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OBIT> PEDRO GUERRERO, 1917-2012

Frank Lloyd Wright's photographer documented the Modern Movement with an uncommon eye.



Pedro Guerrero, Self Portrait, New York, 1950.
Pedro Guerrero

In architecture circles Pedro E. Guerrero was known as Frank Lloyd Wright's photographer, and in many ways this is true. Wright gave Pedro his first job, and Pedro was the last photographer to shoot Wright's portrait. It started when Pedro, having completed photography courses at what is now Art Center College of Design in Pasadena, CA, returned home to Mesa, AZ, a town that offered few prospects for a young Mexican American in 1939. Not sure of what to do next, his father encouraged him to ask the man starting a school near Scottsdale for a job. That man was Wright, the school was Taliesin West, and Wright, coincidentally, was in urgent need of a new photographer. Pedro had never photographed buildings before. In fact, he had never identified himself as a photographer before that first meeting, but Wright saw enough promise in his studies of female nudes on a Malibu beach to

gamble on a green 22-year-old. Pedro, ever the humorist, alluded to a sly wink from Wright as he leafed through his student portfolio. It was the beginning of long career that provided one of the most important contributions to architectural photography in the United States. Between 1939 and 1959, when Wright died, Pedro served as his "on call" photographer, documenting most of his commissions. It is impossible to open a book about Wright without seeing Pedro's photographs.

While Wright was alive, Pedro limited himself to jobs he received through magazine assignments for fear of angering his patron, but there were hundreds of assignments for all the major publications that resulted in a distinctive body of work. Seminal mid-century architects, like Marcel Breuer, recognized an artist who understood how to represent ideas and not just buildings and attempted to convince Pedro to work for him exclusively. Pedro was particularly sensitive to a building's environment, as evident in his first photographs of Taliesin West. While Julius Shulman's photographs of



Diamond Service Station, Thomas Little architect, Macon, GA, 1961.
Pedro Guerrero

midcentury Palm Springs houses have us fantasizing about the cocktail hour, poolside, Pedro foregrounds the cruel desert sun. He bravely tackled the light at high noon, projecting an acute sense of the heat's intensity as it baked his southwestern assignments. I was particularly taken by a series of photographs of fellows hanging off Taliesin West in a state of half dress as they attend to the day's construction tasks. The photographs are entirely about young, muscular bodies, sweat, and sun. The architecture is merely the backdrop to Pedro's real subject: the physicality of life working for Wright.



Yale Skating Rink, Eero Saarinen, New Haven, CT, 1958 (left). Guerrero and Frank Lloyd Wright in 1949 (right).
Pedro Guerrero

I didn't get to know Pedro personally until I mounted an exhibition of his work for the Julius Shulman Institute at Woodbury University last spring, but I knew there was an important body of architectural photography that went beyond Wright's buildings. While I stayed in Los Angeles with my new baby, my co-curator, Anthony Fontenot, dove into Pedro's archive at his home in Florence, AZ. We communicated by telephone, Anthony relaying what he had found, while Pedro's wife, Dixie, diligently scanned dozens of images for us to review. Pedro was often surprised by our choices: a space-age gas station by Thomas Little in Macon, GA with a dynamic, folded concrete roofline ended up as the first photograph in our exhibition. Pedro hadn't thought about it in decades; it wasn't what people usually asked to see of his work. We were similarly enthralled by Pedro's photographs of the Harvard Five's work in Connecticut, which included houses by Breuer and Philip Johnson, and a series on Edward Durell Stone's vibrant, almost ornamental New York townhouse renovation that had shocked the modernist community when the photos were first published in *Vogue*.

These photographs hadn't been exhibited before, but as with everything Pedro was game. With Dixie's help, he went into his darkroom and produced silver gelatin prints for the exhibition, packed the car, and drove them out to Los Angeles. He was 94. At the opening, he talked to a standing-room only crowd, holding the audience in rapt attention as he recounted stories that made us feel that we, too, knew these architects whose work filled our history books. He had a special way of poking fun at Wright's grandiosity, while remaining respectful, which had the audience roaring. In these stories he was always the "short, fat...but cute!" sidekick to "the great master." You had a sense that Wright let his guard down around Pedro, it is visible in photographs that show Wright at ease, walking down a path or taking a break during an installation of his work on the Guggenheim.



Calder Studio, Roxbury, CT, 1963.
Pedro Guerrero

Pedro was a magnificent portraitist. It is particularly visible in his photographs of Alexander Calder, with whom he forged another lifelong relationship that was very different from that he had shared with Wright. Calder's manner was warm, his home a constant work-in-progress. He was in every way "Sandy" to Frank's "Mr. Wright." One summer Pedro spent a day perched above the artist's cavernous studio, waiting for the right moment to shoot him at work. The result is a breathtaking wide-shot of the artist, just one figure among an abundance of materials on their way to becoming sculptures. Conversely, a close-up of Calder's desk, utterly subsumed by papers and materials for half-finished projects is as much a portrait of the artist as an image of Calder himself.

I made one big mistake with the exhibition: I neglected to have a bottle of tequila on hand for Pedro. Looking somewhat put upon as he sipped his gallery-grade wine at the opening, I knew that if presented with another opportunity I wouldn't repeat the same faux pas. I didn't get that second opportunity. Pedro died on September 13 at the age of 95, five months after the exhibition. He had spent the summer at Taliesin in Wisconsin, as he did every year, and had recently returned home to Florence, AZ, near where his photography career began. It was a career that took him far from the adobe house where he had been raised, shaped the way we see the work of countless architects, and introduced that work to the world.

Emily Bill