

THE CHEECH



PHOTOS BY DAVID ALLEN — STAFF

Jazmin Urrea's art installation "Flamin' Hot Cheetos" is exactly that: a 10-foot diameter ring filled with the nearly nonperishable snack item. It's among the works in "Land of Milk & Honey," an exhibition at The Cheech in Riverside that examines foodways and agricultural practices and is part of the MexiCali Biennial.

The MexiCali Biennial art show migrates to Riverside

Have you heard of a biennial? It's an art-world thing: a major exhibition of contemporary art, mounted every two years, and meant to spark conversation. Desert X, happening now in the Coachella Valley, is one.

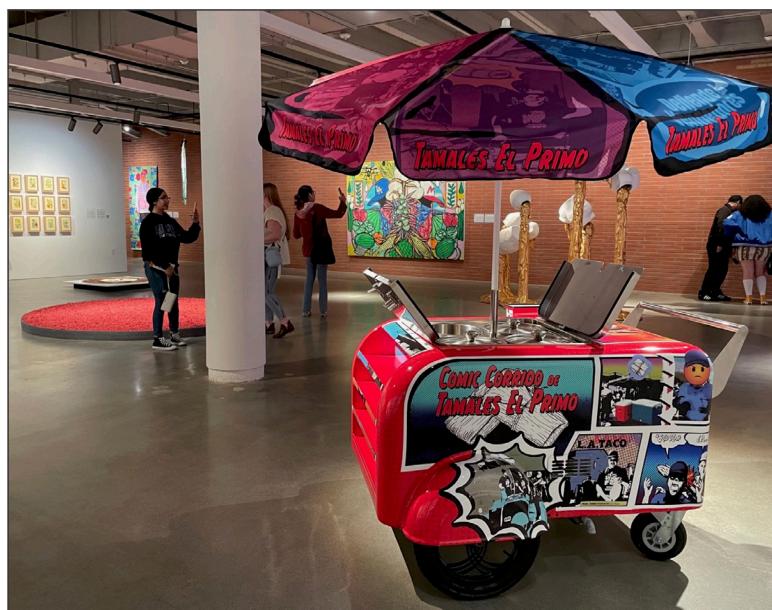


David Allen
Columnist

When I saw that The Cheech, Riverside's new Chicano art museum, would play host to the MexiCali Biennial, my first thought was: The MexiCali Biennial, a binational exhibition bringing together some 40 artists from Mexico and California? That sounds epic.

My second thought was: Uh, I've

ALLEN » PAGE 4



A tricked-out tamale cart by Ruben Ochoa is part of "Land of Milk & Honey," an exhibition at The Cheech in Riverside. The cart uses comics-style graphics to tell the story of a vendor in San Pedro who was harassed on social media in June and then assisted by vendor advocates. The street-legal cart will be given to the vendors, Juan and Luz Aguilar.

Allen

FROM PAGE 3

never heard of the MexiCali Biennial. Should I have?

It turns out that the MexiCali Biennial, while a serious effort, is also a joke on biennials.

Luis Hernandez and Ed Gomez were in their 20s when they founded the biennial in 2006.

“When we started,” Hernandez, a painter from Mexicali, told me in recent conversation at The Cheech, “there were a lot of biennials popping up all over the world. We were recent college graduates and no one was inviting us to those biennials.

“Rather than wait to be invited,” he continued, “we created our own biennial and invited our artist friends — so we could say we showed in a biennial.”

Ha! I’m picturing art-world gatekeepers peering at a resume stating that artist so-and-so had shown at the MexiCali Biennial. The gatekeepers would never have heard of the MexiCali Biennial but would not want to admit it for fear of looking out of touch. Thus is credibility born.

The first MexiCali Biennial had two shows: one in a rundown house in Mexicali, a city on the Mexican side of the border, with artists from L.A., the second in a studio in Boyle Heights and featuring Mexican artists.

The events were promoted through punk music-type flyers and “word of mouth,” recalled Gomez, now an associate professor of art and design at Cal State San Bernardino.

But Gomez and Hernandez also sent printed invitations to make the biennial look professional.

“We’re artists,” Hernandez said with a smile, “we liked the idea of making fun of biennials and the prestige of those kind of events.”

It’s a punk attitude with some cultural underpinnings. “Latinos as artists tend to play with the conventions and create something different,” Hernandez explained.

The biennial these days is a nonprofit arts organization with grant funding. But it remains nomadic, taking place in new venues each time, and artist-run. The principals — besides Gomez and Hernandez, they are Rosalía Romero and April Lillard-Gomez — come up with a theme and invite artists to submit.

This brings us to “Land of Milk & Honey,” the new show on the second level of The Cheech and the main project of the MexiCali Biennial.

Launched in Santa Cruz last fall, the traveling exhibit will be in Riverside through May 28. A spinoff solo show by artist Fred Brashear Jr. focusing on the Nopal cactus is at the San Bernardino County Museum in Redlands through May 7.

The theme is agriculture and food, expressed in sculptures, mixed-media works, paintings and digital media by artists from California and Mexico.

“We think this is representative of what artists in the region are doing now,” said Romero, an art historian at Pomona College. “It’s an exciting show and we’re really proud of it.”

A few examples: video of

two female hands kneading maize dough, illustrating domestic labor; an altar-like installation of LPs and CDs of music reflecting the farmworker experience; a tricked-out, customized tamale cart; and a sculpture that uses family photos from Juarez and Cucamonga, both places connected to the artist’s grandparents.

One favorite of mine is a satirical short film about a telecommuting laborer in Mexico who by push-button operates a machine in the U.S. This invented but weirdly plausible job is treated with utmost gravity in the film, which calls this class of laborers “cy-braceros.”

That’s a mixture of cyberspace and the 1942-64 bracero program of short-term labor contracts between the U.S. and Mexico. Alex Rivera made his film in 1997 and it seems fresher than ever.

Surveying the mix of media in “Land of Milk & Honey,” Hernandez, a painter, admitted he’s surprised there aren’t more paintings. (No one can accuse him of bias in his choices.) But he understands why, given the nature of the show.

“New media,” he said, “is better to convey ideas.”

Possibly the most eye-catching piece is a 10-foot diameter ring filled with a certain industrial food product. The title of Jazmin Urrea’s piece says it all: “Flamin’ Hot Cheetos.”

Her piece is meant as a commentary on highly processed food, synthetic food dyes, obesity and lack of access to nutritious food.

When I visited, it was a popular selfie spot, people standing with phones held high to get themselves

and the ankle-high pool of crunchiness in the same frame.

“Are these Flamin’ Hot Cheetos?” one passerby exclaimed in amusement. “All I can say is, do not let any high schoolers up here.”

Later, two young women were observed laughing on their way to the restroom. Said one: “That’s crazy!” Said the second: “It’s literally Hot Cheetos!”

As with any museum, you shouldn’t touch the art, and you definitely shouldn’t eat it. In this case, the Cheetos are old and probably expired, if that makes a difference.

Hernandez marveled: “They haven’t lost color. They haven’t lost shape or form.”

Gomez confided: “The artist said dogs would come up, sniff it and run away. But with the humans, it’s a different story.”

brIEfly

On March 10, 1997, yours truly first reported for work at the Inland Valley Daily Bulletin’s Ontario newsroom. This was my fourth newspaper job in 10 years, and it seems to have stuck. Today marks 26 years for me at what’s now a group of intertwined newspapers that includes The Sun, The Press-Enterprise and The Daily Facts. Wherever you read me, it’s my pleasure to serve.

David Allen writes Friday, Sunday and Wednesday, columns that dogs come up to, sniff and run away from. Email dallen@scng.com, phone 909-483-9339, and follow [davidallencolumnist](#) on Facebook and [@davidallen909](#) on Twitter.