



Even the kitchen sink

Food-related works fill up the New Children's Museum's 'Feast: The Art of Playing With Your Food' exhibition

Artist Marisol Rendon installs what's supposed to be water coming out of a faucet as she works on her art display for children, "Wobbleland," which represents a kitchen sink with floating pieces of food in it, for "Feast: The Art of Playing With Your Food" at the New Children's Museum. HAYNE PALMOUR IV • U-T

JAMES CHUTE • U-T

Under the title of curator for the New Children's Museum's upcoming "Feast: The Art of Playing With Your Food," you may find the name Tomoko Kuta, the museum's director of education and exhibitions. ■ But it's not as simple as that. ■ "We had a lot of participation from the education team," said the museum's director, Julianne Markow. "We also involved the team that actually builds the exhibitions as well as the marketing team. And visitor services and the floor staff. We've also engaged a lot of outside partners."

At the New Children's Museum, whose mission is to stimulate imagination, creativity and critical thinking through engagement with contemporary art, it takes a village to put on an exhibition — especially one that will fill the museum with

more than a dozen newly commissioned, interactive works of art ranging from a giant kitchen sink to building blocks made out of mushrooms.

"Feast," which opens Oct. 13, will be on exhibit for as much as a year and put

to the test by thousands of children and their families.

"We took a very cross-departmental approach to this exhibition," Markow said. "We're advocates of creativity. That's what we do. And we know from the research that creativity requires divergent thinking. If we were siloed, and everybody was just working in their little narrow area, we wouldn't get that divergent thinking."

"We have to practice what we preach."

Even the artists are included among the collaborators, a role that is sometimes uncomfortable for individuals used to working in relative solitude.

"It is challenging for artists," Kuta said. "Most artists don't have to answer to someone asking, 'So what does that do? What does a child do with it? What are

some other ways to play with that?' And it's hard for some artists to have us as a constant voice asking questions."

"We never intend to step on toes or direct their project; we feel strongly about not doing that. But we do have to ask our questions."

Engaging questions

Since Markow's arrival in late 2011, and her appointment of Kuta shortly afterward, they both have been constantly asking questions. When they took over the museum's leadership, the exhibition "Trash" had already been installed by the previous director, Rachel Teagle, and they were able to look at its successes and challenges with a sense of relative detachment.

ARTS

'FEAST' • Engaging children in the exhibition was a key goal

FROM E4

"We literally put in place an observation study," Kuta said. "What was happening on the floor with our visitors? How much time were they spending with the artwork? What kind of questions were they asking about the artwork? What kind of engagement was there?"

"And out of that, we came up with some really important points we wanted to hit with 'Feast.'"

One of those points: The museum had been overgeneralizing about what constitutes "children" or "children and families."

"We found a one-child family is going to behave very differently from a family with multiple children, or children of different ages, or children who are able to read, or children who are still very much in toddler development," Kuta said.

"So what we had simply been saying, 'Oh, it's for children,' we really had to break it down; we had to start looking at what was happening developmentally, that is, both cognitively and physically. And that really helped us in looking at artists and in our initial conversations with artists."

When Kuta and then-curator Lauren Lockhart (now at Lux Art Institute in Encinitas) started researching artists, the "Feast" theme had not yet emerged.

"We are attuned to what our visitors are looking for, but we also want to keep our finger on the pulse of what's happening in contemporary art," Kuta said. "So we were just looking at different artists' work, visiting shows, getting in touch with galleries, all that sort of stuff. And we began to see some really strong work around food."

Several other themes were also considered, but with its multiple layers, nearly infinite possibilities, and rich potential for the



The New Children's Museum's entry bridge has been covered with a banana-inspired mural that features scratch-and-sniff elements. HAYNE PALMOUR IV • U-T PHOTOS



Local artist Marisol Rendon watches as her husband, Ingram Ober (left), and Jason Adkins install Rendon's "Wobbleland."

food carried the day.

Finding answers

The museum asked for proposals only from artists they wanted to engage, but rather than passively waiting for the art to appear and then install it, they asked for prototypes and tested many of the works in a basement studio the museum named the "test kitchen."

"We saw what was durable, how people were using the creations, how interested they were in them," Markow said.

"That gave us an oppo-

or, 'We want to tweak that,' or, 'This was really popular, but the materials didn't hold up, so let's find something that's more durable.'

"And we got some great visitor feedback, which helped us shape our programs."

A few promising projects, including one involving moving kitchen tables, didn't work out, in part because of safety issues (the tables were cool, but potentially dangerous).

"Most artists don't think about children as their audience," Kuta said

"Feast: The Art of Playing With Your Food"

When: Opens today

Where: New Children's Museum, 200 W. Island Ave., downtown

Admission: \$10 (free during today's grand opening)

Phone: (619) 233-8792

Online: thinkplaycreate.org

relation to safety concerns. They are thinking

The artists

Joe Yorty and John Brady: "Dinner T.V." — Locals Yorty and Brady have created "a video screening room hidden under an oversized dining room table." Children can get under the table and watch other children eating.

Jason Torchinsky: "Food Truckin'" — In addition to his artistic interests, the L.A.-based Torchinsky is a test driver and auto reviewer obsessed with transportation. Children are going to enjoy taking his custom vehicles for a spin.

Phil Ross: "Mo'd" — Ross, who is based in San Francisco, has assembled building blocks, about a thousand of them, out of mushrooms.

Nina Waisman: "Orange we..." — Now working in L.A. but a frequent exhibitor in San Diego, Waisman has built two large sculptures composed of ropes with rubber oranges that emit sounds. Kuta calls walking through it "magical."

Ross Karre: "Sound Kitchen" — The UC San Diego-educated Karre, a former member of the percussion ensemble red fish blue fish and also a collaborator with the International Contemporary Ensemble (ICE), has playfully transformed a kitchen into a recording studio. (Adults won't be able to resist playing his Guitar-BQ.)

Tattfoo Tan: "Nature Matching System" — Tan's mural, which is a grid of 58 colors taken from fruits and vegetables, encourages you to "eat your daily dose of color."

beautiful museum gallery that nobody touches?"

Engagement is a key element of the exhibition. Markow and Kuta want children to explore the art, build with it, and in some cases, crawl in it, under it and on it.

But there's a price for engagement: Things break.

Tattfoo Tan: "S.O.S: 5p.m. West!" — Simply stated, it's a chicken coop, with five chickens.

Marisol Rendon: "Wobbleland" — Rendon, who lives and works here, has created a giant kitchen sink, filled with soft food sculptures.

Leah Rosenberg: "I made this for you" — Creating objects out of clay will never be the same as Rosenberg has created "a festive environment mimicking a professional bakery and cake shop where visitors can sculpt 'treats.'"

Fallen Fruit! (David Burns and Austin Young):

"Rainbow Bridge!" — The Los Angeles collective has covered the museum's entry bridge with a mural inspired by bananas. Don't miss the scratch-and-sniff elements.

Woodbury University School of Architecture students (with Miki Iwasaki and Stan Bertheaud): "Stacked Stories" — A sculptural installation that is a mini-library and aspires to offer a place of repose in what is a very active exhibition.

FriendsWithYou (Samuel Borkson and Arturo Sandoval III):

"The Fruit of the Gods" — A big, food-themed jumpy.

Urban Plantations and Spurlock Poirier Landscape Architects: "The Garden Project" — An outdoor garden at the Children's Museum Park across the street from the museum.

with all the prototyping, and all the studies we can do, the observations and what not, we're never going to predict every behavior.

"But that's part of the fun of it. If we were to be 100 percent, like nothing would ever go wrong, it wouldn't be interesting."