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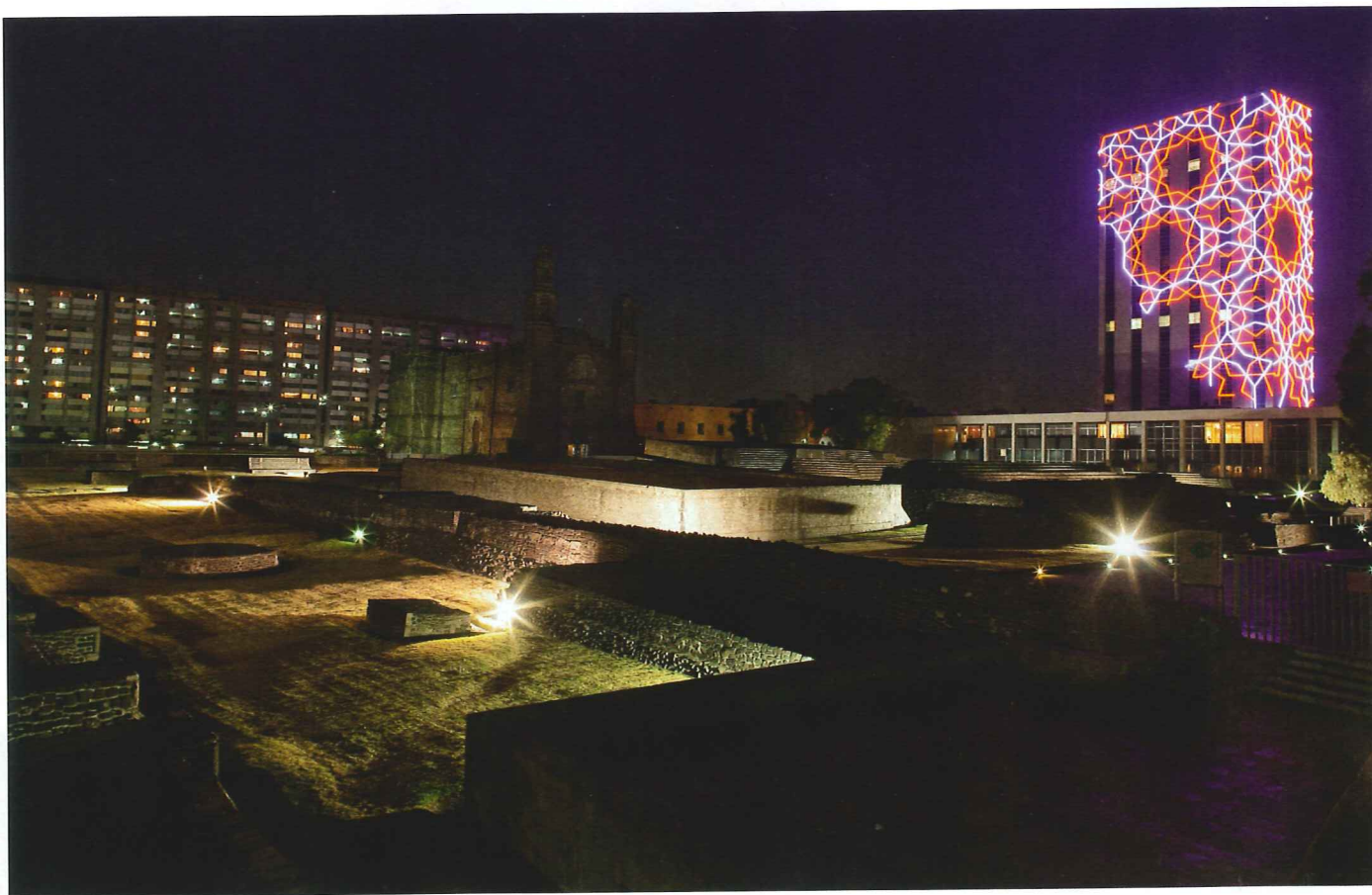
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MEXICO CITY REPORT

RITUAL AND RENEWAL

American artist and Mexico City resident Thomas Glassford has created for his adoptive home *Xipe Totec*, a permanent public monument that serves as a luminous beacon with significant art-historical resonance.

BY JAMES OLES



View of Thomas Glassford's light installation *Xipe Totec*, 2010, at the Tlatelolco University Cultural Center, UNAM Mexico City. Photo Jorge Moreno.

IN A CITY WHERE every politician and institution seeks to commemorate anything possible with a monument, and where those monuments vie for attention within a hectic urbanism, *Xipe Totec*, a recently inaugurated site-specific LED light installation in Mexico City by the American artist Thomas Glassford, is a rare achievement. It is delicate and unobtrusive yet massive and unavoidable, historicist without being nationalist and unabashedly abstract without suf-

fering from an elitism that too often leaves the general public—in whose interest civic monuments are supposedly erected—either mystified or indifferent. And it accomplishes all this at a site particularly weighted with history, in Mexico, a country with a particularly complex past.

Architect Mario Pani's Unidad Habitacional Nonoalco-Tlatelolco, a sprawling Corbusian housing development built near downtown Mexico City between 1960 and 1965, might be considered a metaphor for the dreams and nightmares of post-Revolutionary Mexico. The complex originally consisted of 102 apartment

buildings of varied heights, designed to house 80,000 residents. The centerpiece of the development was the Plaza de las Tres Culturas, which juxtaposed restored Aztec-era pyramids and a 16th-century church with an elegantly modern Ministry of Foreign Relations designed by architect Pedro Ramírez Vázquez in 1965.

The photogenic perfection of the plaza lasted only a few years. The state-sponsored gunning down of assembled students and workers during

CURRENTLY ON VIEW

"Thomas Glassford: Pteridomania" at Sicardi Gallery, Houston, through Mar. 5.

GLASSFORD HAS EMPHASIZED INDUSTRIAL MATERIALS, WHICH HE MANIPULATES INTO COMPLICATED SCULPTURES THAT PLAY AGAINST THE HISTORY OF GEOMETRIC ABSTRACTION.



Above, view of works from the "Aster" series in the exhibition "Event Horizon," 2003, fluorescent lights and mixed mediums; at Laboratoria Arte Alameda, Mexico City. Photo Laura Cohen.

Top, *Untitled (partitura)*, 2008, anodized aluminum, aniline dye, 86 3/8 by 59 by 3 1/8 inches. Courtesy Charles H. Scott Gallery, Emily Carr University, Vancouver, B.C.

Right, *Stela 2*, 2004, broomsticks and Lucite, 138 by 47 by 15 inches. La Gaia Collection, Milan.

Opposite, view of *Afterglow*, 2010, acrylic, aluminum, water and mixed mediums; at Museo Experimental El Eco, Mexico City. Photo Ramiro Chavez.



a demonstration in October 1968, just before the city hosted the XIX Olympic Games, as well as flimsy construction techniques, the devastation of the 1985 earthquake (one tower fell immediately, killing 500) and the less than salubrious social effect of erasing a traditional neighborhood in pursuit of a modernist utopia all conspired to turn Tlatelolco—at least from the perspective of tourists and the Mexico City elite—into something of a working-class wasteland, fraught with crime and stained by repression, though located just a few blocks from the increasingly gentrified colonial downtown.

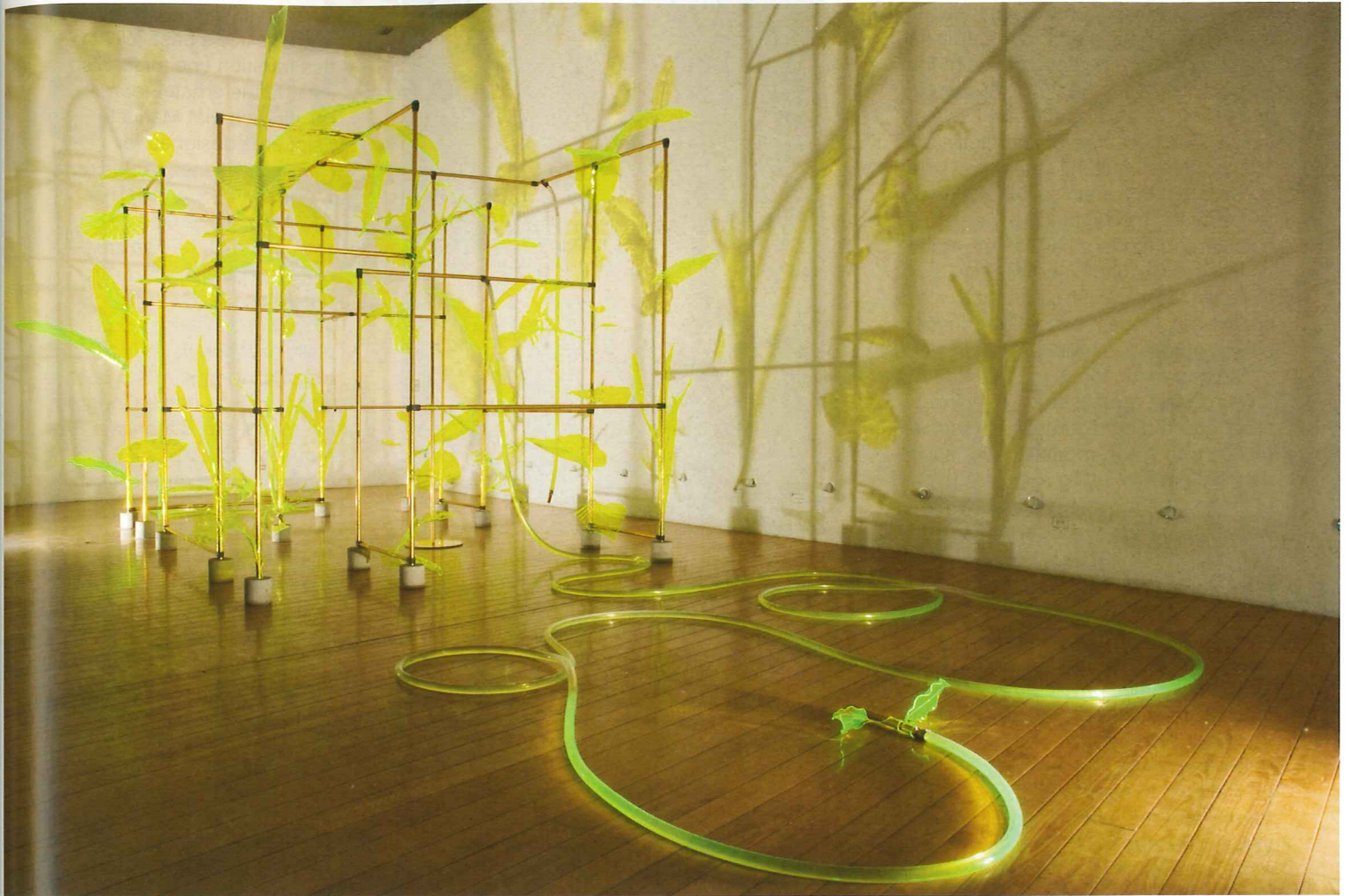
For this contested space, Glassford (b. Laredo, Tex., 1963) was commissioned by Mexico's National Autonomous University (UNAM) to create a sculpture covering the white marble tower of the former Ministry. That 21-story building, which had already begun to tilt before completion and was never fully occupied, was recently restored by the UNAM after the university took over the entire Foreign Relations complex in 2006, transforming its reception halls, conference rooms and offices into a vast cultural center that includes educational facilities, an art museum and a historical memorial

to the 1968 student movement. More than just another urban renovation project, the Centro Cultural Universitario Tlatelolco (CCUT) was explicitly intended to assuage cultural, political and even geological wounds long repressed by the PRI (Institutional Revolutionary Party), which led the Mexican government until 2000.

At once visible from vast distances but often obstructed at ground level by Mexico City's urban density, the installation consists of over 22,000 feet of flexible PVC tubing containing LEDs. Arranged in an elegant Moorish-style pattern of intricate geometric shapes outlined in blue and red, the tubing terminates at different heights on various sides of the tower. By day, this network is practically invisible, but at night it is breathtaking. Like the illumination of

the Empire State Building or the more garish lighting of skyscrapers in Moscow, Glassford's tower is a beacon or even a lure, partly designed to draw wider attention to a cultural center that still remains off the map for many in this sprawling





megalopolis. However, unlike two previous commissions done for the site, one by Santiago Sierra (*Proyecto para Tlatelolco*, 2007) and the other by Rafael Lozano-Hemmer (*Voz Alta*, 2008), both of which literally gave voice to those silenced by oppression or censorship, *Xipe Totec* takes a less ephemeral and more multivalent approach to our need for commemoration.

GLASSFORD HAS LONG lived in Mexico City, one of several foreign artists—among them Francis Alÿs and Melanie Smith—who around 1990 took up residence in a decrepit apartment building just a few yards from the Aztec Templo Mayor. They delved into the street markets in search of new materials and ideas, and—in league with their Mexican counterparts—energized the local scene with a more critical and conceptual discourse, years before Mexico City became a trendy art-world destination. Glassford's early work relied on the actual and metaphorical

tensions between natural materials (dried gourds, leather, even *chicharrón* [pork rinds]) and hand-tooled machine parts. In more recent years Glassford has emphasized industrial materials, from corrugated and mirrored aluminum to Melamine dinnerware and painted broomsticks, which he manipulates into complicated sculptures that play against the history of geometric abstraction. Relatively recent works, such as the installation *Afterglow* (2010), feature complex metal structures with neon. The "Aster" series (2000-03), each piece composed of numerous fluorescent lights radiating from a nucleus, and a series of hanging sculptures that include lifelike forms resembling leaves from different plants cut from hot pink and green Plexiglas, evoke botanical specimens from a distant planet.

For the Tlatelolco project Glassford moved beyond even the large scale of some of his previous installations, which have filled the deconsecrated churches and colonial patios that are

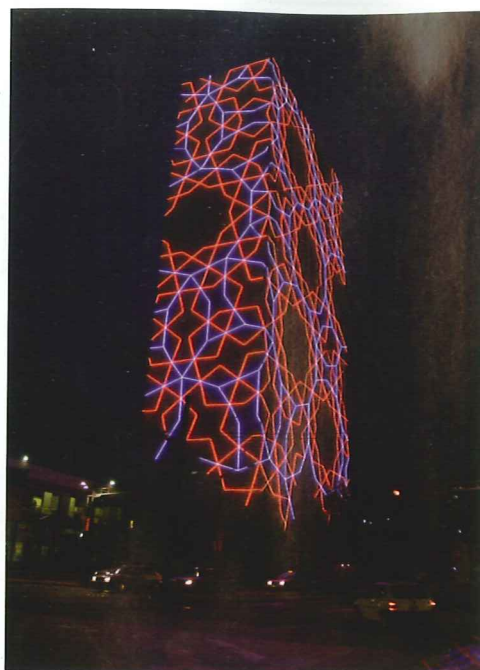
choice exhibition spaces in Mexico. Relying as never before on his training in architecture at the University of Texas at Austin, Glassford chose a material that, albeit somewhat cumbersome, has emerged as a weather-resistant and cost-effective replacement for neon. To keep each section of the geometric pattern taut, the lights were set into an aluminum frame designed by the artist, a technical feat that required negotiations with architects, assurances that the white marble facade wouldn't be compromised and a skilled team of installers. Given the limited budget (the total cost was under \$500,000) and bureaucratic delays, the artist had five weeks to install the network in time for the official opening on Nov. 23, 2010. The lights, which consume about as much energy daily as a middle-class house, could theoretically last for over a decade.

In the ancient Central Mexican religious system, the deity Xipe Totec, of Glassford's title, was associated with

spring, fertility and renovation, though the rites celebrating him were particularly bloody. Xipe impersonators wore the flayed skins of captives until they dried and fell off, symbolizing the life cycle of maize. This of course is a perfectly apt metaphor for a cultural center that rises above a site of human sacrifice (slaughter being the mortar binding the ancient, colonial and modern parts of the Plaza de las Tres Culturas), and partly explains the artist's choice of blue and red, which are like resplendent capillaries carrying energy across the building's exterior.

The geometric forms in Glassford's tower project are based on aperiodic tiling, ordered configurations that cover planes with a non-repeating and asymmetrical pattern, using a limited number of forms. The most famous of these were developed by Roger Penrose in the 1970s, building on the discoveries of Johannes Kepler. Seen in three dimensions, aperiodic tiles are known as quasicrystals, physical structures whose atoms do not line up in perfect, unbroken rows, and are now known to exist in nature and not just on university blackboards. That *Xipe Totec* looks far more Islamic than Aztec is not coincidental: although aperiodic tiling and quasicrystals were not well understood in the West until relatively recently, similar structures were developed by Islamic tilemakers in medieval Iran, who were apparently as concerned as our contemporary physicists with finding efficient and elegant ways to tile a flat surface.

Historically, then, Glassford's installation resonates formally with a rarely noted facet of Mexican colonial architecture: in carpentry, plasterwork and, of course, tile decoration, one finds the explicit legacy of Andalusia's *morisco* (Moorish) artisans, whose esthetics were embraced in both Spain and the Americas even if their backgrounds made them racially and religiously suspect. But Glassford was also intrigued by the debates that have arisen in the West, with some physicists questioning whether Persian artisans could really have figured out the complex math behind aperiodic tiling. For him, such cross-cultural tensions resonate at Tlatelolco, a site layered with appropriations and translations. From the 1530s to the 1570s, Franciscan monks at the Colegio Imperial de Santa Cruz de



XIPE TOTEK MIGHT BE UNDERSTOOD AS THE MOST RECENT ATTEMPT IN MEXICO TO "DECORATE" THE INTERNATIONAL STYLE, TO AMELIORATE ITS AGGRESSIVE GEOMETRIES WITH "ART."

Tlatelolco retrained the sons of the indigent nobility in humanist letters, while native informants helped create an encyclopedia of pre-Conquest life under the direction of Bernardino de Sahagún. Four centuries later, the entire neighborhood was razed and reinvented according to the utopian theories of Le Corbusier, as translated by Pani during a postwar economic boom; once hidden pyramids were now restored by government archeologists for nationalist rather than religious purposes. Like the patterns of *Xipe Totec*, history repeats itself without symmetry.

Xipe Totec might also be understood as the most recent attempt in Mexico to "decorate" the International Style, to ameliorate its aggressive geometries with "art." The most famous example of this visual integration of muralism and architecture took place on the UNAM's main campus, built in the 1950s, where muralists like Juan O'Gorman and David Alfaro Siqueiros covered modernist facades with didactic

messages largely drawn from Mexico's past. Within this tradition one might also include the ornate geometric screens that Manuel Felguérez designed for Ramírez Vázquez, including window grilles in the Museo de Antropología and ceiling ornaments at the Ministry of Foreign Relations, both based on pre-Hispanic stonework. What is especially new here is the material, though at the post-war meetings of the Congrès internationaux d'architecture moderne (CIAM), Le Corbusier and others had called for more integrated, inspirational and even joyful public monuments that would use water, movement

and light in addition to traditional mediums. Glassford seems to have taken these ideas to heart, while at the same time exposing the density of Mexico's culture and history, impossible to summarize, impossible to ignore.

Glassford's installation commemorates, albeit obliquely, the centennial of the foundation of the UNAM in 1910. And as a commemorative monument, it stands in stark counterpart to several others financed with government money in 2010, a year in which Mexico celebrated both the bicentennial of its declaration of independence from Spain and the centennial of the outbreak of the Revolution. The federal government's lead project, by architect César Pérez Becerril, is a Bicentennial Arch that—despite its name—consists of two thin, approximately 300-foot pylons set within a plaza in front of Chapultepec Park; fortunately, given its bloated budget and visual banality, serious engineering problems might truncate the project and preserve one of the city's finest views. Though somewhat more discreet, Javier Marín's awkward equestrian bronze of President Madero, stuck in front of the Palacio de Bellas Artes, is but an anachronistic exercise. The real triumphs are those that,

like the splendid restoration of the Monument to the Revolution (1934-38) and the total renovation of its surrounding plaza, as well as Glassford's *Xipe Totec*, make this contentious and never contented city a better place to live. ○

Above, view of *Xipe Totec*. Photo Andres Villalobos.

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