

Arts

Where a poet played God

Constance Wyndham on the challenges facing Edward James's ruined Surrealist masterpiece in Mexico

The story of how Edward James (1907-84), the millionaire poet, painter and patron to the Surrealists, escaped to Mexico to build a garden in the jungle has often been told. The famously eccentric James – known for boiling his paper clips in eau de cologne for fear of germs – moved to Mexico in the late 1930s to escape judgemental English high society after the collapse of his marriage to the dancer Tilly Losch.

There, on a hillside deep in the Sierra Madre jungle, outside the town of Xilitla, James spent 40 years building Las Pozas (The Pools), a name that refers to the focal point of the garden – nine pools filled by a natural waterfall. Here James designed and built a sprawling Surrealist-inspired garden full of large, colourful sculptures and more than 30 fanciful concrete structures, some over 100ft high, where James lived intermittently surrounded by pet ocelots and boa constrictors.

Since his death, however, Las Pozas has been slowly losing the battle against the elements and the dense, encroaching foliage: James would probably have delighted in the paradox that his sculptures are actually feeding the jungle that is destroying them. Concrete paths wind through the damp forest, with gnarled roots forcing themselves between the cracks. Plants growing around the structures are nourished by minerals in the green moss and lichen that covers them. Epiphyte roots dangle down from the structures, filtering the afternoon light. One imagines that the place, in its semi-decayed state and completely in tune with the surrounding jungle, is now more beautiful than ever. This is the most striking aspect of Las Pozas: the synchronicity of the creation with its environment. Art and nature are so intertwined that it's often hard to tell the difference between a concrete column and a tree trunk.

It was obvious that the jungle was going to win in the end, however. Despite his love of the place, James, the inheritor of an American railway and timber fortune, was famously chaotic, and he failed to leave sufficient money for the upkeep of the gardens.

In June this past year, a group of Las Pozas enthusiasts came to the rescue. The Xilitla Foundation, set up by Rob-

erto Hernández and his wife Claudia Madrazo, with contributions from the local government of San Luis Potosí and Mexican cement company Cemex, bought Las Pozas from the Gastelum family for \$2.2m. Plutarco Gastelum has been running Las Pozas since the death of his father – also called Plutarco – who was Edward James's close friend and project manager. In late November, advisers and trustees of the foundation met for the first time to discuss the conservation of the fragile structures and the future of the 80-acre site. Damian Fraser, foundation chairman and a banker with UBS, chaired the meeting in El Castillo, a hotel that was once James's house in Xilitla.

Hernández, the chief benefactor, is a successful banker turned philanthropist, and he convinced his friend Lorenzo Zambrano, head of Cemex, to get involved. Zambrano sent representative Juan José Flores to the meeting, while Roberto Vazquez, the region's secretary of culture, represented the governor of San Luis Potosí. Other trustees are Caroline Egremont, trustee of the Edward James Foundation, which runs West Dean, a college for conservation in West Sussex, Lynne Cooke of the Dia Foundation and Michael Govan, director of Los Angeles County Museum of Art, plus Mexican architects and historians.

Salvador Dalí described Edward James as "crazier than all the Surrealists put together. They pretend, but he is the real thing." According to Avery Danziger, who lived in Xilitla and made an evocative film about James entitled *Builder of Dreams*, he hired a composer to write a requiem for his dying alliga-



Paradise lost? Edward James in his Eden-like creation in the gardens of Las Pozas

Main picture: www.averydanziger.com/Luis Felix Other pictures: Constance Wyndham



tor, and shipped his animals around in crates marked "spare parts". Danziger understands James, above all else, as an entertainer. "He had a strange sensibility," he says. "His love of things was for their surface. He loved animals, but it wasn't a real love, it was more for entertainment."

Accounts such as these have made James into something of a cult figure. Irene Herner, an art historian and admirer of Las Pozas, is, however, keen for the foundation to see beyond these anecdotes, and resist the temptation to preserve Las Pozas as a shrine to the personality of Edward James. Las Pozas is very much part of the local life in Xilitla and local children come daily to swim and frolic in the freezing pools.

Apart from Mexican families and the odd aficionado of Surrealism, visitors to Las Pozas are mostly psychedelic tourists willing to make the nine-hour

drive from Mexico City – heavily dreadlocked characters in search of mind expansion can often be spotted wandering among the structures. The foundation's plans to subsidise flights to the local airport of Tamuín will make the site accessible to a wider range of tourists, but their number will be regulated. Entrance fees are to be enforced, but plans are for locals to have passes allowing them regular access to the pools.

"We mustn't make it a Mont Saint-Michel – an empty box full of souvenirs," Herner says, and Cemex has responded with a suggestion to involve artists in the conservation of Las Pozas's structures.

The foundation is in dire need of donations. "If it is as incredible as you say it is, we would have heard of it already," was the Smithsonian Museum's reply to Danziger's request

Psychedelic tourists in search of mind expansion can often be spotted wandering among the fanciful concrete structures

for funding to help save Las Pozas in 1990. Danziger thinks the only way to get the \$5m needed is to bring potential donors to the site.

"Describing Las Pozas is like trying to describe the Rothko Chapel – you can't," he says, as we sit below towering bamboo-like constructions waving in the wind. "It doesn't look good on paper; you have to come here to be seduced." Above, a staircase spirals up into the sky and a bridge flanked by concrete fleur-de-lis leads up to the pools, where the water pressure is damaging some of the structures. On the way are concrete hands, heads and an eye-shaped bath, all looking rather worse for wear.

"The challenge is how to go about maintaining the spirit of Las Pozas without losing its character," says Fraser. But the site is a health and safety inspector's nightmare. By mid-afternoon the brilliant sunshine is dwindling, the shadows are lengthening and the moss-covered paths are becoming slippery. Staircases encourage visitors to climb to terrifying heights, and several teetering structures are only propped haphazardly with wooden beams. The place would be ruined by a proliferation of warning signs and safety rails, but more information is needed – one idea is to have signs informing visitors of James's poetic names for the structures – "The House with a Roof like a Whale", for instance, or "The House With Three Storeys That Might Be Five". "It won't be a didactic experience, it must remain a voyage of discovery," Fraser says.

Las Pozas is already a government protected area and the foundation is hoping for World Heritage Site status, so the site itself is secure. The worry is the surrounding land. With new money comes new interest, and the renaissance of Las Pozas could be easily exploited by other business interests. The foundation failed to buy land across the road from the

entrance to Las Pozas, and it was subsequently bought by Juan Ignacio Torres Lander, a charismatic local politician turned businessman. When he turned a party in his restaurant under Las Pozas, Torres Lander, a rock fan, illuminated James's stairs and played Led Zeppelin's "Stairway to Heaven" at top volume.

The foundation has a range of ideas for Las Pozas. One possibility, in keeping with James's love of orchids, is to create a centre for the study of indigenous Mexican varieties. A plan to create a studio for the restoration of concrete has also been discussed and some hope for Xilitla to become a global centre of Surrealism, complete with reference libraries and international symposiums. Las Pozas is full of butterflies – one story goes that James decided to build his garden here when a swarm of butterflies settled on Gastelum while they were sunbathing at the pools – and another suggestion is to make a butterfly nursery there, and perhaps invite the artist Damien Hirst, who spends time in Mexico, to exhibit pieces he has made using butterflies.

Considering the bold nature of its creator, the ambitious ideas flying round the November meeting for the future of Las Pozas did not seem out of place. Positive spirit is rife in Mexico and it was here, after all, that James was able to build these extraordinary designs with nothing more than imagination and manpower. When he proposed to make a simple pond out of coloured concrete at Monkton, his house in West Sussex, the gardener told him that it simply wouldn't work.

No one knows what James had in mind for the future of Las Pozas. He once said he wanted it to be discovered as the ruins of an ancient civilisation, and in another 20 years, if it were not for the vision of Hernández and the work of this new foundation, that is probably what would have happened.

Edward James and the Surrealist movement

Although Edward James was known as "the English Surrealist", his father William was an American railroad magnate who moved to Britain and married an English socialite, Evelyn Forbes. On his father's death in 1912, the 19-year-old Edward inherited the huge fortune that allowed him to indulge his artistic passions: he was a poet and occasional painter himself – but his deepest enthusiasm was for the emerging Surrealist movement. With its interest in fantasy, fetishes and escapism, it was a movement born of the upheavals of the first world war.

James became one of Surrealism's most generous patrons, as well as a practitioner: he befriended René Magritte and bankrolled Salvador Dalí through some difficult years in the 1930s, when the Catalan was at odds

with the other Surrealists over his support for Franco. James sponsored Minotaur, the Surrealist magazine published lavishly in Paris, and throughout this period he was adding to the quirky treasures at Monkton House, his home in Sussex, which came to be acknowledged as the best private collection of such work: he eventually owned more than 40 important works by Dalí. It was for Monkton House that Dalí created the famous lobster telephones and the vermilion sofa in the shape of Mae West's lips: here too James had a stair carpet specially woven that bore the bare footprints of his wife, the dancer Tilly Losch.

James is the subject of at least two important paintings by Magritte, both powerful statements on alienation: in "The Pleasure Principle: Portrait of



Edward James", the sitter's head is ablaze in a luminous fireball; the other is "La Réproduction Interdite" (left). After 1940, when James and his wife had parted, the increasingly eccentric millionaire spent more and more time in Mexico, and there he created his own Surrealist masterpiece, the gardens at Las Pozas, a magnificent embodiment of Dalí's definition of the ideal Surrealist object, which should be: "absolutely useless from the practical and rational point of view, created wholly for the purpose of materialising in a fetishistic way, with the maximum of tangible reality, ideas and fantasies having a delirious character".

Edward James in René Magritte's 'La Réproduction interdite', 1937. Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen, Rotterdam. ©ADAGP, Paris/DACS, London 2007