

Episode 1: Rio Yañez

My name is Rio Yañez. My father, René Yañez, helped Frida Kahlo's art to San Francisco in the 1970s. It was her first gallery show on the West Coast, and it's had a long lasting impact on the Bay ever since.

Local Voices aims to highlight artists in the Bay Area. This iteration of Local Voices focuses on the influence of Frida's art and iconography on contemporary Bay Area culture.

This is Rio Yañez. This is the story of how Frida came to the Bay Area. Frida Kahlo does have a fairly extensive history with San Francisco. She created some really amazing artwork. She remarried Diego in San Francisco.

There was a lot of unique moments in Frida's history that transpired in the Bay Area, but she didn't get exhibited in the West Coast California, the Bay Area, San Francisco at all until the '70s. This is a brief story of how that happened.

In the early '70s, a group of Mexican American Chicano artists came together and formed Galería de la Raza. It was the first Chicano Art Gallery in the Bay Area. My dad, René Yañez, was part of the collective. Looking back, knowing my dad, and thinking about why Frida really resonate with him, part of it was, of course, national pride -- my dad being Mexican.

There was a certain appeal the fact that Frida was a surrealist. I hate to say it, but she just had the pains you could really get stoned to. [laughs] The other thing is that as a surrealist, she had this incredible body of work that was so autobiographical.

In the time, place, and culture of the early '70s in San Francisco, that connected with a lot of people here and including my dad. Where my dad tells it, he was able to get a catalog of a traveling exhibition of Frida's work that was traveling through Mexico. Up until this point, there had only been one single exhibition of her work in the United States. That was in New York City.

He got this catalog, and he went to SFMOMA. He was able to get a sit down face-to-face meeting with someone at MOMA to essentially pitch the story. In that moment, he sat down. The person at MOMA flipped through the book, looked at her work.

He was told that no one was interested in this artwork. No one was interested in what a Mexican artist had to say. No one was interested in Diego Rivera's girlfriend and sent him packing. Years later, Frida would return to MOMA, but this was more than two decades prior to that.

Having been rejected at MOMA, my dad coordinated with the collective at Galería de la Raza to produce a show in honor of Frida and featuring Frida's work. My dad, Amalia Mesa-Bains, Ralph Maradiaga, these were all the key figures in bringing Frida to San Francisco.

In the late '70s, on the corner of 24th & Bryant, they staged the West Coast very first exhibition of Frida's art. It created a sensation. It had so much attention more so than anyone could have imagined.

It's wild to think now in 2020 that a little storefront gallery on 24th & Bryant, you could just walk in and be just inches away from one of Frida's paintings, but there it was. That's what it took to get Frida to California, to San Francisco.

Years later in the '80s, the Galería would stage another exhibition of Frida's work. It continued to grow in popularity. From what I understand, that second exhibition was when they started to be more attention put on Frida's aesthetics, Frida as kind of a fashion icon, Frida as someone that people look towards as more than just a visual artist.

It was the personality of Frida that started to emerge. It was the iconography of Frida that started to take shape as we know it. Then that idea of Frida's iconography, her aesthetics, and her larger-than-life presence fully bloomed when my dad curated an exhibition of her work.

At the time was the biggest exhibition of her work in the United States at the Mexican Museum, back when it was at Fort Mason. For that show, he put out an open-call for what he called Frida Look-Alikes in the local neighborhood newspapers of the Mission District and the local Spanish language newspapers of San Francisco.

He put out a call -- I think it was also in the "SF Weekly" -- said, "Do you look like Frida?" He gathered a small group of performers together to create tableaux vivants, which are live recreations of her paintings. He would dress them in elaborate costumes. They would sit on these platforms and recreate poses and images of her paintings. It created such a stir.

So much so that in the late '90s, when SFMOMA staged its own Frida show, they brought him into recreate that on a much larger scale. Decades after being rejected by the MOMA, my dad found himself back there. He didn't curate the show, but he brought his army of Frida's together.

It was a wild scene. There was Frida's work in the coat check. Frida's standing around critiquing the artwork and the permanent collection. They were Frida's painting. Frida's making music. It was such an amazing experience. From there, my dad was just hitched to Frida as he was the one that everyone associated her with here in the Bay.

He had quite an amazing career of working with her artwork, her image, her iconography, and her larger-than-life...being that she became posthumously through all this. It's been an amazing experience to grow up with that. That is the story of how Frida came to San Francisco.

[pause]

Rio: This podcast was brought to you by the Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco. Next up, we have the dynamic duo behind Twin Walls Mural Company. Learn more about Kahlos' impact and their journey as women in the arts in San Francisco.

For more information on the artist featured in the series, please visit deyoung.famsf.org. Thank you for tuning in to Local Voices. This is your host, Rio Yañez. I will see you next time.

Transcription by CastingWords