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.

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 Kata, 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 Marlow. "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 glass kitchen sink to building blocks made out of mushrooms.

"Feast," which opens Oct. 11, 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," Marlow 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," Kata said. "Most artists don't have to answer 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 in and direct their project; we feel strongly about not doing that. But we do have to ask our questions."

Engaging questions

Since Kata's arrival in late 2011, and her appointment of Kata shortly afterward, they both have been constantly asking questions. When they took over the museum's leadership, the exhibition "Feast" had already been installed by the previous director, Rachel Tague, and they were able to look at its successes and challenges with a sense of relative detachment.
'FEAST' • Engaging children in the exhibition was a key goal

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"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 going to behave very differently than 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 LACMA 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 future, 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. "What was in an artwork, or, 'We want to tweak that,' or, 'That 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 talk about children as an audience," Kuta said.

The artists

Joe Yeo and John Brady: "Dinner 3:55" — Locals Yeo 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 Trucks" — 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 Rosell: "Mess of It" — Rosell, who is based in San Francisco, has assembled building blocks, about a thousand of them, out of mushrooms.

Nina Walsman: "Orange the World" — Working in L.A. but a frequent exhibitor in San Diego, Walsman has built two large sculptures composed of ropes and rubber squares that emit sounds. Kuta calls walking through "magical."

Ross Kurre: "Sound Kitchen" — The UC San Diego-educated Kurre, who creates art for the San Diego Museum of Art, has started to use a kiosk to transform a kitchen into a recording studio. Artists won't be able to resist playing with the Guitar EQ.

Tatfoo Tan: "Nature Matching System" — Tatfoo Tan's mural, which is made of 56 colors taken from fruits and vegetables, encourages you to "eat your daily dose of color."

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

The New Children's Museum's entry bridge has been covered with a banana-inspired mural that features scratch-and-sniff elements.

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"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)
Online: thinkplaycreate.org

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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: "Stashed Stories" — A perpetual sculpture that is a mini-library and inspires kids to create a place for repose in a very active exhibition.


with all the prototyping, and all the studies we can do, the observations and what not, we've 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."