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It began with a vow

Edward James' Surreal Paradise in Xilitla

Text by Tess Thatcher
Photos by Roberto Salvador

A STAND OF CEMENT BAMBOO JAMES CALLED "EL BAÑO", after his employees' custom of relieving themselves behind the concealing plants.

In a hilly patch of dense jungle in East-Central Mexico, steps zigzag up to a ten-foot cement totem-pole shaped like an orchid carpel. Below the totem, a stand of bamboo is, upon closer inspection, a cluster of cement wands. A mortar leaf balances delicately on its stem inside a clover arch like a giant ornament for a cake, or a crown. Buttresses trace butterfly wings.

Descend any of the stairways that thread through this forest and discover more elaborate constructions: an enormous cement lotus blooms in a courtyard between two wall-less houses; columns cluster beneath floors like underwater plants. Ropes of cement strung between giant cacti mimic vines; rooftop arches are bowing stalks. Spiral staircases end in ceilings. Doors give passage to nowhere. Bridges bridge nothing.

Is this an Eden, an artistic masterpiece, or a colossal, 30-acre joke? Is it art or architecture? Is it unfinished, a ruin, or just bizarre? These forms must mean something, but what? Visitors follow paths by the waterfall, their mouths agape, their questions fading to reverence as "Las Pozas" (named for the nine pools that collect the pristine river water that tumbles and rushes down the slopes) works its spell.

At the base of the hillside, the creations concentrate in a soaring jungle-gym of skeletal castles with seed-pod columns and blossoms for turrets. Tucked like the Swiss Family Robinson treehouse into these mad branches is a little box of a home, with a sad verse scrawled on an inside wall: "My house grows like a chamber'd nautilus after a storm… The deluge comes; and it is after me … This house is all assieged and wailing for its lords … My house has wings, and somehow in the dead of night, she sings…"

This fragment of poetry and more than 30 mossy structures crumbling in the forest outside the town of Xilitla, San Luis Potosí, are the remains of one dreamer's awesome indulgence. They are the work of Edward James (1907-1984): millionaire eccentric, disappointed lover, rejected Surrealist, and master castlebuilder. The Scottish-American arrived at this isolated mountainside in 1947, and for over thirty years employed hundreds of locals to build his fantasy garden – and what just may be one of the great sculptural monuments of the 20th century.

It's like a "whole mad enormous space ship from another world that exploded apart there," says Mexico City-based artist Jan Hendrix. The wreck of Noah's ark might be more like it, especially in James's day when the metal cages that dot the property housed his collection of deer, ocelots, and flamingos. Scattered over a hillside, the installation does feel broken. When they're not fortress-like and aggressive, spiky and defiant, the structures look blown open, ruins from the moment they were born, reminiscent of blitzed buildings from World War II. But the cement fragments bloom. They sprout shoots and buds; they are starting over. Even as Las Pozas is about ruin, it is also about rebirth, as new plants sprout from decomposing logs in the rainforest.

Preservation

As of June 2007, a consortium of investors is banking on the importance of James' artistic legacy. More than two decades after the artist's death, the site has been bought for $2.2 million USD by the Xilitla Fund, set up by billionaire ex-Banamex CEO Roberto Hernández and his wife Claudia Madrazo, and chaired by British-born UBS economist Damian Fraser. For Hernández to convince fellow billionaire Lorenzo Zambrano of CEMEX to join the project was easy. "This is the largest open-air cement sculpture park in the world, and CEMEX is one of the world's largest cement companies. It was a natural complement," says Fraser. A volunteer board comprised of artists, curators, and historians was assembled. The previous owner, Plutarco "Kako" Gastelum, the son of James's local partner in creating Las Pozas, will stay on as a kind of custodian.

Since the sale, the San Luis Potosí government has recognized Las Pozas as a patrimony of the state, the Fund's key first achievement. The next goal is status as a UNESCO World

JAMES' COLLECTION of bold quotations emerges as a language of its own, possibly surrealism's greatest monument.

Heritage Site. A local project manager has been named, the state's Secretary of Tourism is on board, and technical surveys of the structural conditions have begun. Five million USD are earmarked over the next five years, for restoration of the works, revitalization of the gardens, and international promotion of Las Pozas as a "high-quality ecological and cultural destination".

For big leaguers like Hernández and Zambrano, these figures are low. "This is a very small project," said Fraser, who explained Hernández's motivation as concern for a place he has long loved: his father was a native of San Luis Potosí.

"This is not a commercial prospect," Fraser emphasizes, "It's philanthropic. This artistically important place stands in need of conservation."

Still, suspicions have arisen. "There was a rumor Kako was thinking of selling, and every time you'd see a helicopter go over you'd think, this is it," says Dalila Hernández (no relation to Roberto), the owner of a small hotel in nearby Xilitla. The town, with a significant Náhuatl presence, has never been rich, and since frosts and falling prices have nearly sacked the local coffee trade, work is scarce. Hernández, like her fellow retailers and hotelkeepers, hopes for more tourism, but wonders if it will be the locals who benefit. "Everything Robert Hernández touches turns into a huge hotel," she worries.

Others, including Kako Gastelum, wonder if the bankers will get the vibe. "People come for the myth, for the magic," he says. "It's going to have to be a very delicate balance between structural security and aesthetics." Many visitors, he points out, prefer the works back in the thickets, where vines climb walls and trees relax over bridges, where the beauty is ghostly and the forest is winning.

Hendrix, a Dutch transplant to Mexico and a Fund adviser, is among them. "That's way more interesting than the [semi-restored structures] at the entrance. They're a disaster. They look like fakes of Edward James! His will was to let it evolve: a further symbiosis between jungle and architecture. What he wanted was for the jungle to overtake the place. Any ivy or fungus helps create an atmosphere," says Hendrix.

"I have been very critical," says Irene Herner, an art historian and *Reforma* newspaper reporter who is finishing a book on James. She sounded the alarm in an early November article for *Nexos* magazine. What if it becomes Disneyfied? Turned into a souvenir-and-a-snapshot tourist commodity? Herner has visited enough of what she calls "empty shells" of once wondrous monuments to know the vulnerability of their magic.

Now she supports the project with the zeal of the converted. "There is an absolute interest on the part of the people who bought [Las Pozas] to preserve it as a magical artistic sanctuary," she says following a late November "Surrealism Symposium", where advisers met investors for an on-site planning session. Herner believes the board's priorities – to reinforce at-risk structures and regulate the tourist flow (which can range from a mere handful to a loud, littering throng during Semana Santa) – are sound.

Hendrix echoed her relief. "I was happily surprised by the analysis of CEMEX [whose technician promised not to touch a thing without the artists' input]," he said. "Their job is to help with the endangered structural situation. That's it."

Herner reminds us that it is James' work, ultimately, which will set the agenda. "Look, if important investors buy something it's so they can get something out of it. But in this case, they'll have to rescue the work of art, or they're not going to have anything to sell. Here you don't have a golf club, you don't have a beach; you have this work of art. The task is to integrate this project into the history of art."

James' eccentric sadow

The history of art hasn't had much time for Edward James. The record counts him as a Surrealist patron, a collector of Dali, Magritte, Giacometti, Picasso, and Leonora Carrington, and a backer of *Minotaure*, the magazine edited by André Breton-- but not as an artist. "It is hard to be both," says Fund adviser Lynne Cook of New York's Día Art Foundation. Indeed, James' early volumes of self-published poetry were disparaged in Europe, and the few original paintings that hang in Xilitla's Edward James Museum are unremarkable.

Treatments of what he built at Las Pozas quickly become studies of its creator, and as a subject James is hard to resist. The story of how the wealthy oddball – speculated to be the illegitimate maternal grandson of King Edward VII– came to be the *brujo* (sorcerer) of Xilitla reads like a Gabriel García Márquez novel.

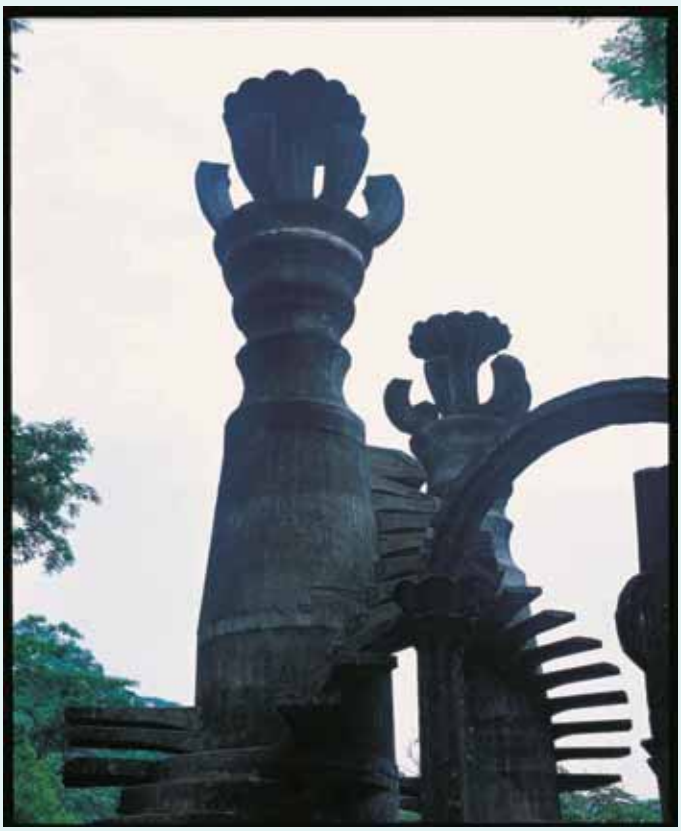
James inherited his American father's railroad fortune when he was young, and studied at Eton and Oxford, but to his socialite mother he was little more than an accessory. Once, when choosing which child the maid should ready to accompany her at church she crowed, "Let it be Edward. His eyes match my dress!" A brief marriage to the dancer Tilly Losch in the 1930s ended in a scandalous divorce: he alleged infidelity, she alleged homosexuality. In 1940, James fled to New Mexico, and then to Cuernavaca, Mexico, where he met a dashing telegraph operator named Plu-

tarco Gastelum. James soon followed him to Plutarco's native Xilitla, to purchase the site that would become Las Pozas..

The Surrealist escapist set to work building his personal paradise, hiring hundreds of locals to realize his strange designs. A local carpenter, José Aguilar, became a Surrealist mold-maker. According to former employees Ángel Alvarado and Ángel Martínez, "Don Eduardo's" wages were the best in town. Alvarado remembers that you could always make a little extra as a skinny-dipping photo model.

One year, James hurt his back, and had to be carried sultan-like through the forest on a litter borne by his workers. Some say he bathed with his pet deer. Dalila Hernández remembers him as a dapper gent stepping into her perfume shop to chat Chanel No. 5.

Kako remembers the day his "magic uncle" was struck by a vision of the upper pool filled with ducks. Until sunset, Kako and his sisters made trips behind their "tío", arms filled with flapping cargo. But Kako also remembers the more difficult eccentricities. James installed faucets everywhere throughout the construction, to accommodate his crippling hygiene compulsion. One year Plutarco built an access ramp for his jeep. Rather than complain, the displeased James had a doorway built that was just a hair too narrow for the vehicle to pass.



TO HAVE CAPTURED in hard cement the rhythm of fleeting artistic impulse is James' remarkable feat.

"For us [kids] he was only fun, but I imagine for my parents his extravagance could be difficult," says Kako today.

If James was, as some say, heartbroken when Plutarco married in 1956, his attachment seems to have shifted to the entire Gastelum family. Kako's sister Gabriela, who runs the "El Castillo" hotel in the family's former home, says that James introduced her as his daughter when they traveled in Europe. She believes that James never finished his jungle installation so that he would have an excuse to continue living with her family.

Kako's lingering attachment to James' memory made it hard for him to part with the property. Its upkeep had been beyond his means for years, he says, but "it was very difficult to sell. I love the place. But I figured it would be a good opportunity for its maintenance and preservation."

More than twenty years after James' death, Kako decided it was time to let the creation, and not the memory of the man, guide decisions. "He wouldn't have sold it," said Kako. "But the truth is I wasn't thinking of James anymore, but of his work."

A new place for Las Pozas

The single paragraph usually found in the tourist guides doesn't do Las Pozas justice, nor does a half-hour stop on a bus tour of the Huasteca. Taken piece by piece, James' works can be ugly. Joints are merely functional, and rough columns still bear mold marks. Cooke links James's giant forms to the "Follies" popular during the 16th through 18th centuries among British estate owners, who frequently commissioned towering impracticalities for their properties. Like Las Pozas, Cooke says these flights of fancy are often wrongly derided. Jan Hendrix and Damian Fraser both point out that the magnificent energy of the eclectic whole isn't achieved by any single structure.

The sale puts a new price on the place, and the spotlight is sure to follow. If James's work has been like a lost canvas collecting dust in the basement, the Xilitla Fund means to bring it out of the shadows. "But," says Herner, "they need us [artists, writers, and critics] to express and explain to them what it is about."

Lynne Cooke describes how a collection of bold quotations can emerge as a language of its own. Even without knowing of James' affinity for Gaudí, you recognize the mark of the Spaniard in the hyperboloid totems and catenary arches, and in the way James let organisms, not arithmetic, guide his lines. The giant serpents standing guard along a central walkway could be straight out of a Dalí dreamscape; so could a huge pair of cement hands. You think of Miro's ambiguous, whirling creatures. At one point, on my own wander through James' creation, a strange breeze blew through an imaginary wall as a bird rose in its eye-shaped window, and I felt like I was inside Giacometti's surrealist sculpture, "Palace at 4 a.m."

James used to send Plutarco postcards from his travels, with rough sketches and notes saying "Let's do this in Xilitla." Now a Japanese-inspired pagoda floats above a high-walled walkway like a medieval Scottish close, which gives way to a run of playful paving in Mexican mosaic. Las Pozas is a Babel-like assemblage of homages and memories, like the magnified model of an architecture student suffering from ADD, or a strange dream.

André Breton advocated a rupture with rationality and restrictive custom, and James's work, like his life, met the challenge. What rules does eclectic Las Pozas follow but "free play of thought and association"? The Surrealist practice of "automatic drawing" is transposed to three dimensions in James' method: having a whim, jotting a sketch, and handing it off to Plutarco and Don José to see it realized. The Surrealists wrote manifestoes on breaking free from aesthetic prescription, but off in the isolation of Xilitla, James just did it. It is said that Las Pozas began with a vow. After a freak snowstorm wiped out James' orchids, he said he would make some to last. The result is a spectacular marriage of nature and art. Besides the more literal leaves and buds, James' hyperbolas and parabolas pay tribute to the plant forms that surround them. The artistic abundance mirrors that of the rainforest. Now nature creeps over the structures, painting them green, as if the jungle itself is finishing the piece, or the sculpture is alive and evolving. For Irene Herner, this "marvelous dialogue" between forest and man's construction is the point, all the more relevant as environmental catastrophe threatens.

In the face of war, ostracism, and disappointment, James retreated to a lonely place to create a compensatory paradise. The impulse is as universal as the act was deeply personal. Left to us all is a marvelous monument to irrelevance and irreverence, to the urge for utopia, to the gorgeous eclecticism of dreams. To have captured in hard cement the rhythm of fleeting artistic impulse is James' remarkable feat. The Xilitla Fund's challenge will be to preserve the magic of this sprawling chapel to a strange religion, where visitors tiptoe forward, eyes cast up, voices lowered, listening for wordless answers from this unique place.