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13th FEMSA Biennial: We Were Never Contemporary

This year's edition of the FEMSA Biennial takes place in Zacatecas and reflects on the craft and industrial traditions of the Mexican city



Since 2016, the FEMSA Biennial has been itinerant, a decentralized approach inspired by European international exhibitions such as Manifesta. Its 13th edition, curated by Willy Kautz, takes place in Zacatecas, a mid-sized city north of the central Mexican altiplano. Titled 'Nunca Fuimos Contemporáneos' (We Were Never Contemporary), the biennial critiques the very notion of 'contemporary' in relation to the city's history, with its rich colonial past and powerful mining industry.

A number of commissioned artworks, made in collaboration with local workshops, reflect on the craft and industrial traditions of Zacatecas, though often too literally. Works by some of the most promising young artists in the biennial are sometimes reduced to ham-fisted references. For example, in the imposing Museo Rafael Coronel, a rehabilitated monastery partially consumed by vegetation, an installation of stone, wood and found-object assemblages by Ricardo Alcalde, Plinio Ávila and Iván Krossolevich, many of them shaped like columns, overemphasizes their material similarities, making them seem as though they had been produced by the same artist. Similarly, geometric sculptures and textiles by Javier Hinojosa and Felipe Mujica – placed in the collections of the Museo Pedro Coronel and the Museo Felguerez, respectively – almost camouflage in those institutions' mostly abstract collections. One 'erection' stands out from this bunch: *Albarrada* (Wall, 2018), a series of seven adobe walls that artist Antonio Bravo has constructed atop the Cerro de la Bufa, a hill dedicated to various heroes of the Mexican Revolution. Bravo's 'memorial' is dedicated to the Chichimec warriors who fought the Spanish conquistadors during the Mixtón War of 1540–42, and whose memory is rarely acknowledged in public record. According to the artist, while the walls were being fabricated, locals accused the raw adobe of 'dirtying' the patrimonial site, exemplifying the persistent divergences between official and indigenous versions of Mexican history.



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Ricardo Alcalde, *Estado inconsciente*, 1967. Courtesy: the artist and XIII Bienal FEMSA

It's mostly work by the biennial's women artists that stands out, perhaps for being less indebted to a history from which they have historically been excluded. Guadalajara-based sculptor Cynthia Gutierrez comments wryly on the symbols of patriarchy by replicating the stone pedestals of three local monuments and partially submerging them in the lawn of the Museo Rafael Coronel (*Rumores de piedra*, *Murmurs of Stone*, 2018). In Naomi Rincón Gallardo's three-channel video *Sangre pesada* (*Heavy Blood*, 2018), at the Museo Pedro Coronel, a group of rock musicians escape from the harsh economic realities of Zacatecas by donning masks and street wear and setting out into the foothills, where they soliloquy into the microphone or smoke nonchalantly at the entrance to a mine. At the Museo Zacatecano, Chantal Peñaloza's installation *Los otros días* (*The Other Days*, 2018) comprises several small plaster sculptures of kittens, puppies and ducklings, facsimiles of which the artist has installed in abandoned houses around Zacatecas and captured in an accompanying video. The cute tchotchkes, which resemble internet Lolcats, evoke the ongoing millennial exodus from rural Mexico to Zacatecas and other urban centres.



Luis Carrera Maul, *El Estado de las Cosas*, 2018. Courtesy: the artist and XIII Bienal FEMSA

Ultimately, though, the subtlest critique is the most effective. At the Museo Guadalupe, a former Franciscan mission with an impressive collection of colonial art, Fabiola Torres Alzaga's *Telón de fondo* (*Backdrop*, 2018) recalls the baroque conventions popular in colonial-era art while eschewing its ornamental air. Shot at a local theatre, the double channel video depicts a pair of heavy red curtains sweeping balletically across an empty stage, as machinery jingles in the background and ghostly lights illuminate the empty seats. As with Bravo's derisory adobe walls, Torres Alzaga suggests that the lasting cultural power of colonialism is its ability to affect perception, rather than to construct a fixed set of subjects – much like the scenography of a play. Such interventions confirm the capacity of the biennial – and of art – to undermine the reactionary politics that continue to govern provincial Mexico and much of the world.

[FEMSA Biennial XIII runs at various venues in Zacatecas, Mexico, until 9 February 2019.](#)



Main image: Naomi Rincón Gallardo, *Sangre pesada*, 2018, video. Courtesy: the artist and XIII Bienal FEMSA

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