

Episode 8: The Great Tortilla Conspiracy

Río Yañez: My name is Río Yañez. Today, I'm going to tell you the top-secret origin of The Great Tortilla Conspiracy. The Great Tortilla Conspiracy is a tortilla art collective made up of myself, printmakers Jos Sances and Art Hazelwood, and my late father, René Yañez.

We had our start in the De Young Museum in 2007 as part of programming for the Chicano Exhibit, which was a collection of Cheech Marin Mexican American art that my father curated. The very first iteration of The Great Tortilla Conspiracy was we would transfer images onto tortillas using iron-on-T-shirt transfer paper.

Those of you who grew up in the '70s and '80s are familiar with the designs that you could buy in a store and then iron them onto a T-shirt. We did that, except we used heat to transfer them onto tortillas. We had our first event at the Kimball Gallery, what was then the Kimball Gallery at the De Young Museum.

We created our own images. One of the very first tortillas we produced was that an image of Frida Kahlo that I had created. Frida has been a long-lasting influence and inspiration for us. Her iconography has definitely played a very large role in our work.

Over the years, we've experimented with the medium because initially, when we were creating tortilla art, people would ask us, "Can I eat this?" We'd hand them a tortilla with some artwork on it. The first question we get is, "Can I eat this?" We would have to tell them, "No. It's actually a thin layer of plastic and it's not good for you."

But Jos Sances, one of our members, came up with a genius idea of combining Hershey's chocolate syrup and a little bit of food coloring to create an amazing and delicious edible ink that could pass through a silkscreen. Using that formula, we were able to silkscreen images directly onto tortillas and have them be edible.

Throughout the years, we've handed out tortillas at protests, at art events. Time and again, we've come back to our home at the De Young Museum. Throughout the course of our career as The Great Tortilla Conspiracy, we have definitely looked towards the artwork, the imagery, the iconography, the aesthetics of Frida Kahlo.

My father was part of a group of that initially brought her work to the Bay Area in the '70s. She has had a profound influence on him. For him and for me as well, it's Frida's surrealist's work that is wild and outrageous, but also deeply personal and autobiographical.

That kind of element has just had a profound and lasting impact. That's definitely reverberated with the kind of both funny and political artwork that The Great Tortilla Conspiracy has been putting on tortillas.

Please keep an eye out for us. Hopefully, when we're in a much better state, we would love to see you at one of our events. You can find more by googling The Great Tortilla Conspiracy. All right. Stay healthy, everyone.

Transcription by CastingWords