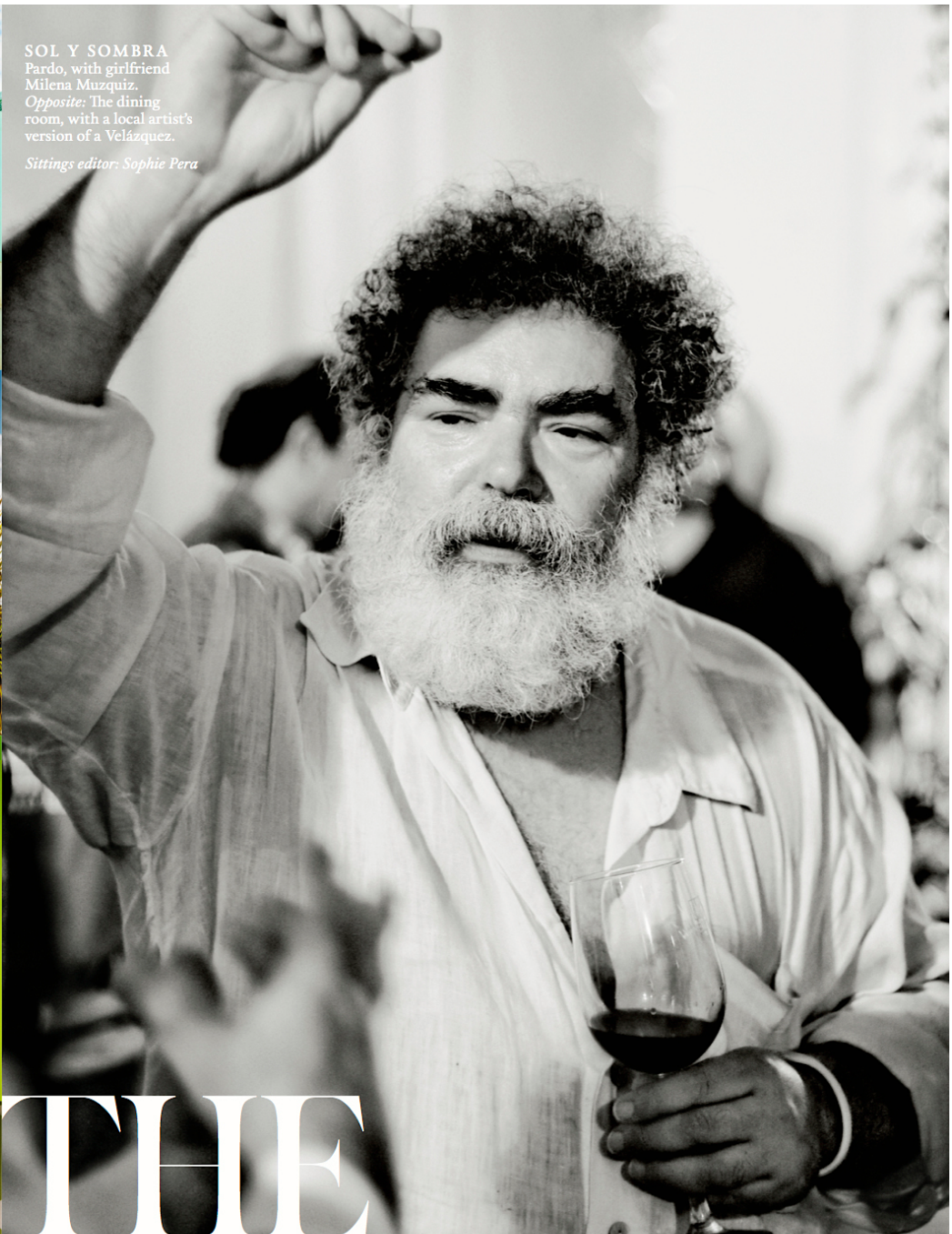
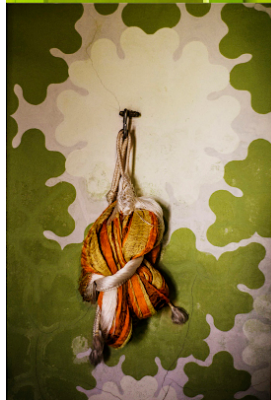
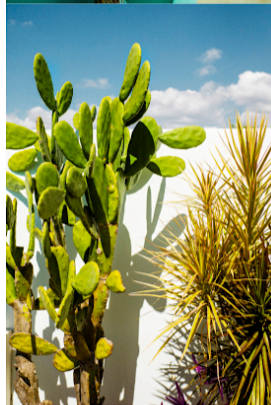


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SOL Y SOMBRA
Pardo, with girlfriend
Milena Muzquiz.
Opposite: The dining
room, with a local artist's
version of a Velázquez.
Sittings editor: Sophie Pera

THE
MAYAN

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Jorge Pardo is a Cuban-American artist who turns homes into art. Here, he opens the doors of his newest creation, his jewel box of a getaway in the colonial Yucatán city of Mérida.

By JEREMIAH TOWER
Photographs by JEAN FRANCOIS CAMPOS

MODERNIST

APRIL 2014 | 123

Petzel

Jeremiah Tower, "The Mayan Modernist," *Town and Country Magazine*, April 2014, pp. 122-127.

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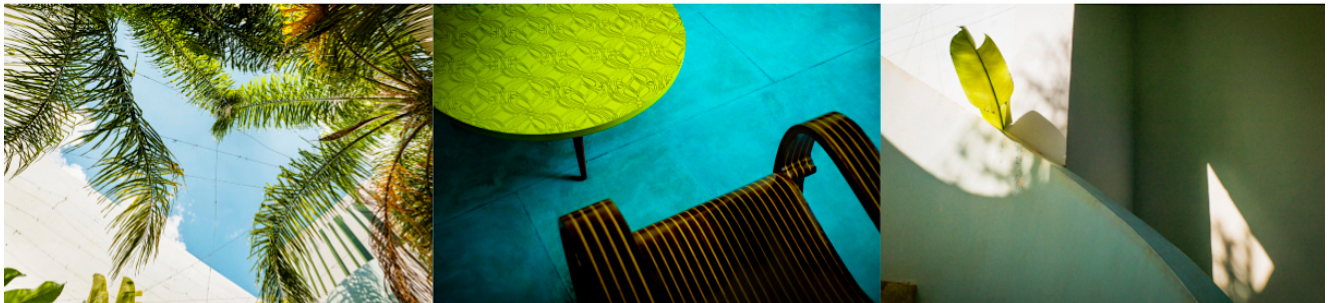
HEN JORGE PARDO AND I first met, I had a glass of Moët & Chandon in one hand and a five-pound octopus in the other. As he came over to me with a glass of his own to ask me what was for dinner, I slid the animal back into its poaching broth. We were both guests at an old colonial house in Mérida, Mexico, that Pardo—a Cuban-American artist who in 2010 won a MacArthur "genius" award that recognized the ease with which his work moves among sculpture, architecture, painting, and design—had just completely reworked for his longtime friends the Reyeses. César Reyes, a psychiatrist, and his wife Mima are avid art collectors who commissioned Pardo to redo their homes in Puerto Rico and Mérida. Jorge and I often speak about how things are made, and that night we talked about how the ingredients of a house for him are like items at a food market for me—the bits and pieces that make up a meal. As we drank the champagne I felt the powerful lust for fun and life that emanates from his presence. We agreed that a house can be a banquet, a sensibility that extends from the walls to the food on the table. Then we admired the matching colors of his pants and the steaming octopus that I had just pulled out of the pot.

We have met many times since, cooking and drinking together, just as we are tonight at a pig roast at his own home. His recently completed three-bedroom place in Mérida, the capital city of the Yucatán, may look small, but there are plenty of places to escape. Every time I enter the house I marvel at the way Jorge has turned arriving here into an adventure full of revelations, like the huge copy of Velázquez's *Las Meninas* in the whimsically stenciled dining room or the traditional Spanish "carpet" on the floor—ornately patterned polished cement tiles. Jorge has surrounded that tile carpet with a border of terra-cotta—orange and lime-yellow, and it all seems classically familiar until you look up and fall under the spell of the patterns thrown onto

the walls by the light fixtures overhead. It's just one step from there to the courtyard, with its aquamarine cement floor and blue pool, which makes me think I might be in a house by Tadeo Ando, Jorge's favorite small house architect. By this point I feel as if I'm entering another world, or walking into a work of art.

ARRIVE A BIT AHEAD OF THE OTHER guests, and Jorge is standing over two pigs, one in a covered barbecue, the other on an open grill, both also tended by several Mayan women cooks. The suckling pig in the Big Green Egg is almost done, but Jorge and I sneak a morsel of fat from the belly of the other one and decide it needs more time. "Sweet," he says. "Sweet. You know, these are a cross between the Spanish *pata negra* and the local wild boar. The skin on the bigger ones can be a bit rubbery, but the skin of these young ones that they call *pelón*"—Spanish for "bald"—"is the best." While a young Mayan man at the kitchen counter starts squeezing limes by hand for margaritas, and the fragrance fills the air, the guests start arriving: a troupe of restaurant-owning chefs from Barcelona (Albert Adrià, of Tickets, the younger brother of Ferran Adrià, of El Bulli fame), Copenhagen (Matt Orlando, of Amass), Chicago (Curtis Duffy, of Grace), and various parts of Mexico (Benito Molina, of Manzanilla in Ensenada; Guillermo González Beristáin, of Pan-gaia in Monterrey; Elena Reygadas, of Rosetta in Mexico City; and their ringleader, Roberto Solís, of Mérida's Nectar).

As the cooking aromas swirl around the courtyard, I point out the reflection of the kitchen light fixtures, which form swaying, silky white curtains on the cream concrete walls. The comments of the chefs—"Must do that," "Just smell those limes," "This place is like a party," "Can't believe Jorge is doing this all himself"—mix with the crackling sounds as we all watch Jorge flip the 15-pound



GREEN REVOLUTION Pardo's three-bedroom home in the heart of the colonial district of Mérida is filled with bright open space and cool and colorful places to escape the tropical sun.

Petzel

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Petzel

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pig onto its back to crisp the skin. After the first pig is cut up, the most diminutive of all the chefs, the dynamic Elena Reygadas, dives in, grabs a front leg, and bites down on it, a huge smile on her face.

Once, on a bus trip from Cancún to Mérida, Jorge told me that his spirit of hospitality comes from Cuba, where he was born, in 1963. His family moved to Chicago (the birthplace of modern American architecture) in 1969, and Jorge grew up and went to college there before heading west to art school in Pasadena. So he is, as he says, "a proper working-class American immigrant," who also likes to stay home and continue to think how buildings frame art, a frame in which "a work starts and ends."

He first burst onto the scene in 1998 with an exhibit, "4166 Sea View Lane," at the Los Angeles Museum of Contemporary Art. For his commission he built, near the museum, an actual house designed to be an exhibit. When the L.A. MoCA show was over, Jorge moved into the house and never looked back. Exhibits followed in Ireland, Germany (where he is now outfitting a church), and Barcelona, along with permanent installations at various American museums and in a restaurant in Düsseldorf. (A show of his work at the Friedrich Petzel Gallery in New York City continues through April 5.)

Pardo first visited Mérida in 2000 while on his honeymoon with his now ex-wife. At this point he has lived there for 10 years (he has homes in Los Angeles and Brooklyn, too) and feels completely at home in the old colonial city, where you are immersed in architecture wherever you go. Spanish, French, and Moorish influences pervade the streets and the colorful houses, which are painted not just in the traditional yellow or Mayan sky-blue with white trim but, increasingly, with the full range of Mexican colors, including Mediterranean lavender, flamingo-pink, and iguana-green. There's dancing and music nearly every night in one or another park or plaza here. In Italy art festivals are timed for the arrival of the summer tourists; in Mérida festivals devoted to film, ballet, painting, sculpture, and classical music go on every day. And all of it is free.

Around 1900, thanks to its monopoly in rope fiber, Mérida was briefly one of the richest cities in the world. Méridians of that era turned their backs on the rest of Mexico and looked instead to France, Italy, and New

Orleans. They sent their children to school at New Orleans's Sacred Heart, ordered their clothes from Charvet in Paris and their olive oil and wine from Marseille. And now the descendants of the Mayan masonry workers who built pyramids here (before the Spaniards tore them down to make endless churches) are employed by Jorge to build his houses.

JORGE RECENTLY REWORKED A SPRAWLING and dilapidated hacienda from Mérida's golden age, creating for the former CEO of Banamex a private estate called Tecoh that often serves as a colony for visiting artists and creative types. The chefs at Jorge's pig roast have spent the previous four days there, and they can't stop talking about the visual surprises

Jorge has installed, such as pink glass chandeliers. Haciendas are on my mind at the party. Over the first perfect margarita we debate the relative merits of barbecuing a pig in a box, in his egg-shaped grill, or wrapped in banana leaves, Mayan-style, and cooked in the ground. I tell him about a lunch at the former hacienda of the Empress Carlotta in Chunchucmil (near Mérida, toward the west coast of the peninsula) that I'd read about. The menu on that day in 1904 included ground-cooked pig, but it was for the staff. For guests there was a 14-course menu prepared by a French chef that included fresh oysters, lobster à l'Americaine, turtle cooked in its shell, and Yucatán turkey and woodcock, all washed down with champagne and both Châteaus Lafite and Margaux. Those guests were dressed in Charvet, but Jorge prefers the faded cottons that Monet and Picasso wore. His painter's blouse often includes a gratuitous still life of what he has eaten that day. I have joked with him and his lithe companion, Milena Muzquiz, that were Schiaparelli still alive we would have her make a bib for Jorge along the lines of her famous lobster dress.

"What I do is shape space and play with the history that forms people's sense of expectation," he tells me while squeezing more limes. Meanwhile, above the open kitchen counter, his lamp sculptures create a random ballet of light on the wall. We talk about his designing by "anticipating and including unforeseen outcomes"—in this case, the effects of the light fixtures swaying in the breeze of the overhead fans. That is the artist he is: He gives his creations an eccentricity of their own. He likes to think of it, he says, "as a parade, when you have to wait for the experience to unfold." ●

✈ MÉRIDA

STAY Coqui Coqui Mérida is a neo-Baroque pied-à-terre and the city's most stylish hotel. It's run by perfumer Nicolas Malleville and accessories designer Francesca Bonato; their wares are available at the Perfumeria next door. From \$320, smithhotels.com/coqui-merida



HOME IS WHERE THE ART IS Yucatán flora complements Spanish tiles inside a bold hand-tinted border. *Opposite:* A chair fabricated in Pardo's studio sits below a pendant light of his own design.

Petzel

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