

The interiors of Pedro E. Guerrero

TEXT AND INTERVIEW BY LEAH SINGER
ARCHIVAL PHOTOGRAPHY BY PEDRO E. GUERRERO



In the following pages, all firsthand accounts in these text boxes are excerpted from Pedro E. Guerrero's autobiography, *Pedro E. Guerrero: A Photographer's Journey*.

'Mr. Wright's ... private retreat contained a daybed where he could nap. He displayed his favorite Japanese prints on easels. Branches of native plants adorned his desk'. Wright's study at Taliesin, Spring Green, Wisconsin, 1952. Previous spread: A self-portrait at his 25th Street studio, New York City, 1946.



When Pedro E. Guerrero was 22 years old and fresh from photography classes at ArtCenter College of Design in California, he asked America's foremost architect, Frank Lloyd Wright, for a job. It was 1939; Wright was 72 and had recently built a home and a fellowship program at Taliesin West near Scottsdale, Arizona, a winter retreat named after his main house, Taliesin (Shining Brow), in Spring Green, Wisconsin. Based on Guerrero's student portfolio and very likely his bravado, Wright offered him work on the spot as he needed someone to document the building process on his sprawling property. Guerrero would remain his personal photographer until Wright's death in 1959. In his autobiography, *Pedro E. Guerrero: A Photographer's Journey*, Guerrero reflects on the significance of this offer: 'I began to realise what a marvelous opportunity this new job provided for testing my training. Here were interrupting forms, studies of texture and shadows, and the entire spectrum of values from black to white to test my techniques and the limitations of film and paper'.

It's Guerrero's unique affiliation with Wright that gives his legacy a considerable edge, although he also went on to document the homes of other distinguished people, including Alexander Calder's house in southern France, featured in my story on the sculptor for issue 31. However, unlike other photographers such as Ezra Stoller and Julius Shulman, whose names are synonymous with mid-century architectural and interior photography, Guerrero seems to have flown under the radar despite the many iconic images he has contributed to the field. As we learn from Guerrero's autobiography and his daughter, Susan Guerrero, there were numerous possible reasons for that. His singular way of telling visual stories through lengthy associations with his subjects often led to a yearslong process in the making of work. His photographic methods leaned into a naturalistic style that defied the more formal trends of the time. And he was outspoken about the Vietnam War, and his dissent, paired with his Mexican American heritage, cast him as an outsider amid the prejudice of the era.

I contacted Susan, who lives in Norwalk, Connecticut, to reminisce about her father and his legacy. She remembers him telling her that he was so poor as a child, he didn't know there was a depression; he didn't notice the difference. He grew up in Mesa, Arizona, in the Mexican barrio of El Molino, a short car ride from Taliesin West—close enough for him to go home every evening to develop his film but very far from his own life experience.

Apart from honing his skills as a photographer while negotiating the bright desert light at Taliesin, your father went on to learn about the aesthetics of living simply and the fundamentals of architecture. What was his experience at Taliesin like?

He was so young when he started. He knew nothing about architecture except that his father had drawn the parameters of their house on the dusty ground with a stick. That was his big introduction. When he came to Taliesin West, he was so



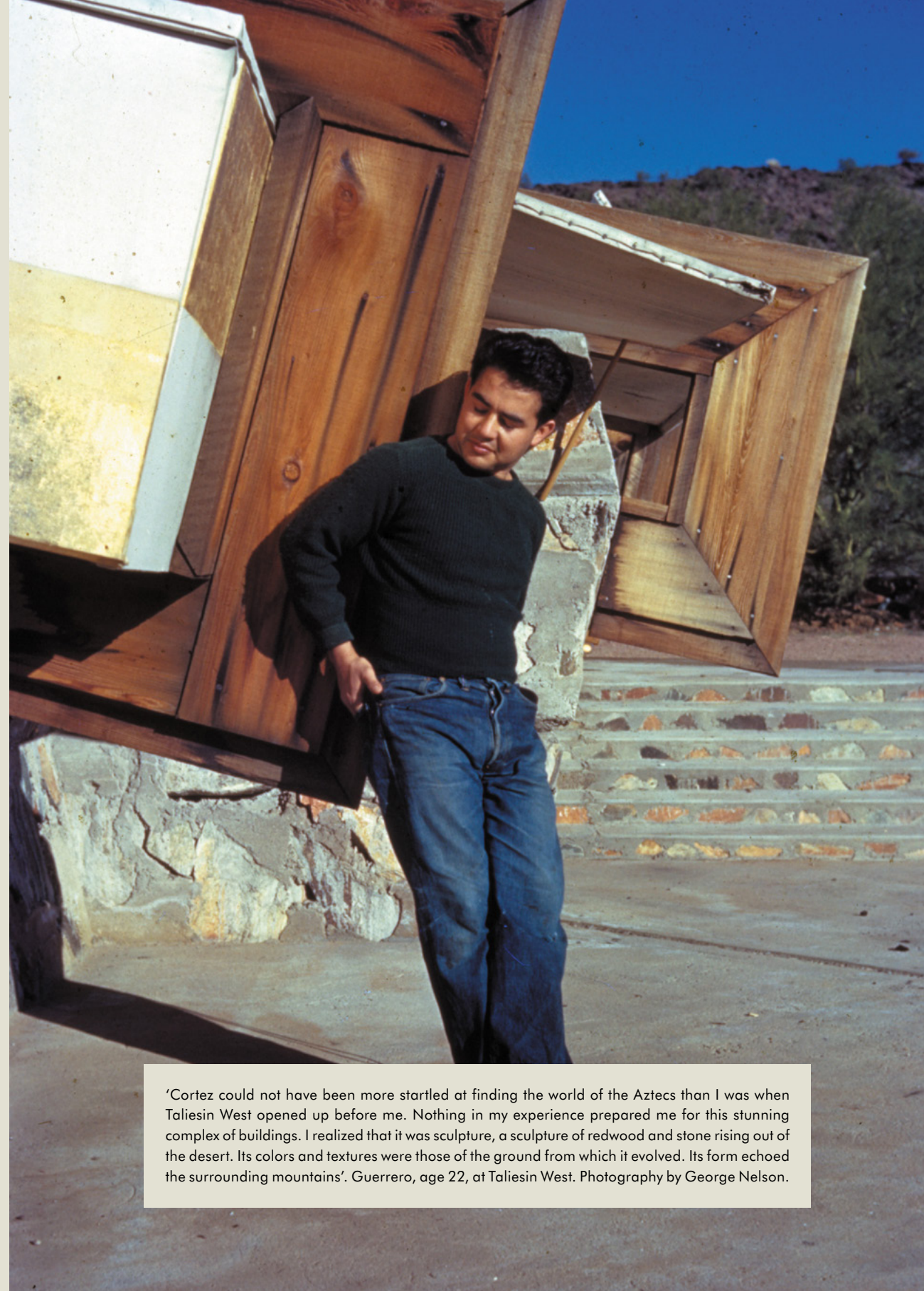
Frank Lloyd Wright and Guerrero, Pleasantville, New York, 1949.



Guerrero with daughter, Susan, New York City, 1949.



'This shabby shack was our first house in Mesa, Arizona. In 1917 Dad built the original peaked-roof section, where four of us—Mother, Dad, Adolfo (my older brother), and I—lived in two rooms'.



'Cortez could not have been more startled at finding the world of the Aztecs than I was when Taliesin West opened up before me. Nothing in my experience prepared me for this stunning complex of buildings. I realized that it was sculpture, a sculpture of redwood and stone rising out of the desert. Its colors and textures were those of the ground from which it evolved. Its form echoed the surrounding mountains'. Guerrero, age 22, at Taliesin West. Photography by George Nelson.



'Originally scheduled to pose for a waist-up portrait in 1947, Mr. Wright appeared without shaving and told me that "he wasn't about to." I had to move the camera back to conceal his stubble, which actually improved the shot. My magazine client lost the color photograph, but fortunately I had made a duplicate in black and white'. Portrait of Wright at Taliesin, Spring Green, Wisconsin, 1947.



'Members of the fellowship traveled from Arizona to Wisconsin in a caravan of cars, camping overnight along the way. The route was planned to give the apprentices the experience of traveling through Indian country. The first stop to refuel on May 1, 1940, was in Tuba City'.

prepared for the DIY aspects of Taliesin where the students build and do the plumbing. He'd been doing all that out of necessity back in Mesa.

Guerrero grew up watching his father slowly upgrade the family home to accommodate another child or add a necessary function like running water. In his autobiography, he is attentive to how this strategy of renewal and invention was also present in the way Wright improved upon Taliesin West, which was in a constant state of change. Do you think this process influenced how Guerrero built his own family home in New Canaan, Connecticut?

If you compare the picture of the initial 1917 house that Dad grew up in in Mesa—it was a tent platform—it didn't look a whole lot different from our first house in Connecticut before the expansion. We didn't have hot water. David Henken, who built the Usonian houses with Wright, collaborated on the house design with Dad. Henken was always trying to save Dad money and didn't always do what he was asked to. The playroom was supposed to have a fireplace but didn't, and the hallways were too narrow. The house was a cobble.

World War II propeller in Luke Air Force Base, Arizona, 1940.



overwhelmed by what he saw there. Wright was his university; he believed in educating the whole man. My dad had to go out in the field and pick corn, cook in the kitchen, be in Mrs Wright's dance troupe, learn how to play the recorder, and so on. He loved how they all had to shower and shave and put on suit jackets and ties for Sunday night dinner. He became comfortable, and he confided in Wright, once complaining of being too short. Wright told him, 'Oh, those other men are just weeds'. My dad explained to me that Wright built his buildings to be the perfect proportion for a man of his height, which wasn't really so tall. Wright walked around in Cuban heels. He explained to Dad how to photograph a house. He didn't like bird's-eye views. I think my dad was



'The "camp," as Taliesin West was called by Mr. Wright and the fellowship, was continually under construction. "Everything here is important," said Mr. Wright, and I took his words to heart in 1940 when I photographed the apprentices working'.

Your father stayed on with Wright at Taliesin West until the breakout of the Second World War when he decided to enlist. Wright was a pacifist and not in agreement, although he handed your father \$200, a lot for that time, as a parting gesture. Your grandfather pressured him to go because he thought it was the patriotic thing to do as a Mexican American. After the war, Guerrero returned to Taliesin for what he called a 'sentimental visit with the master' before leaving for a new life in New York City. Wright made it clear to him before he left that he wanted to retain him as his personal photographer. The opportunity to continue working for Wright was not lost on your father but he was aware of the downside of such a commitment.

I think there were opportunities that he passed up that definitely could have changed things for him. But I think their agreement was that he would be Wright's on-call photogra-

apartamento - Pedro E. Guerrero



'In 1953 *House and Home* sent me to Phoenix to shoot the home Mr. Wright had designed for his son David in 1950. It was a completely new statement about residential design for the desert: a full circle of concrete block that looked like a coiled rattlesnake poised to strike. My initial visit was made alone, shooting from dawn to dusk from all angles and making sure not to overlook a single nuance of this challenging house'.



'Albert Kornfeld, the editor of *House and Garden*, gave me my first big job, the William Burden apartment (1947) on Park Avenue, designed by Philip Johnson (1906–2005). I purchased an 8-by-10 camera for the shoot—a significant investment—but it paid off'.

pher, and he would come and photograph whatever Wright wanted him to. I'm not sure that he ever paid Dad. The payoff was a lifetime of association with this great man, which led to so many other things for him.



'It was a heady time to be an architectural photographer, not only with Philip Johnson and Frank Lloyd Wright on the scene in New Canaan, Connecticut, but also with the presence of Marcel Breuer (1902–1981), another star of the modernist movement. In May 1948 *Harper's Bazaar* assigned me to photograph Breuer's new home on the outskirts of town, one of two he designed for himself. This was my first attempt at photographing architecture by anyone other than Mr. Wright'.

offered Guerrero his first fated introduction to Calder's work by way of a mobile in the corner of the living room and a wooden sculpture that rested on the wall above the fireplace. Although his images in the October 1948 issue of *Harper's* prompted the offer of additional work from Breuer, Guerrero's sense of obligation remained with Wright: 'Much to my regret, I passed up the chance to work with one of the greats of twentieth-century architecture, the designer of the Wassily chair and the Whitney Museum of American Art, so that I would not offend Mr. Wright'.

In 1953, *Sixty Years of Living Architecture: The Work of Frank Lloyd Wright*, a survey of Wright's work, opened on the future site of the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum. Wright built two temporary structures on an empty lot at 89th Street and Fifth Avenue, his first buildings in New York. There was a pavilion made of glass, fibreboard, and pipe columns, which held models and drawings and a 1,700-square-foot, fully furnished, two-bedroom Usonian model house—his vision for a typical middle-class American home.

Wright was now 86 years old and trying to bolster a storied career that had fallen out of fashion. When he began his practice in the years that bridged the 19th and 20th centuries, he became known for his signature Prairie style: flat or low-pitched roofs with details such as rows of windows that emphasised the horizontal plane. This practice led to the development of the Usonian model, a utopian vision for living with elegance and simplicity at an affordable price. In the exhibition's catalogue, Wright links the two styles: 'The "Usonian House" ... is characteristic of the so-called "Prairie House" of 60 years ago with its modern, human scale, its open-place and flowing space, its corner windows and sense of indoors and outdoors'.



Frank Lloyd Wright with architect Oscar Stonorov at the Guggenheim Pavilion, 1953.

apartamento - Pedro E. Guerrero

'Connie and Marcel Breuer, both kind and welcoming, posed for me in their new house in New Canaan in 1948. *Harper's Bazaar* had sent me on assignment with the baroness Eleanor Perényi, a decorating editor. Breuer's most famous piece of furniture was probably the Wassily chair, designed for the artist Wassily Kandinsky, but he did not have one in his own house. Instead he sat on a recliner of his own design. A Calder mobile dangles behind him'.





'A flat roof with an open courtyard was a striking departure from the more traditional colonial architecture that predominated in New Canaan. John Black Lee (1924–2016) began his career in association with the noted architect Eliot Noyes. John and I saw each other socially—he had designed houses for two close, mutual friends.'

'The 1953 exhibition in New York also featured a full-scale model of a Usonian house built to dazzle the crowds, which it did. Furniture was designed on the spot by Mr. Wright and built by Paul Bechtel, a Long Island cabinetmaker'.





'When the Guggenheim Museum was under construction in the late 1950s, Mr. Wright took up residence at the Plaza Hotel in New York City. First he needed a piano and then "the necessities"—a red-and-black lacquer desk and other furniture of his own design, much of it made by Taliesin apprentices. He embellished the windows with round mirrors to downplay the room's Beaux-Arts features. Gold-toned wallpaper and peach-colored carpet were added'.



A mobile by Alexander Calder at the entrance of the Usonian exhibition house.

The exhibition remained open for a month, and when it came down, so did the Usonian house—brick by brick. Over budget and behind schedule, the house was doomed from the beginning despite its enthusiastic reception. Wright decided to auction it off with the caveat that Henken, the original builder, be hired to manage its reconstruction. After a number of setbacks, the disassembled house ended up in Henken's basement, all but forgotten, for 29 years. At one point, Guerrero lived with some of the pieces in his New Canaan house. Wright was frequenting New York often during the Guggenheim phase, and Guerrero was on hand to photograph all aspects of his time in

the city, including at the Plaza Hotel where he regularly stayed in suite 223. The hotel, with architecture inspired by the French Renaissance, is located across from Central Park, not far from the Guggenheim Museum site. It was the preferred residence of the world's elite, and Wright knew it well; he started staying there in 1909 soon after it opened. The suite, which came to be known unofficially as 'Taliesin the Third', served as a private sanctuary for Wright and his wife, Olgivanna, as well as an office where he would meet contractors and greet potential clients. Marilyn Monroe had a private meeting here with Wright about a commission that never materialised.

While at the Plaza, Wright modified the rooms to serve his taste and needs. The bespoke lacquered furniture he brought in was made by Taliesin students using inexpensive plywood, a material he also used in the Usonian house, as it was donated by a local supplier. Guerrero photographed the suite in 1958, as did other photographers, but his pictures were decidedly different. They were not perfectly staged for the camera but instead appeared more lived-in with pens and books strewn across the desk and an extension cord snaking its way behind a window shutter. His peers, who sought a more stylised look, left out realistic elements such as these.



Guerrero's living room in New Canaan, Connecticut, including shutters salvaged from the Usonian exhibition house.



'Photographers had to test film constantly because publishers required that the colors of objects and spaces be true. This 1950 self-portrait helped me check the usefulness of a new filter'.

Many of the photographs Guerrero took at Wright's properties reveal a real-life setting, such as the one where a disarray of sheets and pillows on a daybed suggest someone has just left the frame.

He was getting bored with perfect interiors. I can remember going on location with him and people really were hiding the extension cords and bringing in their own glasses and getting rid of the glasses that the homeowners actually had. And you should have seen the swag Dad would bring home from shoots: plants, dishes.

Throughout the '50s, Guerrero photographed Wright's architecture, sometimes for Wright himself or as freelance work, as he did for *House & Home* when he photographed the Phoenix house Wright designed for his son, David. But after years of working as a for-hire photographer, Guerrero began to tire of the assignments and the politics that accompanied them.

Guerrero also sensed a change in the jobs he was being offered, noting there was a hierarchy to the assignments:

apartamento - Pedro E. Guerrero



'For *House and Garden*'s 1958 attempt to remake the American garage into a living space, we set up this space in Westchester County, New York'.



'Harper's Bazaar sent me to northern New Mexico to document the home of Emily and Nate Owings in 1961. Nate was the Owings of Skidmore, Owings and Merrill, the famous Chicago architecture firm. The family was active and gracious. Much to my disappointment, the series—including the couple's bedroom, the family riding horses, and the very beautiful Emily—was not published'.



'In 1962 *House and Garden's* kitchen editor, Elizabeth Burris-Meyer, and I traveled to Cambridge, Massachusetts, to photograph the functional kitchen of the fabled Julia Child. Besides the joy of just being in her presence, we were also invited to dinner. She prepared duck à l'orange, a once-in-a-lifetime experience. In 2001 she donated her kitchen to the Smithsonian Institution'.

'In the '60s, for some now forgotten political or personal reason, *House & Garden* magazine—my main freelance account—banished me, and my camera, from the living rooms of America. I was first relegated to gardens, and then demoted to kitchens'. Guerrero did, however, photograph the famously well-organised kitchen of Julia Child and acknowledged in a short essay he wrote for the *New York Times* that 'being demoted to kitchens ... had its advantages'.

That also proved to be the case in 1962, when he drove out to Roxbury, Connecticut, with the *House & Garden* editor, Elizabeth Burris-Meyer, to photograph Alexander Calder's kitchen for a story called 'A Man's Influence in the Kitchen'. Unbeknownst to Guerrero, it would turn out to be a fortuitous meeting. During a television taping for the PBS series *American Masters*, Guerrero recounted how excited he was upon seeing the black-painted farmhouse with all manner of decor made from tin cans and other discarded materials. It reminded him of his childhood toy, a wine bottle pulling a cigar box meant to represent

a horse pulling a buggy. Susan believes that when her father saw Calder's tin sculpture, *Only, Only Bird*, he immediately identified with its handmade aesthetic. However, the magazine couldn't find a reason to run the story, namely because the kitchen lacked new appliances or trend-worthy products, only antique stoves and handcrafted cutlery—hardly the standard fare for shelter magazines of the day.

Guerrero later persuaded Calder and his wife, Louisa, to let him photograph the entirety of their farmhouse in Connecticut and their homes in Saché, France. His work and friendship with the Calders spanned 14 years and culminated with the book *Calder at Home: The Joyous Environment of Alexander Calder*. Meeting Calder kicked off Guerrero's interest in making photography books, and it soon led to other projects. But a bigger shift in his career came a little later, during the Vietnam War era, when a front-page *New York Times* article was published with the headline, 'New Canaan Split on Naming of Dove to its Draft Board'. Guerrero was appointed to the draft board—an unpaid civic position—after his wife, who served as the vice chair of the Democratic Town committee, recommended him. Guerrero felt the board needed a variety of opinions, and after his experiences in the Second World War—and with his newly adopted anti-war stance, which prompted the paper's labelling him a 'dove', a symbol of peace—he felt compelled to take on the role. This did not sit well with the heavily Republican district where he served and where it was his duty to enlist soldiers for the war effort. Many people felt his opinions would conflict with his mandate. The public outing led to Condé Nast—his main employer at the time—blacklisting him from further jobs. Some in the New Canaan community reacted in kind and ostracised the family.




'Mr. Wright invited me to come back to Taliesin West in 1959 to record the changes he had made over the years... His first wife, Catherine, had just died, and we talked about her. "She was a grand lady," he said. The fifteen minutes we spent together that day were our last. He died three weeks later'.



'The colorful Calder living room was festooned with Sandy's [Calder] unpredictable inventions—from noise makers to a pair of fake binoculars fashioned out of two shapely Coca-Cola bottles wired together, he said, "to spy on the neighbors." They probably came in handy when Marilyn Monroe married his neighbor, the play-wright Arthur Miller.'



'Except for a work table next to the open window, the kitchen was glossy black. Louise lined the walls of her dining room with golden-colored "constructions," as she called these boxes. Their warm wood tones were a great contrast to the adjoining black kitchen. The table could be arranged to accommodate groups large or small'.



'In Louise's living room, a bullet-riddled, cow-shaped weathervane leans against a wooden bench. The black background tested my ability to capture her extreme palette of texture and colors, making it almost impossible to photograph without reflecting my much-needed lights. The rest of her environment was far more casual'.

'Louise was always dressed in some elegant outfit. I do not remember ever seeing her in the same clothes twice. Louise dazzled me from the start'.



'At a nearby woodworking shop, Louise guided the charred timbers onto pedestals, creating dozens of new masterpieces'.

After a precarious decade in which Guerrero photographed intermittently, a book agent at Doubleday suggested he come up with a final subject for a three-book deal that would feature his work with Wright and Calder. Guerrero decided to pursue the painter Andrew Wyeth, but his friend, Jean Lipman, the editor of *Art in America*, had another idea. In his autobiography, Guerrero recalls her saying: 'Why do you want to meet him? His home is a bore, his work is a bore, and he's a bore ... Who you need to meet is Louise Nevelson, I'll have you both to dinner'.

Guerrero was immediately captivated by Nevelson, a sculptor and maverick who shared an affinity for the found object and the idealism of repurposing

it into art. He photographed her over a five-year period in her home studio, private home, and working at the Lippincott Foundry. The stunning pictures Guerrero took were published in *Louise Nevelson: Atmospheres and Environments*, a book that served as the catalogue for her 1980 show at the Whitney Museum of American Art. He spoke of the challenges he faced when photographing her monochromatic work, 'the almost eerie gloom of Louise's palette', which tended to be black, white, or gold. As before with Wright's desert buildings set in the contrast of sun and shadow, Guerrero had to negotiate light in unforgiving environments. 'Rooms painted black and furnished with black objects posed the greatest challenge', he recalls in his autobiography. 'These spaces consumed light; I had to figure out how to make one black object stand out from the next, to show that it had texture and depth'.

Guerrero was 95 when he died in 2012, having left New Canaan 16 years previously and moving with his second wife, Dixie, an author and Guerrero's frequent collaborator, back to his roots in Arizona. He was celebrated in his lifetime with exhibitions, documentaries, and articles, and his work continues to be sought after, but a passage in *Pedro E. Guerrero: A Photographer's Journey* reveals a truth he could never forget:

Over the years, I gained a measure of success as a freelance photographer based in New York City and Connecticut, where I made my home. But occasionally, when attending New York parties—dressed in a tuxedo and being of Mexican descent—I was mistaken for the waiter. Such encounters made me think about that old Christmas carol 'Good King Wenceslas', particularly the verse that asks, 'Yonder peasant, who is he? Where and what his dwelling?' That seemed to sum up my life. No matter how much I achieved, I always felt the need to explain just who I was and why I belonged.



Another view of the Guerrero living room, with a Calder gouache on the wall and a Calder stabile on the antique table.