

**Papademetropoulos** Louis Barragán, who was a friend of yours—

**FRIEDEBERG** Louis Barragán...no, he wasn't my friend. He was a friend of my teacher, Mathias Goeritz.

**PAPADEMETROPOULOS** Do you like Louis Barragán's work?

**FRIEDEBERG** No, I hate it.

**PAPADEMETROPOULOS** That makes more sense. I read you were friends, but I thought you weren't a fan of minimalism.

**Friedeberg** I think it's like a hoax. I hate minimalism. I don't like ninety-degree angles. I don't mind them, but I think they are being overused.

**Papademetropoulos** I was wondering what Leonora Carrington was like?

**Friedeberg** She was marvelous. She was so funny, but she had no sense of architecture at all. No, just of monsters, people...animals. A great sense of humor. She was charming in a wonderful way, yes.

**Papademetropoulos** And what about Salvador Dalí? Were you friends?

**FRIEDEBERG** I saw a lot of him in New York. Anybody could visit him in the lobby of the St. Regis. He would sit in the lobby, and people would come and sit with him, and he would talk all the time. He had this wonderful sense of baroque language and it was fascinating.

**Papademetropoulos** You are not necessarily a Surrealist. Do you identify with any particular movement? I feel you are very singular in your work.

**FRIEDEBERG** I think my art is just a

commentary. My art is a pastiche, an eclectic pastiche; a commentary on other people's art. But it is well done, I think. My work is well-executed. I always use a lot of text.

**PAPADEMETROPOULOS** Wow, (sighs) is this a new piece? Is it all hand-done?

**Friedeberg** This is a Mickey number. I did a series of things with Mickey Mouse in them when I lived for three months in Paris. I bought the paper every day and whatever I read that interested me, I would include it here.



**Papademetropoulos** So, what is this?

**Friedeberg** There is a bit of Confucius, something from the sacred Hebrew book, Einstein's Theory of Relativity, and Newton's Binomial. He is explaining it to Felix the Cat.

**PAPADEMETROPOULOS** And this is a realm, here. A room?

**Friedeberg** It could be a room, or a passage. The Labyrinth of Chartres. This is a plan of the Père Lachaise Cemetery. We have all this gossip...and we don't use it. Sacred gossip! [points to devil] People are very

scared of the devil. I love the devil. I mean, the idea of the devil.

**PAPADEMETROPOULOS** Do you believe in the devil?

**FRIEDEBERG** I believe in everything and in nothing. I don't believe in the devil as a man with red horns. Or maybe there are many little men with red horns.

**Papademetropoulos** What do you believe in?

**FRIEDEBERG** Nothing. I am an atheist.

**PAPADEMETROPOULOS** You are an atheist but you believe in all of this.

**FRIEDEBERG** I doubt, a lot.

**PAPADEMETROPOULOS** Do you believe in an afterlife?

**Friedeberg** I believe in killing time.

That is why we have to run and write the alphabet of the deaf mutes, see the provinces of Madagascar, and learn how to cut a beef in pieces to get good steaks and sirloins. Many banal things, and many sacred things.

**PAPADEMETROPOULOS** Do you believe in magic?

**Friedeberg** Yes, everything nice is magic. Everything good is magic. Everything magic is good. Magic shouldn't be bad. Magic is a good word. I believe in poetry—in good music, not rock.

**Papademetropoulos** Do you like Baroque or classical music?

**Friedeberg** Classical music. I love classical music. I read a lot. I have a large library. But I want to show you this. I am really bad at answering questions.

**PAPADEMETROPOULOS** Oh my god, I am just dying in here. It is just the most beautiful thing I have ever seen. It's like a shrine, or temple in here. What if we were this small and we could walk into them?

**FRIEDEBERG** No, I like it to be just fantasy.

**PAPADEMETROPOULOS** I was wondering if you have been to Las Pozas.

**FRIEDEBERG** I went with Edward James once or twice. I designed a house for him that he never built. He had a piece of land in Nayarit and he wanted to build a house. He was a British millionaire who liked



Entrance room at Galeria Casa Diana showcasing a permanent exhibition of Pedro Friedeberg furniture, paintings, sculpture and objects d'art

Pedro Friedeberg



Pink Butterfly Chair, 2012, Painted wood and gold leaf courtesy of the artist and M+B, Los Angeles

IN CONVERSATION





Surrealism, and was the son of the Prince of Wales and Ms. Marshall Fields of Chicago. He was painted by René Magritte. You see the back of his head. In front of a fireplace. And then you see again the back of the head in the mirror, as the reflection. You never see his face.

**PAPADEMETROPOULOS** Oh yes, of course, I didn't realize it was him!

**FRIEDEBERG** This is the drawing of the house I designed for him, with these specifications. He wanted a studio on top like a lotus flower; like an artichoke that would open and close. Closed during the day, and at night it would open, and you could see all the stars.

**Papademetropoulos** That's amazing.

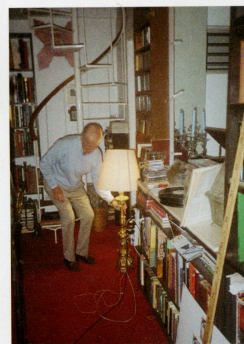
**Friedeberg** And I added some things by his friends who were Carrington, Bridget Bate Tichenor, Remedios Varo, and all the Surrealists. Strangely, all the Surrealist women painters lived in Mexico City. Isn't that funny?

**Papademetropoulos** Of them, who do you feel was under recognized as an artist?

**Friedeberg** [Points to painting] She is not recognized. She should be more recognized, Bridget Tichenor. But that's what happens if you are too rich and glamorous: people don't pay attention to you as an artist.

**PAPADEMETROPOULOS** Why?

**Friedeberg** You have to suffer, and become crazy like Leonora. Or escape



from the Nazis like Remedios Varo. Or live with Picasso for three weeks like Alice Rahon. You have to do one of these three

With Ariana Papademetropoulos

Akhenaten's hand, 2016, Hand carved cedar wood and gold leaf 38 1/4 x 20 x 20 in (97 x 51 x 51 cm) Courtesy of the artist and M+B, Los Angeles





things and then you become recognized. She is just as good as any of those other painters.

**PAPADEMETROPOULOS** But she had a good life?

**Friedeberg** She didn't have an easy life, but she never went crazy. She was very well-centered. Her paintings are worth a lot of money, and like Edward James, she lived out in the country, in Michoacán. As a person, she was tops. She wasn't pretending to be crazy. She was also a model for *Vogue*.

**PAPADEMETROPOULOS** So, she was beautiful, glamorous, talented...

**FRIEDEBERG** Witty, clever...she spoke four languages. She was a wonderful cook and a wonderful painter. And she knew all about agriculture, and keeping animals. She had geese, and pigs, and beautiful gardens. She had been brought up in England. She

was the niece of Queen Victoria. I always thought she was lying, and then I found out it was true!

**PAPADEMETROPOULOS** You have a show coming up at the MAIA Contemporary. What work are you going to show?

**FRIEDEBERG** The usual: a bit of this and that. An assorted menu. And there are all these capricious people involved. Art dealers...they think they know what they want.

**Papademetropoulos** Do you dream a lot?

**FRIEDEBERG** Yes, very much.

**PAPADEMETROPOULOS** What is the last dream you remember?

**Friedeberg** Neither pleasant nor unpleasant. I dream every night from midnight to 1:30—because I fall asleep naturally at midnight. Lately, I've dreamt a lot as if I've had many different mothers. But that isn't interesting.

**Papademetropoulos** I think it's interesting.

**FRIEDEBERG** And then I wake up at 2:00 and take a sleeping pill, so I can sleep some more hours.

**Papademetropoulos** Do you make work every day?

**Friedeberg** I work every day! We can go up and see my studio if you want.

**PAPADEMETROPOULOS** Am I keeping you in any way?

**FRIEDEBERG** No, I like interviews with intelligent people. ☺

