

Bay Area Sculpture Right Now: Border Crossing With Sita Kuratomi Bhaumik

By Sarah Hotchkiss

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Sita Kuratomi Bhaumik in her living room/home studio in Oakland. (Photo: Graham Holoch / KQED)

Long before Donald J. Trump entered the 2016 presidential election, and long before he promised to build a 50-foot-tall, 1,000-mile-long wall between the United States and Mexico, Oakland-based artist Sita Kuratomi Bhaumik was thinking about borders.

“For some people, their life is the wall or the border and that’s their entire experience. And then for so many of us it’s absolutely this imagined thing that exists some place far, far away,” she says. As the topic of the border wall entered the current election cycle, Bhaumik wanted to make that distant and abstract thing a more relatable reality for local audiences.

On Friday, Sept. 9, Bhaumik opens *Estamos contra el muro | We Are Against the Wall* at San Francisco’s visual arts nonprofit Southern Exposure. Collaborating with Bay Area- and Mexico-based piñata makers, along with a mural artist, a DJ collective, chefs and activists, Bhaumik plans to recreate the life cycle of a cinder block border wall — made entirely of piñatas.

The gray tissue-paper-covered blocks are possibly the least-festive piñatas ever made, with their drab fringes and square corners, but Bhaumik and her collaborators will bring life, color, music and food to the wall over the course of the exhibition, culminating in an Oct. 15 event during which the public is invited to channel their aggression towards divisive architecture and ideology and pummel the piñatas into oblivion.

“The piñata exists only to be destroyed,” Bhaumik says. “You see a brick and it’s supposed to last 30 years or 100 years. You see a piñata it’s only supposed to last for a birthday. The only reason to build a wall in my opinion is to destroy it.”

While the timing of Bhaumik’s exhibition ties nicely into this year’s rollercoaster election season, her piñata wall enters a conversation not just about America’s southern border, but about borders — and border walls — in general.

“Erecting border walls around the world is always something that people talk about,” Bhaumik says. “But there’s this reality that they’re completely impractical.” Bordering countries rely on one another for resources, people, goods and basic economic exchange, she says. “The wall’s always better as an idea than it is in real life — which is why so many of them come down.”

The daughter of two first-generation immigrants (her father is from West Bengal, her mother is Japanese Colombian), Bhaumik’s artistic practice frequently investigates and makes evident the movement of people and resources that shaped her own family history. In much of her work, that cultural exchange manifests as food.

But as Bhaumik discovered in her years of food-related research, nourishment isn’t a universal source of bonding. Searching for the phrase “smells like curry” on the internet late one night, she expected to find recipes and a few xenophobic posts. “What I found was just endless... just these crazy amounts of racist comments,” she says. “Like, ‘Help I bought a couch on Craigslist that smells like curry, what do I do?’”

On Yahoo Answers, someone replied to the query of “Help my neighbor smells like curry, what should I do?” with “Call the INS.”

“We like to think of meals as this moment when you can all gather and break bread and everything is going to be okay,” Bhaumik says. But she found that the inverse was also true. “How does food divide people? How are people judged by it? How is that a marker of difference, or something that separates you and me instead of brings us together?”

Partially in response to those ugly internet comments, Bhaumik decided to embrace curry in her art practice. During graduate school at California College of the Arts, Bhaumik’s studio filled with patterned wall installations of curry powder that drew people (and their noses) within centimeters of the flocked surfaces. Other spicy artworks took her to Ireland and the Netherlands, where her project Dear Future used paprika, turmeric, matcha and ube powder as the basis for conversations about the future of food.

With projects like MamaSita’s Tiny Tea House, Bhaumik pushes the culinary interactions even further. Instead of simply serving masala chai (the result of British influence on the Indian beverage market) from a miniature sky blue stall, she makes her “customers” kneel to get their free tea.

Her interest in miniaturizing everyday objects and interactions is apparent in her home studio. The space is filled with miniature things — small tortilla makers next to regular-sized tortilla makers, tiny plastic donuts next to regular-sized plastic donuts. “I can’t explain it really for myself,” she says. “I just love tiny things when they are next to huge things.”

But there’s another reason for this love, she admits. Changes in scale force people to shift their perspective. In addition to regular cinder-block-sized piñatas installed at Southern Exposure, Bhaumik has commissioned a set of miniature piñatas from San Francisco-based Isafas D. Rodríguez, aka the Little Piñata Maker.

“The height and the magnitude of [Trump’s proposed] wall is actually bigger than Southern Exposure’s gallery,” Bhaumik says. “Having a little architectural model of a six-foot person in relationship to the height of this wall is another way both to point at just the sheer insanity of the scale.”

“It also speaks to this wall as a plan and a proposal, because it’s always a plan and a proposal,” she adds, regardless of who’s in the White House.

Nowadays, Bhaumik channels her food-related work into the People’s Kitchen Collective (PKC), a collaboration between Bhaumik, Jocelyn Jackson and Saqib Keval. The PKC, which cooks and serves meals for up to 500 people at a time, often in Oakland’s Lil’ Bobby Hutton Park/DeFremery Park, allows the diners and organizers to share cultures, space, struggles and solidarity.

“I think of it as this Venn diagram of food, justice, art and politics,” Bhaumik says of the project. “We’re in that little central point in between all of these things.” It’s an in-between space that Bhaumik happily occupies both in her life and artwork — and that she seeks out in the world at large.

“I’m always thinking about these moments, whether it’s the Black Panther Party and ‘Yellow Peril Supports Black Power.’ Or whether it’s thinking about the DREAM Act and DACA and immigration reform,” Bhaumik says. “Where are those intersections between communities of color? Because that’s so much a part of my experience.”