



## Painted Tortillas Open Doors for Artist

[Vida en el Valle](#), News Feature, Juan Esparza Loera, Posted: Jun 24, 2007

*Artist Joe Bravo paints the Virgen de Guadalupe and other iconic Latino and pop culture figures on large flour tortillas.*

FRESNO, Calif. -- Joe Bravo favors flour tortillas that have the qualities of Texas: Huge, impressive and unique.

The Los Angeles resident who honed his political views during the Chicano Movement and the Vietnam War savors the tortillas the way Da Vinci would eye a canvas, Michelangelo would see a slab of granite or Scorsese would see a script: A vehicle with which to project art.

Bravo doesn't eat the tortillas -- at least not these monstrous ones produced by Tortillería San Marcos at \$15 a dozen. He paints on them. Anything from a relaxing pit bull to the Virgen de Guadalupe (the most popular tortilla art with eight images thus far). From Mexican icons like La Doña María Félix to noted revolutionists like Ché Guevara. From hulking luchadores to a menacing Mayan warrior.

The former advertising/marketing artist has gotten more than his 15 minutes of fame with his unique exhibit that ran more than four months past its original two-month stay at the Mexican Cultural Institute on historic Olvera Street in Los Angeles. He has been interviewed by Tyra Banks, 'Despierta América,' 'Al Rojo Vivo' and numerous other television stations.

Reporters tracked him down after Agustín Gurza of the Los Angeles Times featured him in a March report.

Banks commissioned a drawing of her with devil horns, and Flea of the Red Hot Chili Peppers has one of Bravo's paintings of the Virgen de Guadalupe. Even Ronald McDonald -- he of the hamburger fame -- has his face on a tortilla.

He recently landed a tortilla company as a sponsor and will soon evolve into using colored tortillas as his canvas.

The artist isn't rolling in dough because of the instant fame, but that is not the goal for tortilla masterpieces that go for between \$1,800 and \$5,000 apiece.

And, Bravo doesn't want people to get the idea that he is nothing but a tortilla artist. He has worked on murals and other mediums. The tortilla fame, he figures, can open the door for people to see his art.

"It's like a curiosity at first, a novelty," said Bravo last Friday evening at a reception for his exhibit at Arte Américas in downtown Fresno. 'The Tortilla Paintings and other Artworks of Joe Bravo' runs through Aug. 3. This is his third solo exhibit.

"But then once people see that the art relates to the tortilla, that's good. I don't mind anymore," said Bravo, who will turn 57 next month.

It takes some getting used to the tortilla art.

Ginny Quinn, who toured the exhibit in the Ruiz Gallery, gave a mixed review.

"It's really innovative to put it on tortillas, but I don't like the subject matter," said Quinn.

Others, like Dave Valenzuela loved what he saw.

"I think it is extremely imaginative; very creative," said Valenzuela. "I thought this would be a bit simple. It incorporates a lot of original ideas."

"They are beautiful," said Lisa Fernández. "I like the texture."

It can be hard for people to digest the tortilla art, admits Bravo.

"At first, they go into denial, 'No, that can't be a tortilla.' But once they start looking, 'It is a tortilla!,'" said Bravo. "Then they get past the novelty. I'm being funny or tongue in cheek, but I am trying to present this as serious artwork."

The story of the tortilla as a canvas goes back to Bravo's college years at Cal State Northridge. He had an art project due, but no money to buy canvas.



"It seemed crazy but I didn't care 'cos I didn't have no money for canvas," said Bravo. "I had brushes and paint."

He was looking at a corn tortilla when he decided to "paint on it and see what happens." He painted five of them and assembled a hanging mobile.

The rest is history ... except it took a few more years before Bravo got back to the tortilla art. "An old schoolmate reminded me about them," said Bravo.

First, Bravo had to throw out the corn tortillas. "The problem with corn is that they can only make them a certain size," he said. "I wanted to go as large as possible. With flour tortillas, I get more variations. I like the burn figurations I get."

Bravo hung up the tortilla art for a couple of years because he didn't want to be labeled as the tortilla artist. But, he relented because it opens the door to his other works.

"It is opening a lot of doors, not just to me but to our culture," said Bravo, who was born in San José but grew up in Mexicali.

For his tortilla art, Bravo lets the tortillas dry naturally before he puts them on the stove top to heat up. That leaves marks on the tortillas that help Bravo imagine a painting. Some burn marks look like a bunch of snakes, so Bravo painted Medusa. Another had a swirling mass that became the background for the Virgen de Guadalupe.

Once the art is done, the tortilla is encased in layers of varnish for protection. Bravo figures his artwork will last a century or two before restoration is needed.

He tried deep-frying the tortillas but discovered the acrylic paint wouldn't stick.

Bravo isn't one to claim exclusivity to tortilla art. He will hold a workshop at Arte Américas on July 14. He sends suggestions to classrooms that are interested in following in his footsteps.

"As the tortilla has given us life, I give it new life by using it as an art medium," Bravo says on his website [JoeBravo.net](http://JoeBravo.net).

So, does he prefer corn or flour tortillas when it comes to eating?

"I kind of like corn tortillas because you can eat more of them," said Bravo. "Actually, I like them both."

Although he doesn't make tortillas at home, Bravo enjoys making sopes, which feature a thick slab of fried corn masa with beans or beef on top. No, there are no thoughts to becoming a sopes artist.

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