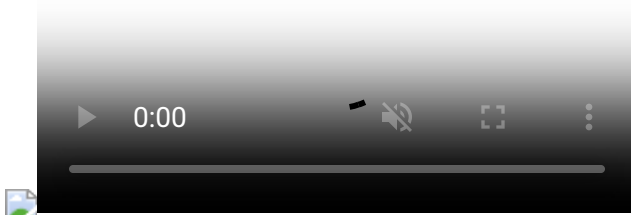


# In Mexico City, a Convent Turned Art Lab Confounds Expectations

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Said Dokins’s installation “Displacements” at the Alameda Art Laboratory features script applied directly to the interior walls.

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**The New York Times**

The Alameda Art Laboratory is housed in a cavernous sacred building dating to 1591, providing a sharp contrast to the technology-driven objects on display.

Said Dokins’s installation “Displacements” at the Alameda Art Laboratory features script applied directly to the interior walls. Credit...

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Photographs and Video by Jake Naughton

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The Alameda Art Laboratory is a museum built on contradictions. Its mission is to show the latest in 21st-century art, but it is housed in one of Mexico City’s oldest structures, a cavernous convent built for Spanish missionaries in 1591. The technology-driven objects on display — digital projections, multichannel videos, immersive sound and light pieces — point toward the future of Mexican culture rather than the colonial past its Baroque architecture evokes.

Image

The interior ceilings of the Alameda Art Laboratory feature architectural details.

The Alameda Art Laboratory is housed in a convent built for Spanish missionaries in 1591.

Image


 The exterior of the Alameda Art Laboratory features yellow walls and a cupola with a large crucifix on top.

The building has a towering cupola topped by a sky-high crucifix that can be seen from blocks away. Some of Mexico's most-respected artists have shown there, stars like [Tania Candiani](#) and [Rafael Lozano-Hemmer](#), and so have international artists known for integrating technology into their work, including Marina Abramovic and Arthur Jafa.

And yet, despite the flashy, sometimes famous fare, the museum does not get the attendance curators say it deserves. The laboratory has struggled to draw locals and tourists alike — another irony considering it sits across the street from one of the country's most popular sightseeing spots, the sprawling urban park known as Alameda Central, home to the grand Palace of Fine Arts.

No doubt the cutting-edge art can be confounding, but so can the museum's setup in the massive convent, a monumental piece of the city's architectural history, with a towering cupola topped by a sky-high crucifix that can be seen from blocks away.

"Our biggest challenge is that it does not look like a museum, it looks like a church," said the director, Xavier de la Riva, during a recent tour. "The people walking by always come in and ask, 'Can we see the church?'"


Image  Fabiola Talavera wearing a blue top and dark pants stands next to a wall.

Fabiola Talavera is the lead curator at the Alameda Art Laboratory.

De la Riva started his job in January and, working with the new lead curator, Fabiola Talavera, is devising ways to draw more visitors to the site, one of 15 venues in the city operated by the National Institute of Fine Arts and Literature. But creating programming that fits the repurposed structure has been a daunting task ever since 2000 when, after a few other incarnations, it became the art laboratory.


One challenge: The place is enormous, designed for an age when sacred buildings were meant to evoke the power and majesty of the Catholic Church. The floors of the exhibition space stretch 16,000 square feet, and the ceilings top out at 62 feet. That means a single exhibition room can have the equivalent height of a six-story building. Any art on display has to be "spectacular," as de la Riva put it, to get noticed.

Image

 Pots are stacked in a work of art on a wood floor next to concrete columns.

Exhibitions, such as, Ana Hernández's "Broken Hand," are displayed in areas with architectural details like columns and archways.

Image

 Doors with elaborate wood carvings and stained glass.

The building is filled with wood carvings and stained glass.

While the building has been stripped of many religious elements internally — there is no central altar or pews — there are built-in details to contend with, like arched doorways, concrete columns and billboard-size murals on the walls and ceilings.

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For curators with present-day art on their minds, there is also the psychological baggage that comes with more than four centuries of history — some of it shocking. During the Spanish Inquisition, the Convent of San Diego, as it was known, was a site in Mexico City where accused heretics were burned alive for their sins. That role lasted well into the 18th century.

Multiple curatorial strategies have been tried, and many of them have been artistic successes, even if they did not always bring large crowds. The museum has exhibited well-known Mexican artists like Helen Escobedo, who died in 2010, and groundbreaking newcomers like the collective [MUXX Project](#), which uses 3-D technology to explore gender identity. And the laboratory has a global outlook, with recent shows featuring the French sound artist [Félix Blume](#), the Spanish performance artist [Dora Garcia](#) and the video maker [Dor Guez](#), who was born in Jerusalem into a Palestinian family from Lydda and Jewish immigrants from North Africa.

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Still, there has always been a tension between the work and the setting. Visitors, offered a helping of impressive architecture and progressive art, can be confused by the juxtaposition.

For the new curatorial team, the solution has been to embrace the building and create shows that respect both its checkered past and its unique role in the city's evolving, urban landscape.

"There is no hiding it, really, all of the history and symbolic things that happened here," Talavera said. "We can't do that."

Three current exhibitions, all continuing through Oct. 26, hint at an evolved curatorial direction, which leans more populist while sticking firmly to the technology-meets-art idea.

Image



A room cast in a bluish light with abstract typography on the walls with some concentric circles with smaller video screens on the floor.

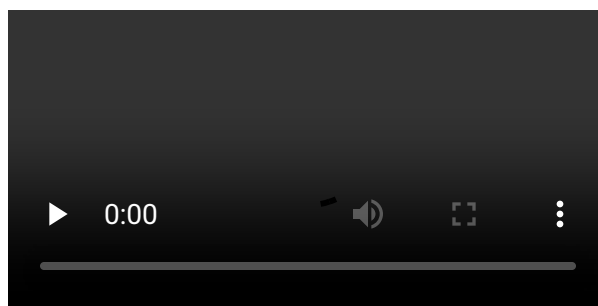
Dokins's abstract calligraphy in "Displacements" is visible under ultraviolet light.

The main gallery space features [Said Dokins](#)'s installation "Displacements." Dokins, a well-known graffiti writer in Mexico City, has covered scores of outdoor spaces with his trademark abstract calligraphy, expressed through marks that resemble alphabetic letters.

De la Riva invited him to bring his work off the street and inside the museum. Dokins applied his script directly to interior walls using paint visible under ultraviolet light. Spotlights projected on the walls illuminate the entire room in an ethereal, pulsating blue hue. The work — modern-day murals to complement the existing ones — is colossal, 30 feet tall and 200 feet wide.

Talavera curated another exhibition at the museum, titled "Broken Hand," by the Oaxacan artist [Ana Hernández](#).

Video



Hernández's exhibition "Broken Hand" includes a work of ceramic pots in a five-level pyramid reaching about 12 feet high.

Her work challenges the basic concept of technology, which most often refers to recent inventions or advancements. Instead, she touts old tech, focusing on ceramic pots, handmade from clay and used domestically as ovens for generations on the Isthmus of Tehuantepec, where she lives. For one piece, Hernández arranged the reddish pots into a five-level pyramid reaching about 12 feet high. Some pots are filled with corn, others are covered in local materials like beeswax or gold.

For a video titled “The Promise,” Hernández knelt inside one of the pots and allowed herself to be covered entirely in corn, kernel by kernel, which drops from above. She is nearly suffocated by it. The piece speaks to the way a material can be sustaining but also threatening if it is not managed well or is used to exploit people or the planet.

Image



A person stands below a large mural next to a scale model of an archaeological site. Deborah Castillo’s “Great Basement” includes a scale model of the Cuicuilco Pyramid, an archaeological site in a section of Mexico City called Tlalpan. In the background is Federico Cantú’s mural “The Informants of Sahagún” (1948).

The third exhibition references the convent’s own transition from a religious institution to a secular place where different voices and viewpoints are allowed to be expressed. “Great Basement” by [Deborah Castillo](#), who was born in Venezuela and now lives in Mexico, is centered on a scale model of the [Cuicuilco Pyramid](#), an archaeological site in a section of Mexico City called Tlalpan.

Working with a guest curator, Jesús Torrivilla, Castillo envisioned the pyramid as a new level of civilization rising on top of the existing one, similar to how Spanish colonists covered important Indigenous sites with their own churches and monasteries.

The pyramid is essentially a stage for performances of a site-specific opera, written by the composer Lanza, which reinterprets a convent mural painted by the Mexican artist Federico Cantú that depicts a scene from the Inquisition.

The pyramid stage has also been opened up to the public for special events, including an open mic night and poetry readings.

For the museum’s leaders, those D.I.Y. happenings enhance their own plans to make locals and tourists see the building as more than an old church. They want to lessen the contradictions that have confused potential visitors while building on 25 years of curatorial rigor.

That strategy is not just about producing more exhibits that make sense, but also meeting people where they are. The curators recently invited in a sonidero, a type of D.J. that plays at Mexico City street parties, and hundreds of people showed up.

The art will still be showy, they said, but there will be bit more context for visitors.

“It’s not that spectacular art is wrong. It’s a good entrance way to art,” de la Riva said. “But we have to make the museum more accessible, too.”