Where Other People See a Tortilla, Joe Bravo Sees a Feast of Images

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LOS ANGELES

Behold the humble tortilla! Home for beans, room for cheese, the welcome mat for all grilled meats. You or I? We see a tortilla and we think, yum, burrito night. But not Joe Bravo. No, mis amigos, Bravo looks at a toasted tortilla and he sees the Virgin of Guadalupe.

Or perhaps a sleeping pit bull. Or Emiliano Zapata. Or a cockroach, its head bursting into flame!

The point is that we have the eyes, but do not see. And that is why Joe Bravo is traveling to Hong Kong this month for an international exhibit of his tortilla art, and we are eating lunch at Taco Bell.

"One morning," says Bravo, 57, the memory still as fresh 35 years later as a crunchy chip with a scoop of salsa, "I was looking at this corn tortilla . . . " (He has since moved on to flour).

And? "I saw a canvas."

This was back in his wilder student days, at Cal State Northridge, a hothouse for Chicano art and politics in 1972, when he first took acrylic-paint brush to unleavened round bread. The early efforts were inspired. But, alas, short-lived. "I made a mobile of hanging tortillas, they were all painted, but they didn't preserve that well, and it blew apart in the Santa Ana winds."

Scattered like leftover Doritos in the storm.

Why the tortilla, one could ask. Why not the ceiling of, say, a chapel in the Vatican? "Necessity is the mother of invention," Bravo explains. "Mexicans, we Latinos, we have a history of being a resourceful people. We'll paint on tin, on walls, on cars, on anything." (He is a former art director for Lowrider Magazine.) One has the feeling that if you sat still long enough on Bravo's comfy couch at his tidy little bungalow in Highland Park, he might paint on you, too.

Because -- watch! Bravo is skiddling around his house/studio, showing off his painted tortillas. Here he comes, wearing an Aztec mask, made entirely of tortillas, and in place of jade and precious stones, he has pebbled the headdress with kernels of corn. "I'm thinking of making a whole suit of tortillas," he says, and you think, please,
can some foundation immediately DHL
a large check to this man so the world can witness the suit of painted lard and flour?

It has not been easy being a tortilla artist. For many years, Bravo worked as a commercial graphic designer (he proudly put two sons through Stanford and UCLA), but lately the world has come around to knowing eccentric genius when it sees it. Recently, his work was exhibited at the Mexican Cultural Institute in Los Angeles, which led to a current solo show at the Arte Americas cultural center in Fresno, which led to his upcoming trip to China, where he will display 20 tortillas at a huge mall in Hong Kong and perform demonstrations of his mastery of the medium. The buzz has garnered him pieces in the Los Angeles Times, on Spanish-language TV, and an upcoming entry in "Ripley's Believe It or Not!," which is like the Sotheby's catalogue for artists who work at the outer limits of human potential.

More accolades: Bravo got a runner-up stroll down the red carpet in Miami Beach at the 2007 Food Network Awards in the "play with your food" category (he lost to sculptor and photographer Liz Hickok and her "San Francisco in Jell-O" series). Bravo says that actor Cheech Marin, who is also an astute collector of Chicano art, is angling for a piece. Recently, Michael "Flea" Balzary, the bassist of the rock band (and interesting food pairing) Red Hot Chili Peppers, bought a large-format tortilla. Bravo's larger flour works are now selling for $3,200 (though a minor work on corn would go for $800, and a poster for $10).

How does he do it? Naturally, it all begins in his kitchen. Tumaro's Gourmet Tortillas company ("Can you give them a plug?" Why sure!) is now providing Bravo with especially large, custom-made flour tortillas measuring 32 inches across. "I felt I had to go bigger," he says. "An audience sees a painting on a little regular tortilla, they might go, okay. But to see a really, really big tortilla? That gets their attention."

To continue. Bravo places the tortillas on his stove top and fires up the gas. The round moist bready flesh begins to crinkle and toast and then burn in spots, creating a topography of subtle peaks and valleys freckled with brown, black and white. Then, Bravo lays the tortillas, steamy hot off the grill, on his cool tile countertop and puts a board on top and weighs it down with a pair of dumbbells. When they are cold and flattened, he covers one side (the back) with burlap (he gets it free from the local fire department; they use it for sandbagging against floods) and seals the tortilla with a varnish -- and then examines it, quite artistically.

"You see patterns," he says, "like when you look up at the clouds. Here," he points, "I'm seeing the fur of a jaguar." The correspondent is seeing a No. 3 special with extra onions from Tito's Tacos. "You're working with the environment of the tortilla," Bravo says. "It's almost like a collaborator, the tortilla is."

Like maybe how Michelangelo saw David trapped in the marble? "Yeah," Bravo says, arching his eyebrows, "something like that. But don't get too serious about it." In his kitchen, there are four or five tortillas ready to paint. He'll do some -- like the pit bulls -- in a hip-hoppy, lowrider style "for the young people." For the traditionalists, it is portraits of the revolutionary Zapata or Mayan kings or Aztec princesses. For the Hong Kong show, he did some Chinese dragons and "Ethnic Elvis," the King, but a pinch darker. The Tate Gallery in London included in a catalogue a Bravo tortilla called "Fridalupe," which is Mexican artist icon Frida Kahlo as la Virgen de Guadalupe, the 16th-century Mexican icon of the Virgin Mary. Also, he's done clown Ronald McDonald for the McDonald's launch of its new "snack wrap."

For that, someone accused Bravo of selling out. His response? "All the money that McDonald's has made off the Latino community? Are you kidding me? If they want to give a little back, I'll take the gig."

Bravo mentions that he is not the first to create tortilla art. "It's been done before," he says, "but I want to elevate the art form." And he has, says Abelino Bautista, curator at Arte Americas in Fresno, where 20 Bravo tortillas are now on display. "We were wondering ourselves, should we do this? Is this a gimmick? I can tell you it is a very, very well-received show. His work is unique and original and excellent. The public has flipped over this."

There is just something about seeing a painting of a raging bull with flame-red chili-pepper horns on a vinyl-like tortilla. Bravo knows, too, that his art is quoting popular history here: News of the apparition of the divine on the
humble tortilla appears occasionally. Religious folklore -- in Mexican culture and many others -- is crowded with reports (some pious, some not) whereby the faithful have seen the visage of Jesus or Mary in gnarled bark or passing clouds or on a cheese sandwich (auctioned on eBay). Bravo is not a mocker. It is beautiful that some people have seen such visions, he says.

Bravo sees things in his tacos, too. "I've solved the problem for everyone," he says. "Now they can go to exhibits and there is the image of the Virgin, big as life, right there on my tortilla."

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Calif. artist works with tortillas
HIGHLAND PARK, Calif., Aug. 4 (UPI) -- A California artist who uses tortillas as his canvas is heading to a solo exhibition in Hong Kong.

Joe Bravo of Highland Park, who began working with tortillas as a student at Cal State Northridge in the 1970s, has won a measure of recognition, The Washington Post reports. He started with corn tortillas but now usually works with extra-large flour tortillas custom-made for him.

Twenty Bravo tortillas will be on display at a mall in Hong Kong. He will demonstrate his art for visitors.

"Necessity is the mother of invention," Bravo said. "Mexicans, we Latinos, we have a history of being a resourceful people. We'll paint on tin, on walls, on cars, on anything."

Bravo, now 57, spent much of his career in commercial art, including a long stint as art director of Lowrider Magazine.

The artist looks to the tortillas to determine his art. When Bravo gets his tortillas from Tumaro's Gourmet Tortillas, he cooks them, backs them with burlap and varnishes the other side. Then he examines the wrinkles on each tortilla to see what he should paint.

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