MAIZE Y MÁS: FROM MOTHER TO MONSTER?
Work by Yvonne Escalante, Yolanda Guerra, Fernando Mastrangelo, Viva Paredes, and Jorge Rojas.

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The Latino artists in this exhibition present the unique heritage of maize and corn in the Americas and illustrate this crop’s journey from pre-Columbian times to today: once a sacred staple associated with a mother/virgin figure, today an engineered product which many compare to a monster. Artists in the exhibition include Yvonne Escalante, Yolanda Guerra, Fernando Mastrangelo, Viva Paredes, and Jorge Rojas.

In the Americas, maize, maíz, or corn has a unique cultural and economic heritage. From pre-Columbian times to today, corn is a dominant feature of social, political, economic and food systems. Aztecs, Mayans, and Mesoamerica in general revered this crop. Gods were created in homage to corn, and many indigenous and pre-Columbian cultures believe that human beings were made of corn. Today, 40% of U.S. corn is genetically engineered, likely different from its pre-Columbian cousin. Still, corn, one of the first domesticated foods, has a history full of ritual, expectation, and myth. The artists in this exhibition pay attention to our complex historical and contemporary relationship to corn, illustrate the role it plays in our current food system, and explore the idiosyncratic role of corn in Latin American culture.

México and the Huichol: an example
The Huichol, a native American group in western central México whose customs remain largely pre-Columbian, exemplify one of many unique and complex Latin American approaches to corn. First, the Huichol believe that human existence originated from five distinct varieties of corn cultivated in their region. Consequently, they are obliged to plant only those traditional varieties of corn in order to preserve the original corn types that are responsible for their existence. To do otherwise will result in losing their communal rights. Further, each variant of corn is associated with the five directions of the cosmos—tuxame/white (north), yauwime/dark blue (south), taxawime/yellow (east), tailawime/purple (west), and tsayule/red (center). Corn for the Huichol is both celestial and earthly.

In terms of social structure, Huichol farmers use the word “marriage” to describe their relationship to corn. The corn creation myth begins with the marriage between the groom Watakame and the maiden of corn, who is asked to prepare a meal as punishment for not helping with the household chores. The reprimanded maiden grinds the corn on the metate as blood streams down her hands; soon after, she disappears. Watakame, in danger of being famished, is forced to pay homage to his mother-in-law, a pigeon, in order to bring back the corn. He presents her with gifts and prepares elaborate rituals. Even today, growing corn requires intensive physical labor and rituals that include pilgrimages, offerings, music, and dance. The “marital” relationship
between the Huichol and corn can be described as interdependent: human intervention produced corn, and corn sustains humans.

Not surprisingly, the Huichol’s social life relies on corn rituals that preserve their symbolic structure. Ceremonies take place at least three times a year and are generally called mitotes (in today’s slang mitote is a significant social event). The first mitote in the cycle is related to planting crops and the onset of the rainy season, which corresponds to the summer solstice. The second is the mitote of corn or the first fruits, celebrated at the end of the rainy season. The third mitote is often called “the ritual of toasted or boiled corn.” It celebrates the grain that has been harvested and stored and the preparation of the cornfields [clearing with fire], which takes place during the dry season. The mitote (and tlamanes) are highly protocolarian. The ceremonies ask the higher powers for permission to plant and for a good rainy season and then give thanks for the harvest. Each member of the community has a particular role in the mitote, and as such the cycle of the cornfield organizes the bulk of the social life.

Given their relationship to corn, this community is particularly involved in lobbying against genetically engineered corn in México. New variants of corn are foreign to their system and further, undermine the spiritual, social, political and economic role of traditional corn in the Huichol culture. “Corn is our blood,” the Huichol proudly announce.

The Exhibition
Exploring the myths and legends surrounding corn is at the core of Salt Lake City-based artist Jorge Rojas’ work. For this exhibition, the artist is presenting video, a performance, and a corn mandala. These works are part of a larger project, Gente de Maiz, which explores the use of corn in ceremonies and mystical practices of divination. The video, shot during a live performance, shows Rojas as he embodies a “tortilla oracle,” channeling ancient shamanistic practices and rituals. He also reads people’s tortillas (similar to tarot cards or tea leaves). Rojas, interested in the role of symbols and the revelation of hidden knowledge, is self-trained in tarot reading. Similarly, his multi-colored mandala made entirely out of corn kernels is a form of training; it is an exercise in patience, an encouragement to slow down life’s rhythms, and to respect the length of the process. The ritualistic
tempo, rhythm and concentration on repetition provide a connection with the higher orders of the cosmos. With *Gente de Maíz*, Rojas explores our metaphysical and ritual connection to corn and food and encourages us to think about our relationship to the food we eat today.

In Latin American communities such as the Otomí, the Virgin Mary and corn are considered equally miraculous—to the point that one can stand for the other. Mesoamerican beliefs in corn were complemented by Christian liturgy in that both (corn and the Virgin) participated in the human myth of origin and good omens. The association of the female figure with Earth allowed indigenous peoples to ideologically accept the image of the Virgin as their mother. Hence, the rituals of corn became inextricably intertwined with Marian rites that continue today. Made entirely of cornmeal and corn kernels, the Virgin Mary in this exhibition is the work of Brooklyn-based artist **Fernando Mastrangelo**. *This Too Shall Pass* works on two levels: it illustrates the synonymous relationship between the Virgin Mary and corn, and also comments on the military and missionary conquest of Mexican indigenous populations by the Spanish. Mastrangelo further extends the analogy of conquest and domination to today’s mass cultivation of corn and the appropriation of indigenous farming land by North American agribusiness. For the artist, the black (and reflective) tile that rests directly on the wall behind the sculpture represents cultural and physical death. This metaphorically black-and-white composition reminds us that today, large tracts of Mexican farmland have been rendered unavailable to locals in order to meet the energy and consumption needs of American and foreign consumers.

**Yvonne Escalante** is a San José-based artist also concerned with the corn cultivation in Latin America by North American agribusiness. Her work represents the complex relationship between these two Americas, her own cultural heritage—a Midwesterner with Latin American roots—and a personal family history that quickly transitioned from a rural/farming to a military life. Escalante explores the balance/imbalance of these relationships with a series of works that marry corn with tools of war (bombs, bullets, grenades). *The Kernel of Truth* series brings together farm and military family histories, and in so doing, illustrates the destructive nature
of cultivating transgenic corn and its adverse effects on indigenous corn populations. For Escalante, “one kernel holds some grain of truth.” She encases real corncobs in resin polished to a fine finish, a treatment that brings to mind a reliquary; each cob is capped off with a brass bullet casing. This hybrid unit juxtaposes life and creation (corn) against destruction and death (bullet). From a distance, these units appear to be bullets; up close, they reveal something different. Similarly, while transgenic corn appears from a distance to solve a global problem of food distribution and nutrition, it may not be so, upon closer inspection.

Escalante also presents *Keeping Time*, a soundbox constructed from wood and brass, in which the music cylinder has been replaced with a glass corncob. The hourly sound created by this machine evokes a nostalgic passage of time. Hourly, a chime sounds, signaling “the progression of our lives.” Yet, for Escalante, “memory seems to find loopholes in time, weaving in and out of existence.” Glass is used to crystallize fleeting moments and memories; the half-eaten glass cobs represent a landscape that continues to be altered by human touch and consumption while simultaneously capturing and preserving the eating event. Corn, like music, connects us to our past and future, to other times and places. And there lies another metaphysical dimension in the Latin American relationship to corn.

For the Otomí, the tortilla (a patty version of corn) is a ceremonial tool. The Otomí’s religious celebrations include painted and stamped tortillas that bear mythic images of plants, animals, and images of the Immaculate Conception. This practice dates back to the late 17th century, when Franciscan missionaries used tortillas as a tool of evangelization, linking them directly to round painted canvases of the Virgin Mary from that period. *The Miracle Tortillas*, by San José-based artist *Yolanda Guerra*, are an updated and feminist version of the Otomí tortilla. They pay homage to women who have been influential to her personally, and to women who protect and continue the lifeblood of cultural customs. Her work also reminds us that, unlike today, where buying is easy, tortillas were once only made at home. The first modern “miracle tortilla” can be traced back to October 1977 in New México, when Maria Rubio, preparing a burrito for her husband, noticed burns on the
tortilla that resembled the image of Jesus Christ. The miracle tortilla quickly received the attention of skeptics and the faithful who flocked to see this miracle. In the following 2 years over 30,000 people visited the home of María Rubio. Since then, the miracle tortilla has become ingrained into the collective conscious, encouraging more people to come forward, over the years, with their own miracle tortilla. Guerra’s piece plays with the idea of divination and spontaneous miracles and shows the symbolic content of corn as a miraculous crop—a divine phenomenon that ensures cultural heritage and human survival.

Paying homage to the great diversity of the corn cultivated in the Americas, San Francisco-based artist Viva Paredes’ installation is comprised of 27 glass vessels that mimic the shape of corn. The vessels are filled with various types of heirloom corn seed and represent a small sampling of over 1,000 corn hybrids that exist today. In this work, varying colors of corn and kernel sizes speak to its genetic complexity, long history of cultivation, and most importantly, our interdependent relationship to it. The glass containers also suggest a type of seed bank that preserves these valuable native species that are rapidly being replaced by transgenic variants.

In contrast, Paredes also presents an installation of small containers holding specimens of transgenic corn and its byproducts: high fructose corn syrup, cornstarch and others that are no longer considered food. The U.S. Food and Drug Administration considers these “ingredients” used to make “food products”—in this view, corn is neither food nor a food product but only an ingredient. The majority of genetically engineered plants—corn, canola, soybean, and cotton—are typically used to make ingredients that are then used in other food products. Such ingredients include cornstarch in soups and sauces, corn syrup as a general purpose sweetener, and cottonseed oil, canola oil, and soybean oil in mayonnaise, salad dressings, cereals, breads, and snack foods.”

As of April 1, 2013, the FDA reviewed 95 submissions for engineered plants. Corn, at 30 submissions, accounts for 30% of the FDA consultations, the rest devoted to cotton, canola, soybean, and other crops including alfalfa, flax, papaya, plum, potato, squash, sugar beet, tomato, and wheat. No other crop is in such danger of being transformed beyond recognition and still is considered “corn.”

For the artists in this exhibition, corn is starting to amount to a split personality, in the same vein as Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde. Good and evil co-exist simultaneously in the same body, at opposite levels of morality. It can be said that, like these famous characters, (im)morality can be controlled with a special formula—with disastrous and life-ending consequences. Indeed, the artists in this exhibition live in fear of what is around the corn-er.
About the Artists

Yvonne Escalante received her M.F.A. in Spatial Arts from San José State University and a B.F.A. in Metal Arts from California State University, Long Beach. Her work explores themes of social and environmental justice. Yvonne draws connections between the degradation of our planet and the marginalization of peoples across the globe, whose skills, livelihoods, and cultures are replaced by modern agriculture and commerce. Drawing inspiration from the not-too-distant past, her art refers to a time when industrialization first began to shape our modern landscape. Objects she uses seem easy to identify: their form indicates their function. Soon, though, manipulated materials and hybrid objects emerge to address paradoxes within the ever-changing American ideal.

Yolanda Guerra was born and raised in San José, CA and received a B.F.A. from San José State University. Guerra has exhibited her work throughout the Bay Area and is the recent recipient of an encouragement grant from the Center for Cultural Innovation. Guerra’s current body of work pays homage to Latina grandmothers, aunts, mothers who continue to pass on cultural customs, like making homemade flour tortillas for their families.

Fernando Mastrangelo lives and works in Brooklyn, NY and Los Angeles, CA. Mastrangelo received an M.F.A. from Virginia Commonwealth University in 2004 and a B.F.A. from Cornish College of the Arts in 2002. Currently, he is at work on Al One (2010-2012), which is to date the most ambitious and comprehensive sculptural installation to address the increasing complexities of social networking. Mastrangelo has exhibited internationally and his work is in the permanent collection of the Brooklyn Museum.

Viva Paredes is a Bay Area native born and raised in San José, California. Paredes is a graduate of California College of the Arts with an emphasis in sculpture. Influenced by her grandmother Petra, a native of Chihuahua, México, Paredes was initiated into the ancient tradition of medicinal plants and curanderismo (physical and spiritual healing through medicinal plants). Paredes’ work has been included in group exhibitions throughout the U.S. and México.

Jorge Rojas was born in Morelos, México and studied art at the University of Utah and at Bellas Artes in San Miguel de Allende, México, where he focused on painting and sculpture. Rojas’ work has been exhibited in galleries and museums across the United States, México and India and is included in numerous private and public collections, including The Mexican Museum in San Francisco and Museum of Latin American Art (MoLAA) in Long Beach, California. Rojas currently resides and works in Brooklyn, New York; he also teaches mural painting, set design and other art-related workshops in New York City public schools.

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MACLA is an inclusive contemporary arts space grounded in the Chicano/Latino experience that incubates new visual, literary and performance art in order to engage people in civic dialogue and community transformation. MACLA is located at 510 South First Street, San José, CA 95113.

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