

# The Nine Women Leading Mexico's Cultural Renaissance on the World Stage

[wmagazine.com/story/women-artists-designers-chefs-creatives-mexico](http://wmagazine.com/story/women-artists-designers-chefs-creatives-mexico)



Armand Limnander

December 5, 2018 8:00 am

Photograph by Stefan Ruiz; Styled by Gianluca Longo.

In 2002, the Mexican photographer Daniela Rossell published *Ricas y Famosas*, a book of portraits she had taken between 1994 and 2001. As the title makes clear, it focused on the unabashedly rich and famous women who were part of Mexico's ruling class and who seemed to consider conspicuous consumption their life's work. One lady lounged provocatively on the lap of a giant decorative Buddha, the base of which was accessorized with a profusion of Champagne bottles - nestled in ice; several others—who evidently shared a passion for door-knocker-size jewelry, leonine coiffures, and formfitting animal-print ensembles—posed in gilded, stadiumlike rooms filled with enough big-game taxidermy to rival the American Museum of Natural History.

Nearly two decades later, the book—a powerful documentation of pre-social media one-upmanship—shows its age. It's not that Mexico has suddenly become egalitarian; quite the contrary, social inequality remains a huge and seemingly intractable problem. But nowadays, indolence is hardly something to aspire to, and a reflexive attraction to all things moneyed and

foreign is no longer cool. As the country becomes an increasingly important player in the global arena, creating and exporting culture has become a far more rewarding pursuit than blindly adopting or imitating status signifiers from abroad.

Mexico's cultural resurgence has been happening slowly but surely, without unnecessary fanfare. Did you realize, for instance, that Mexican filmmakers have won four of the past five Academy Awards for directing? Alfonso Cuarón got the nod in 2014 for *Gravity*, followed by Alejandro Iñárritu in 2015 and 2016 for *Birdman* and *The Revenant*, respectively. Then, in 2018, Guillermo del Toro] (<https://www.wmagazine.com/story/behind-the-scenes-of-crimson-peak>) took home the Oscar for *The Shape of Water*. This year, Cuarón is already being touted once again as a serious contender with *Roma*, his sweeping, ambitious re-creation of his childhood in the Roma neighborhood of Mexico City during the early 1970s, as seen from the vantage point of Cleo, a housekeeper. And while Mexico has always been a regional powerhouse in television thanks to its tearjerker telenovelas, a new generation is refreshing the genre in a self-referential, humorous way that turns clichés on their head. Netflix's *The House of Flowers*, a huge hit in Spain and Latin America that is now catching on in the United States, is a good example. Tune in if you'd like to learn, for example, how to hide a funeral for your father's mistress, who ran a drag bar and hanged herself in your mother's flower shop, leaving behind a young daughter and a letter revealing all of your family secrets.

## Watch

---

### New York Fashion Week: The Money Shot

---

Mexico City chefs, too, are spicing up the international gastronomic scene. Enrique Olvera got the ball rolling with Pujol, his temple to fine dining, which riffs on Mexico's rich cultural history with dishes that include everything from reinvented street snacks to a traditional mole sauce that is reconstituted and reheated indefinitely to deepen its flavor. Ranked among the best restaurants in the world, Pujol spawned Cosme and Atla in New York, just as Contramar, Gabriela Cámara's seafood emporium, gave way to Cala in San Francisco. And, as any foodie will tell you, new restaurants pop up seemingly every week in Mexico City, staking their own claim on regional specialties. One of the most interesting is Máximo Bistrot, helmed by Eduardo "Lalo" García, who grew up in the United States, the son of undocumented laborers. As a young adult, García worked in a couple of high-end restaurants in Atlanta, where he would have likely stayed had the American government not deported him. Our loss.

Cultural arbiters are also looking to Mexico for new ideas. This year, the architect Frida Escobedo, whose practice focuses on socially transformative spaces, was asked to design the prestigious Serpentine Pavilion, in London; she is the youngest architect ever to do so, and the second solo woman, after Zaha Hadid. Zonamaco, founded by Zélika García in 2002, is now Latin America's leading art-and-design fair, drawing more than 170 international galleries and 60,000 visitors every year. The fact that it attracts not just local but also American and European collectors is proof of Mexico City's growing cosmopolitanism—as is the steady growth of galleries such as OMR, House of Gaga, and Kurimanzutto, which recently opened an outpost in New York. Artists themselves are also increasingly drawn to the megalopolis's creative energy, and not just as visitors—Danh Vo, an art world darling who could live anywhere, chose to restore a house there.

An essential—and sometimes overlooked—factor in Mexico's current cultural renaissance is the increasingly important and visible role that women are playing in pretty much every field. It's easy to forget that this wasn't the case not too long ago: There is a scene in *Roma* in which Sofia, a mother of three whose husband has left and who is struggling to keep her family and finances afloat, poignantly says that women should never forget that, when push comes to shove, they are always alone. The influential ladies in the following pages—many of whom know each other, and all of whom certainly know of each other—prove that this is not the case anymore. They are all doing their own thing, and are in no way interested in the flashy *Ricas y Famosas* tropes of the turn of the millennium. Instead, their focus is on bringing forth the best of a modern, forward-looking Mexico to the rest of the world—and they have a lot to show for it.

## Carla Fernández

---





Carla Fernández, in the house she and her husband designed in the Coyoacán neighborhood, wears a top from her namesake line; Salvatore Ferragamo skirt; her own boots.

Since she started her namesake line 12 years ago, the fashion designer Carla Fernández, 45, has been celebrated for her sophisticated, avant-garde clothes—and for the fact that they are manufactured in collaboration with indigenous communities in order to support centuries-old traditions of handicraft. But this December, she and her husband, the artist and architect Pedro Reyes, are being recognized jointly, with the Design Miami Visionary Award, at Art Basel Miami Beach. As a result, the couple is designing two pavilions and an exhibition at the entrance to the fair, where they are displaying two giant steel dolls with multiple arms, which allude to migrants and their myriad occupations, plus a giant fabric map of the Americas that Fernández and Reyes created—except that instead of national borders, it charts all the indigenous communities who arrived in pre-Columbian times. Fabrics printed with the map will be used for garments that Fernández will sell inside the fair; the proceeds will go to an organization that helps reunite migrant children separated from their families at the Mexico-U.S. border. (Reyes, for his part, will show furniture

inspired by traditional Mexican design.) "We want to get across the idea that this America that some people are claiming as theirs has, in fact, been populated by many other peoples," Fernández says. "Human beings have always moved around."

## Tatiana Bilbao

---





Tatiana Bilbao, on the terrace of her studio on Paseo de la Reforma, wears an Akris coat, shirt, and pants; Jimmy Choo pumps. The wooden structure was part of an installation she designed for a museum show.

Photograph by Stefan Ruiz; Styled by Gianluca Longo.



The architect Tatiana Bilbao is a visiting professor at Yale, has received numerous international prizes and accolades, designed splashy, critically acclaimed buildings like the pavilion for temporary exhibitions at the Jinhua Architecture Park in China, and will present a survey of her work next year at the Louisiana Museum of Modern Art, in Denmark. And yet her concerns are not those of the typical starchitect. Following her long-standing interest in how architecture can impact social development, Bilbao, 46, took a “dream job” straight out of college at Mexico City’s Office for Urban and Housing Development—only to realize, after two years, that “it was exactly the opposite of what I wanted,” she says. “You are always responding to conflicting economic and political interests.” So she left to set up her own shop with two friends from school, before going out on her own in 2004. These days, Bilbao is juggling an assortment of projects all over the world—a museum in Spain, an aquarium in Mexico, a monastery in Germany—but her first interest is still “addressing our most basic necessity, which is housing.” Working with the Mexican government, she designed a low-income family house that costs just \$8,000 to build. “It’s 650 square feet, but I made it double height,” Bilbao says. “It took me four years to make it work, but it was very important for me.”

## Andrea Wild Botero

---



Mom-to-be Andrea Wild Botero, at home in her Colonia Roma apartment, wears a Fendi dress; her own jewelry. The sculpture to her left is by her grandmother Sophia Vari.

Photograph by Stefan Ruiz; Styled by Gianluca Longo.

To say that Andrea Wild Botero is an art world insider is like saying that Eskimos know ice. Her grandfather is the Colombian artist [Fernando Botero](#), and her grandmother the Greek sculptor Sophia Vari; at just 31, she has worked for galleries as diverse as Acquavella in New York, Blain/Southern in London, and Gmurzynska in Zurich. Born in Colombia, Wild Botero lived in Mexico City between the ages of 3 and 18, when she left to study art in New York and London. She returned three years ago and found a bustling contemporary art market, spurred by major collectors like Eugenio López, who opened the David Chipperfield–designed Museo Jumex in 2013. After working for the [Museo Tamayo](#) for a year and a half, Wild Botero started Artemisia, a company specializing in direct sales between collectors. “It’s something that’s very established in the United States and Europe, but it was missing in Mexico,” Wild Botero says. “If you wanted to sell an important piece, you had to send it to [Christie’s](#) or [Sotheby’s](#) in New York.” Additionally, she

plans to bring big-name exhibitions to Mexico, like the one she recently produced for the artist Sean Scully. "There is a boom happening here, and it's not just about the top tier of the art world. There is a whole new group of people who want to learn more about art."

## Karla Martinez de Salas

---





Karla Martinez de Salas, at home in San Miguel Chapultepec, wears a Dior sweater and skirt; Daniela Bustos Maya earrings. Behind her is an artwork by the artist Eduardo Sarabia.

Photograph by Stefan Ruiz; Styled by Gianluca Longo.

When Karla Martinez de Salas, 41, left a job at this magazine to become the editor in chief of *Vogue México*, she wasn't sure what to expect. She had grown up visiting family south of the border, but had lived in the United States her entire life; Mexico City, with its 20 million inhabitants, seemed like a tough nut to crack. Three years later, she has become a cornerstone for the city's cultural class, building networks for all kinds of creatives. "Things are changing here very quickly," says Martinez de Salas, pointing out that virtually every high-fashion brand now has an outpost—or, in some cases, seven or eight—in Mexico. "We don't need to travel anymore to find those labels—and now other Latin Americans come here to shop." *Vogue México* holds a yearly contest to promote emerging fashion designers, such as Cynthia Buttenklepper and Daniela Cassab, and Martinez de Salas has noticed that people are more willing than ever to support local talents in every field. "The best restaurants are all about Mexican food, and the most interesting interiors are furnished by Mexican designers." Martinez de Salas has taken a similar approach with *Vogue México*, which turns 20 next year. "For a long time, it was seen as mostly a syndication magazine, bringing content from abroad," she says. "Now, there is enough happening here to make it much more local."

## Olympia de la Macorra

---







Olympia de la Macorra, holding her dog, Crosby, wears a Louis Vuitton top and shorts; Gala Is Love Fine Jewelry earrings; Golden Goose Deluxe Brand sneakers. The indoor tree, she says, was the size of a houseplant when she began work on her home, eight years ago.

Photograph by Stefan Ruiz; Styled by Gianluca Longo.

"At the beginning, all we sold was punk rock apparel and Chanel—people thought we were insane," says Olympia de la Macorra of Void, the vintage fashion store she runs with her business partner, Salvador Sahagún, in Condesa. Eventually, de la Macorra expanded Void's repertoire to include French and American work wear, Japanese *boro* patchwork pieces from the 19th and early 20th centuries, and ladylike classics like Birkin bags. "We evolved, but the store still has the duality of something very raw and super classic," she says. De la Macorra, 26, dropped out of fashion-business studies at Parsons, in New York, to open Void, but her style education had begun pretty much at birth: Her grandmother has donated part of her impressive wardrobe to museums, and her mother is a fixture at couture houses. Ironically, de la Macorra points out, they would never consider buying used clothing, no matter its pedigree. "Fortunately, younger people understand what we're doing, and Void has also become a destination for foreigners visiting the city." (Just a couple of recent

https://www.wmagazine.com/sto/Art/When-artists-design-Albums-Debut-mexico-void-open-vintage-fashion-and-advocate-albany-besides-fashion, de la Macorra is obsessed with vintage

furniture and horticulture—"my father is a landscape designer, and all my tattoos are of plants"—and she is already mulling additional ventures. "People are calling Mexico City the new Berlin," she says. "And I want to take advantage of that."

## Gabriela Ruíz

---



Gabriela Ruíz, at Carmela & Sal, her restaurant in Lomas de Chapultepec, wears an Alberta Ferretti dress; Caralarga earrings; Manolo Blahnik shoes.

Photograph by Stefan Ruiz; Styled by Gianluca Longo.



"I wanted to know why everyone loves Mexican food so much, so I asked a neuroscientist," says Gabriela Ruíz, chef of Carmela & Sal, the acclaimed restaurant she opened about a year ago. The answer: spiciness, which generates dopamine and endorphins, mimicking adrenaline, plus acidity, which increases salivary production, creating a lasting impression of tastiness in your brain—or something along those lines. In any case, you don't need a Ph.D. to ascertain that Ruíz's "citric lamb" or "lying tostadas," which taste like crab or pork even though they're actually made of coconut, are out of this world. (The tostadas even became a source of inspiration for the Noma chef René Redzepi, Ruíz's idol when she was starting out.) Ruíz, 31, was born in a small town in the state of Tabasco and was terrified about moving to Mexico City, with its hustle and bustle. It's a good thing she got used to it, as plans are already in the works for her to open a restaurant in New York sometime next year. Also coming up: a 10-part television series in which Ruíz "cooks" songs. "I have synesthesia, which is a condition in which the senses are interconnected," she explains. Listening to a song can make her feel the taste of coffee, chocolate, or citrus, for example; she then composes those flavors into a dish. "When I was a child," Ruíz recalls, "being with my best friend tasted like milk with aniseed."

## Ilse Salas

---





Ilse Salas, on the street where she lives in Coyoacán, wears an Hermès sweater and skirt; Anndra Neen earrings; Valentino Garavani boots.

Photograph by Stefan Ruiz; Styled by Gianluca Longo.

"Over the past 10 years or so, Mexican films have been having more of an impact internationally," says the actress Ilse Salas, 37, who just happens to be in two such movies released this year. *Museo*, with Gael García Bernal, which was directed by Salas's husband, Alonso Ruizpalacios, tells the story of a famous heist of priceless artifacts at the National Museum of Anthropology, in Mexico City, in 1985; *Las Niñas Bien*, based on a book by the same name, chronicles the vacuous lives of a set of ultrawealthy women in the early 1980s, as a massive financial crisis upends their gilded world. Salas has been a fixture in Mexico's cultural scene for two decades—she started out hosting a children's television show, and consciously makes a point of working in film, TV, and theater. Her next project is the Netflix anthology series *Historia de un Crimen*, based on the murder of the Mexican politician Luis Donaldo Colosio, in 1994. Despite her growing international profile—or perhaps precisely because of it—Salas feels a strong commitment to her country. She is deeply involved with El Grito Más Fuerte ("the loudest scream"), a nonpartisan collective striving for greater inclusivity in politics and the arts. "There is a lot of official support in Mexico for folklore and traditional festivals," Salas says. "But we need to be open to different voices and definitions of culture."



## Pia Camil





Pia Camil, outside her home in the Anzures neighborhood, wears a Miu Miu shirt and skirt; Valentino Garavani shoes. She made the colorful sculptures behind her.

Photograph by Stefan Ruiz; Styled by Gianluca Longo.

Around the time when Donald Trump was elected president, the artist Pia Camil, 38, started working on one of the enormous textile pieces that have become emblematic of her practice. It was made of hundreds of T-shirts sewn together, allowing for people to stick their heads through the collars. The T-shirts had all been made in maquiladoras—American-owned factories in Mexico that use low-cost labor and export their product to the U.S. without paying taxes. Surplus T-shirts are often smuggled back into Mexico and sold in unsanctioned secondhand markets. “It’s important to call attention to the problems associated with how these items are created and consumed,” Camil says. Although she focused on painting while studying at Rhode Island School of Design and the Slade School of Fine Art, in London, and has done sculpture and performance, her work now, she says, revolves around the idea of audience participation. At New York’s New Museum, in 2016, she created a barter market in which visitors could exchange meaningful objects. At the Frieze New York art fair a year prior, Camil set up a stand to give away a series of ponchos she had made—soon, people were trying to purchase the garments outright, or offering bribes to cut in line. “It was a positive experience, because it generated so much interest and contact with the public,” Camil says. “But at the same time, it starkly showed the market side of the art world, and its power struggle.”

## Bettina Kiehle

---



Bettina Kiehnle, at home in her Colonia Roma apartment, wears a Givenchy dress; Varon bracelets; Gucci shoes. The sofa is her own design, and the table, with objects designed to evoke a cityscape, is by Tezontle.

Photograph by Stefan Ruiz; Styled by Gianluca Longo. Hair by Manuel Oliva; Makeup by Ana G de V; Fashion Assistant: Dan Gleason.

Bettina Kiehnle doesn't just take her work home—she lives with it. This past August, the 30-year-old opened IMA, a gallery-showroom-store for art and design that just happens to be in her apartment. "I found the word '*ima*' in a book of Japanese design—it's a concept that places emphasis on temporariness rather than on permanence," Kiehnle says. "But then a friend pointed out that it could also stand for 'In My Apartment.' " Kiehnle had planned to become a journalist but got hooked on design while studying communications in London and Los Angeles. "I spent all my free time in galleries," she says. After discovering the work of the Danish design firm Framma, Kiehnle hightailed it to Copenhagen and struck up a friendship with its founder, Niels Strøyer Christophersen. When she moved back to Mexico, she convinced Christophersen to give her exclusive representation of Framma; she also developed a partnership with Peana, a gallery that provides the art she shows at IMA, in addition to local on-the-rise designers like the sculpting duo Tezontle. Despite her lack of formal training, Kiehnle is also experimenting with design herself. She's



already created a minimalist, Japanese-inspired sofa and plans to turn IMA into a creative hub, hosting dinners, book launches, and other events. "I want it to feel like a salon, but in a very personal way," she says. "After all, it's still my home."