



Justin Favela Ruta Madre



Justin Favela: *Ruta Madre*, installation view, Contemporary Art Museum St. Louis, September 8, 2023–February 11, 2024. Photo: Dusty Kessler.

Las Vegas-based artist Justin Favela is known for his grand murals of desert landscapes and playful sculptures of food products all created from the basic materials of tissue paper, cardboard, and glue. The artworks evoke joy and humor, while also conveying ideas about authenticity, place, and Favela's family history as a Mexican and Guatemalan American. The artist complicates notions of what it means to be Latinx in the US, showing the multiple dimensions of Latinidad through his colorful and layered works.

Favela produces large-scale installations using his signature technique of assembling and adhering thousands of hand-cut pieces of tissue paper as if brushstrokes of paint. His process involves projecting an image on a surface, creating a paint by numbers schematic, and working with a palette of 20–30 colors of commercial tissue paper to translate the image. Each strip of paper is applied to the wall with glue, a deeply labor- and time-intensive process that results in vibrant, monumental works akin to abstract paintings.



Justin Favela: *Ruta Madre*, detail view, Contemporary Art Museum St. Louis, September 8, 2023–February 11, 2024. Photo: Dusty Kessler.

Favela develops his large-scale murals and sculptures by reinterpreting historical paintings by Latinx artists or by imagining his own compositions. These pieces often draw inspiration from the location in which he is working or from art history or pop culture. Rather than make work about his family history and generational trauma as a Latino, which is a common pull in the contemporary art world, the artist began to identify subjects that Latinx artists avoid making work about because they are considered unserious or not real art. “The piñata was the first thing I thought of,” says the artist. Piñatas allow Favela to explore cultural appropriation and exploitation, and what it means to have one’s heritage reduced to a party decoration. Through this ubiquitous Mexican form, Favela’s installations become a site where Latin American stereotypes are embraced with the purpose of dismantling them. There is always a deeper significance to these exuberant forms beyond their enticing material exteriors.

The lighthearted and playful quality of Favela’s works acts as a key element in their political positioning. There is an inviting aspect to the piñata material, and sense of celebration through associations with family picnics and parties. The artist states, “As a queer person of color working in the United States, I believe that expressing joy, making art accessible, and taking up space can be a political act.” By using everyday materials and providing visitors with a joyful experience, Favela disrupts institutional hierarchies and places emphasis on accessibility and overall fun. When conceiving an exhibition, the artist harkens back to his first museum

visits in his youth, and taps into the childlike wonder of seeing something recognizable and seeing oneself represented within the art on view.

For CAM, the artist presents a new site-responsive work reflecting on St. Louis’ geographic and cultural position as Gateway to the West, and the largest city between Los Angeles and Chicago along the historic Route 66 highway. On view is a lowrider filled with an abstract collage of various symbols and road signs from Route 66 as well as designs culled from the side panels and hoods of lowrider cars, and Latinx cultural symbols. The exhibition title, *Ruta Madre* (or Mother Road), focuses on lowrider culture, drawing inspiration from the iconic Gypsy Rose, a 1964 Chevy Impala painted by Jesse Valadez in East Los Angeles. The car was an homage to the mid-century burlesque star Gypsy Rose Lee and was made in honor of Valadez’s mother—both of which indicate the unsung role of women and queer people in lowrider culture. As art in motion, Valadez’s car came to symbolize and define the Chicano lowrider movement through its vibrant pink paint job and unique detailing, including dozens of roses, veiling, spider webbing, and scrolling.

The title of the exhibition, *Ruta Madre*, is a play on words with multiple meanings. It translates in English to “Mother Road,” a common nickname for Route 66. It also references the mother of all lowriders—the Gypsy Rose. For Favela it is also a cheeky reference to the Chicano exclamation “Putá Madre!” which can be positive and negative, according to the artist.

Lowrider culture uses customization as a way to resist a mainstream American society that too often homogenizes and suppresses the creativity of its minorities. At the heart of lowrider culture is an expression of uniqueness and originality. For the artist, lowriders are also a Chicano appropriation of the car as a symbol of American progress. Rather than expressing a universal experience, each car tells an individual story connected to family, religion, and Latinx cultural pride. Lowriders have traversed this country from the US–Mexico border to Chicago, and the phenomenon has even made its way as far as Japan and Brazil. Favela’s work celebrates the movement of cars, people, and cultures across the US and beyond, and the visibility of Latinx representation along the way.

Favela also takes inspiration from other Chicano artistic spaces such as Chicano Park, located in San Diego’s oldest Mexican-American neighborhood. The park is home to the largest concentration of Chicano murals in the world, with more than 100 paintings on seven acres. The murals at the park act as a way to transmit the history and culture of Mexican-Americans and Chicanos. They cover many themes, including immigration and family, and feature significant historical and civil rights leaders. The artist considers his work—which he often refers to as murals—in relation to these paintings and their legacy.

Ruta Madre is inspired by *The Great Wall of Los Angeles* by Judith F. Baca, a half-mile long mural that celebrates the plural histories of California from the prehistoric era through the 1950s. Begun in 1974 and completed over

five summers, *The Great Wall* pictures, according to Baca, “a long narrative of another history of California; one which included ethnic peoples, women and minorities who were so invisible in conventional textbook accounts.” *The Great Wall* functions as a visual narrative and timeline, illustrating important historical events and figures. Each scene flows into the next, with clever transitions and abstracted imagery, from which Favela takes cues for *Ruta Madre*’s overall composition and design.

A major component to the exhibition is Family Fiesta, a one-day participatory performance by the artist in which he activates the mural. Family Fiesta furthers Favela’s attempts at disrupting institutional hierarchies by welcoming new audiences into the museum and creating a space for celebration. The artist and ten of his family members host the fiesta, and the event includes food, music, games, entertainment, and piñatas. In Family Fiesta, the event is taken out of its traditional context (a cookout in a backyard or a park) and into unconventional locations, where the artist “seeks to highlight people’s expectations of a fiesta, and at the same time, dismantle notions of location and institutional inclusion.”

Alongside the mural and its activation, Favela presents a new video for CAM’s outdoor projection series, Street Views. The video *Cruisin’* functions as a teaser for *Ruta Madre*, an invitation for anyone passing CAM to enter the museum’s galleries.



Justin Favela: *Cruisin’*, installation view, Contemporary Art Museum St. Louis, September 8, 2023–February 11, 2024. Photo: Dusty Kessler.

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Justin Favela. Photo courtesy Mikayla Whitmore.

Justin Favela (b. 1986, Las Vegas, NV; lives and works in Las Vegas, NV) is known for large-scale installations and sculptures that manifest his interactions with American pop culture and the Latinx experience. He has exhibited his work both internationally and across the US. His installations have been commissioned by museums including the Denver Art Museum in Colorado, Crystal Bridges Museum of American Art in Arkansas, and El Museo del Barrio in New York. He is the recipient of the 2021 Joan Mitchell Foundation Fellowship. He holds a BFA in Fine Art from the University of Nevada, Las Vegas.

Justin Favela: Ruta Madre is organized for the Contemporary Art Museum St. Louis by Misa Jeffereis, Associate Curator.

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