

COMMUNITY ARTS

Jazmin Urrea Builds Monumental Cheetos Sculpture in South L.A.

Janna Zinzi | October 15, 2019



Current:LA Food is a city-wide triennial presenting art projects by 15 national and international artists and teams, who have taken on the global issue of food. See Current:LA Food all over the 15 council districts of Los Angeles. This article was made in partnership with The City of Los Angeles Department of Cultural Affairs (DCA) and the Institute of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles (ICA LA). Find out more about Current:LA Food on our coverage here.

“It’s like the Stonehenge of Cheetos.”

Tyrone, a community member, uttered this out loud as he stood amidst “Imperishable,” a public art installation boasting 8-foot-tall towers full of the vibrant colored snack food. Families, homeless folks and young people walking through Martin Luther King Jr. Park stop and stare, take photos or ask questions. The artist, Jazmin Urrea, stands on a step ladder putting the final touches on this work, which is part of this year’s Current:LA Food, a triennial celebration featuring art installations in 15 public parks across the city and a month of related programming in nearby community centers. The idea is to make art accessible because of its potency to spark conversations and inspire actions about social justice issues.

Urrea’s event focuses on food accessibility and equity and how this impacts Los Angeles’s diverse communities. “Imperishable” consists of six see-through towers filled with “Flamin’ Hot” Cheetos arranged in a circle, casting shadows

on the grass near the park entrance on Western Avenue in the Exposition Park neighborhood. Each tower weighs from 800 to 1,000 pounds and uses hundreds of bags of Cheetos. Urrea worked with a fabricator and someone specializing in construction for 15 twelve-hour days to make her vision a physical reality.



Jazmin Urrea working on "Imperishable" for Current:LA Food | Courtesy of the Department of Cultural Affairs, Los Angeles

“I wanted the person to feel encompassed essentially engulfed in the product,” explained Urrea. “I wanted you to feel surrounded and almost kind of minimal to highlight...that this is the food that's being pushed towards us and our community, and what's sold in convenience stores, liquor stores, and what's readily accessible.”

“I learned that you have to calculate for wind,” she also noted, simultaneously laughing and cringing at the idea of thousands of flaming red Cheetos flying around the park. “Can you imagine?” Urrea asked. It’s one example of the various logistical considerations she learned in bringing this grand-scale art installation to life. She learned to work with concrete to stabilize the towers with the weight of the Cheetos while getting a crash course in the science required to build an outdoor monument that has to last for a month outside in the elements. “It was intense!” she exclaimed.

Her art makes a bold statement about the lack of fresh food available in L.A.'s communities of color and the health risks caused by FD&C Red No. 4, Yellow No. 6 and other chemical additives found in readily available low-cost junk food. "Imperishable" reflects the "pervasive presence" of cheap processed snacks while healthier options are expensive and elusive. "These artificial dyes aren't just in Flaming Hot Cheetos; they're in other processed candies and stuff. They're in Takis; they're in Skittles."

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A wide shot of Jazmin Urrea working on "Imperishable," 8-foot tall Cheetos sculptures for Current:LA Food | Courtesy of the Department of Cultural Affairs, Los Angeles

“Flamin’ Hot” Cheetos are a particular staple and local favorite in urban communities in Los Angeles. These communities serving lower-income people and people of color also tend to be food deserts, areas with no supermarkets and little or no access to fresh foods. While Urrea was born and raised in South L.A., it was her college commute from Watts to California Institute of the Arts in Santa Clarita, where she noticed the disparity in food equity. “In Santa Clarita, a lot of people have access to a Whole Foods, Trader Joe's, like they're really close to get to. People in my community, we have to drive like what? An upwards of 25, 30 minutes. And if you're in public transportation, it can take up to an hour.”

She has seen the impact of the prolonged exposure to processed foods in the health of her family, her preschool students and even herself. The food additives are known to contain carcinogens, trigger hyperactivity, and offer no nutritional benefits. And they are practically everlasting. Because the Cheetos in the installation are unlikely to decompose during the month it's on display, it also affirms how unnatural the composition of snack food actually is.

One of the most powerful things about having this installation be so public, in a park that is a distinct part of the Jefferson Park community, is watching the community engage with the art.

“First it's like, you know, the initial shock of ‘Wait, Cheetos?’” explains Urrea. “Then it's super cute because I saw some kids being like, ‘Oh I get it, they're bad for you.’ And some little girls were like, ‘Eww it's chili, and it's red.’ It's interesting to see their parents telling them...and it's been really positive.”

Seeing people connect with the project has ignited a lot of conversations between Urrea and local folks about how they are experiencing the art. “A man who I was speaking to...Caesar, a local, he was just telling me ‘You know, I've witnessed a lot of gang violence in the area.’ And he was like, ‘I just hope you bringing something like this here, can inspire the teens.’ I almost cried.”

Connecting within community beyond the art is a major component of Current:LA, funded by the City of Los Angeles Department of Cultural Affairs. There will ongoing community events, workshops and discussions happening throughout the city until November 3. Urrea will be co-hosting a vegan food workshop with Angela Means Kaay, the owner and chef of Jackfruit Cafe, in MLK Jr. Park on October 24. Capacity is 30 people and it's a first-come, first-served basis, so RSVP here.

A visitor asked Urrea if she still eats Cheetos. She admits her sisters tried to feed her some but said she ate three and couldn't stomach anymore.

“They've become my art material.”

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Note: A pile of Cheetos | Still from "Artbound" Current LA

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