

Tortilla Bravo

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Felicia Cousart Matlosz -- The Fresno Bee

It's a pause-button moment when you first hear what Joe Bravo creates: "tortilla art."

That's right. Tortillas. White flour ones to be exact, baked extra large so that Bravo can paint bold images that reflect Hispanic culture and beyond. Some are thought-provoking. Others are just pure fun.

Visitors to Arte Americas in downtown Fresno can judge for themselves the substance of Bravo's unique art through Aug. 3. They will see such work as "Checano," his take on an iconic photo of Cuban revolutionary leader Che Guevara in modern mode for Chicanos. Bravo has Guevara wearing cool sunglasses, his right fist thrust up across his chest.

In all, 20 tortilla pieces and 10 of Bravo's regular paintings are on display. His first-ever exhibit in Fresno opened Friday.

"Chicano artists for years have done this kind of work in the past on tortillas," says Abelino Bautista, visual arts consultant for the Fresno museum. "For some reason, he seems more contemporary."

Bravo's tortilla art is attracting more attention. His exhibit this year at the Mexican Cultural Institute in Los Angeles was well received. He's appeared on the Tyra Banks television talk show. He has even been nominated for a Food Network Award. His next show is in Hong Kong. His art sells from \$1,800 to more than \$3,000 each.

Bravo's success allows him to keep creating. And he says he plans to lead a Fresno workshop July 14 for those interested in trying their hand. Details are being worked out; call the museum for more information.

Last week, the artist, who has also painted murals, shared his thoughts about his work with The Bee. He's 56, was born in San Jose and grew up in the border town of Calexico. A one-time graphic artist, he lives in Highland Park in Southern California.

Here are some excerpts from that conversation:

Why he started with tortillas: Bravo says his art, on many levels, is a representation of Latino-Chicano culture. But it all initially began out of dire need when he was a student at California State University, Northridge: "I had an art assignment due. I didn't have the money to buy canvas. I had the brushes and the paints. One morning, I was looking at corn tortillas, and I was thinking, 'Why not paint on them?'"

Why it would be years later that he explored the medium: About seven years ago, a friend remembered that tortilla art in college and said it made a great cultural, social statement. Bravo says that started him thinking again about the possibility ... but how to preserve them?

What the solution involved: Bravo developed a process involving modern acrylic varnish to preserve the art. He found a tortilla company that would make large flour tortillas. He puts his art usually in 28-inch-by-28-inch shadow-box frames.

How he starts to create: He equates it to artists who look at the grain in a piece of wood, or veins in marble. "I put them over my stove top, and I start burning them, rotating them," he says. "I get all these interesting burn marks on them. Then I varnish them. Then I have a stack to choose from. I then start looking at them and start tripping on them."

Why you should check out his traditional paintings, too: The Fresno show includes Bravo's "Juarez Porque?" It expresses his sorrow and outrage over the hundreds of women murdered since 1993 in Ciudad Juarez, a city just across the U.S. border from El Paso, Texas. The 6-foot-by-8-foot acrylic painting shows a nude woman in a sacrificial pose. A red cloth, which covers her face, drapes around her body in the shape of a question mark.

What Bravo says of his tortilla images: Because it's a tortilla, "I'm using a lot of imagery from Latino culture," he says. But he also says he's starting to explore universal themes. Bravo says: "There's all kinds of deep meaning that people are getting out of it. I expected some notoriety, but people are seeing a combination of culture, of just so many things. That's fine. Art is supposed to be

interpreted by the individual."

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