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8-foot tall Flamin' Hot Cheetos statues are a fiery symbol of food inequality

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BY [BRITTANY LEVINE BECKMAN](#)
5 DAYS AGO

Growing up, eating Flamin' Hot Cheetos was a lifestyle for artist Jazmin Urrea. Even after she had an emergency appendicitis when she was 12, one of the first things she asked the adults in her life was whether she could still eat Flamin' Hot Cheetos. Of course, they said. No problem, they said.

But over time, she realized there was a problem.

The snack came to represent her complicated relationship with processed foods and the food desert she grew up in in South Los Angeles, where it was difficult to buy affordable, good quality food. At the same time, it became a [meme superstar](#), inspiring internet love far and wide.





IMAGE: BRITTANY LEVINE BECKMAN / MASHABLE

Urrea poured all of those associations with the chip into an art exhibit that is reminiscent of Stonehenge, but composed of a massive amount of Flamin' Hot Cheetos. The project, called "Imperishable," is one of 15 new works scattered throughout Los Angeles parks focused on the power of food.

Standing in the center of her six, 8-by-4-by-2-foot plexiglass containers filled with more than 200 pounds of Flamin' Hot Cheetos each is unsettling, overwhelming, and ... kind of gross. Especially when you look closely at the top of each statue and see a layer of "Cheeto sweat," as Urrea calls it — the condensation that results from the sun beating down on the greasy kernels.

"I wanted people to get the sense of being surrounded and engulfed by it," Urrea said, standing in the shade of one of her bright orange towers. Flamin' Hot Cheetos have flooded our lives. They're on pizza and [in bagels](#); there's Flamin' Hot Cheetos [clothing](#) and jewelry. There's a meme, Urea recalled, that posits, "If you're Latina, you eat" in chunky white lettering over a picture of Flamin' Hot Cheetos. When she substitute teaches, she sees preschool students eating the chips for breakfast. Google searches for "Flamin' Hot Cheetos" have jumped over the past decade. I even spotted an empty bag of Flamin' Hot Cheetos on the grass near where Urrea's Cheetos cubes loom in a city park — a poetic piece of litter.

This isn't the first time the 29-year-old has turned Flamin' Hot Cheetos into art. She's poured the Cheetos into a [pit](#), had people step on them, and invited others to eat them (with fair warning they'd been stepped on before). Each time she's used the same collection of Flamin' Hot Cheetos, which she's kept in bins in a storage unit since 2016. She calls it her "Cheeto archive." She and her team had to jiggle the Cheetos in colanders to shake away orange dust that had accumulated in the bins, but otherwise the chips have survived quite a beating.



[View this post on Instagram](#)

Today is my birthday and I am super excited that I got to spend it building my first #publicart piece for @current_la! 🏠👤🍰🎈🍰🍦 The project is titled IMPERISHABLE and it opens October 5th at Martin Luther King Jr. Park! Stay tuned for more updates on events, aesthetics, and install progress! #currentla #currentlafood #imperishable #dca #food #birthday @theicala

A post shared by [Jazmín Urrea \(@lumpyjazzy\)](#) on Sep 26, 2019

Other works in the city-wide art show called Current:LA Food aim to also spark conversations around food, both difficult and joyful, said Asuka Hisa, director of learning and engagement at the Institute of Contemporary Art Los Angeles,

which partnered with the city's Department of Cultural Affairs on the monthlong event. They range from the "Contemporary Museum of Temporary Containers," which consists of used take-out containers painted pink, to "Comida a Mano," an outdoor earthen oven and video exhibit that celebrates cultural diversity.

SEE ALSO: [Eva Longoria signs to direct biopic of Flamin' Hot Cheetos creators](#)

While Los Angeles may be a haven for [experimental and diverse cuisine](#), it also struggles with food inequality. The homeless go hungry and plenty of neighborhoods are considered food deserts.



Seeing the Flamin' Hot Cheetos up close.

IMAGE: BRITTANY LEVINE BECKMAN / MASHABLE

"Food is a good focus point for addressing many issues that surround it," Hisa said, adding that Urrea's work taps into larger issues rather than just being a monument to Flamin' Hot Cheetos.

"As an artist, she's appreciating how toxic that color is when you see it in that quantity, but also how seductive it is in its toxicity," she opined.



IMAGE: BRITTANY LEVINE BECKMAN / MASHABLE

Turning Cheetos into material for her art has changed how Urrea sees a snack she once craved.

"I accidentally deleted the love for them," she said "It doesn't have that same rush any more."

If you're in Los Angeles, you can see "Imperishable" at [Martin Luther King Jr. Park](#) from Oct. 5, 2019 - Nov. 3, 2019. For more information on other Current:LA Food projects, visit [currentla.org](#).

TOPICS: ACTIVISM, FLAMIN-HOT-CHEETOS, FOOD, SOCIAL GOOD

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