

# The Cheech,' a Game Changer for Chicano Art, Opens in Riverside

As the Cheech Marin Center for Chicano Art and Culture debuts, its founder hopes to inspire a renaissance in a region of California lacking public arts funding.

**By Patricia Escárcega**

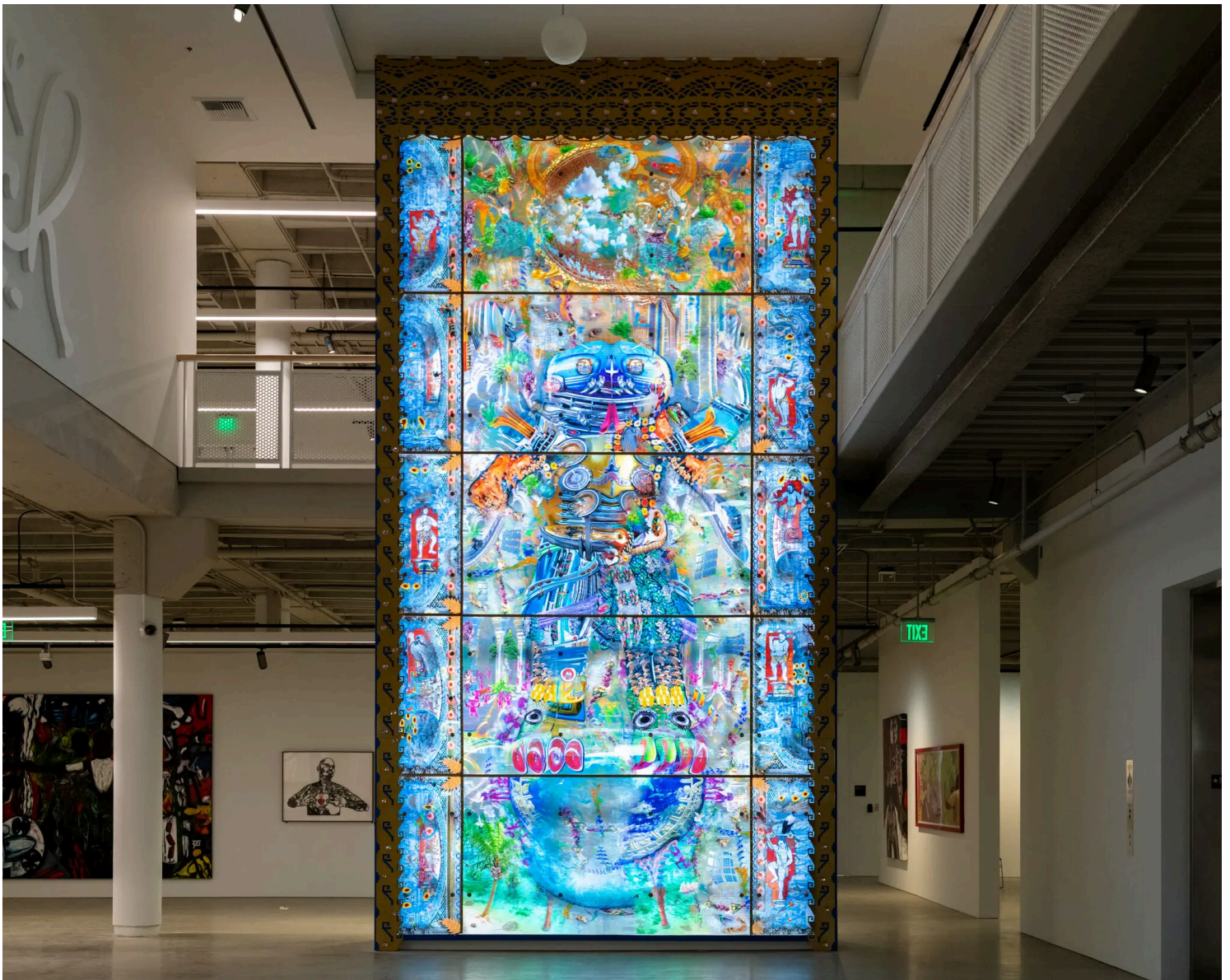
Published June 14, 2022 Updated June 16, 2022

RIVERSIDE, Calif. — As a child, Cheech Marin loved collecting objects — baseball cards, stamps, marbles — and then organizing them obsessively.

“I had a mania for codifying them and putting them in some kind of collection or whole set,” said Marin, 75, who is best known as the mustachioed, Chicano half of the classic stoner-comedy duo, Cheech & Chong.

In the 1980s, buoyed by steady film and TV work, Marin’s natural inclination toward collecting found its fullest expression when he fell in love with the works of Los Angeles-based Chicano artists like John Valadez, George Yepes and Patssi Valdez.

Their works, which synthesized Mexican and American influences and “delivered news from the front,” felt revelatory, like “listening to the Beatles for the first time,” said Marin, who grew up in a third-generation Mexican American family in South Los Angeles and the San Fernando Valley.



Einar and Jamex De La Torre's two-story lenticular installation projects an animated image of the burly Aztec Earth goddess Coatlicue, who shape-shifts into a transformer-like machine made out of lowrider Chevy Impalas. Carlos Jaramillo for The New York Times

Since then, Marin has amassed a collection of more than 700 paintings, drawings, sculptures and mixed-media works by Chicano artists, including major works by Carlos Almaraz, Frank Romero and Judithe Hernández. In art-world circles, Marin's trove of Chicano art is believed to be the largest such collection in the world.

Now, Marin's collection has taken permanent residence at the Cheech Marin Center for Chicano Art and Culture (known as "the Cheech") in Riverside, Calif., a majority-Latino city of roughly 330,000 people, about 55 miles east of Los Angeles

in Southern California's vast Inland Empire region.

The center, housed in the former Riverside public library, is possibly the first museum in the United States entirely devoted to showcasing Chicano art and culture. Marin hopes the project, a public-private partnership girded by significant municipal investment, will inspire a sort of Chicano art renaissance in the Inland Empire, once the cradle of California's citrus production, and one of the nation's fastest-growing and racially diverse regions.

On a recent walk-through of the Cheech ahead of opening day, June 18, Marin was in high spirits. He stopped to admire the masterful brushwork in Romero's "The Arrest of the Paleteros" and the "cannonball" of color in Almaraz's unnervingly sublime "Sunset Crash."



Frank Romero's "The Arrest of the Paleteros," 1996. Paleteros are ice cream vendors; the work is based on an incident that the painter witnessed in Echo Park Lake, where the police arrested vendors without permits. Carlos Jaramillo for The New York Times

“The story of the Cheech is one of serendipity,” said Todd Wingate, curator of exhibitions and collections at the Riverside Art Museum.

In 2017, Wingate and the former Riverside city manager John Russo pitched Marin the idea of founding a museum based on his collection. At the time, the city was looking for a new tenant for its landmark public library building, a two-story, buff-colored modernist edifice in the city’s historical core. Marin’s traveling exhibition of works on paper, “Papel Chicano Dos,” had recently drawn record crowds to the Riverside Art Museum. In exchange for Marin’s donation of his collection to the Riverside Art Museum, the city would cover the costs of housing it in the old library building.

“It didn’t take convincing,” Wingate said. “I think Cheech was just starting to think about where his collection belongs.”

“If you think about it, a collection of the size and caliber of Cheech’s collection, not many places are going to be able to take the whole thing” he added. “A lot of it just lives in storage.”

Under a 25-year partnership agreement, the Riverside Art Museum will manage the Cheech, and the city will contribute about \$1 million per year to cover operating costs.



The Cheech Marin Center for Chicano Art and Culture, which opens Saturday, was formerly a branch of the Riverside Public Library. The artistic director sees it becoming a “dynamic scholarly hub” with fellowships to help increase Latinx representation in museums and archives. Carlos Jaramillo for The New York Times

The Riverside Art Museum funded the roughly \$13 million costs of renovating the library building, chiefly through a \$9.7 million state grant and private donations. The center is projected to generate \$3 million in admissions revenue in its first decade of operation.

Riverside’s mayor, Patricia Lock Dawson, who took office after the Cheech partnership had been finalized, says she hasn’t gotten pushback about the investment. (One notable lob came from a local Republican state assembly candidate who called it a “stoner art museum” on Twitter).

Mayor Dawson believes the Cheech will attract people of all backgrounds, including international visitors. “I recently saw an article about it in Japan’s art news,” she said. “If you’re from Southern California, you have at some point experienced Chicano culture, right? But it’s also interesting to people in other parts of the world.”

“All parties involved want the Cheech to be self-sustaining,” said Drew Oberjuerge, Riverside Art Museum’s executive director, who expects that most revenue will come from grants, fund-raising, membership sales, admission store sales and facility rentals.

For nonprofit arts organizations in the Inland Empire, an enduring challenge is the lack of public arts funding and philanthropy in the region, Oberjuerge said. State funding disproportionately favors coastal communities and major urban centers like Los Angeles, San Francisco and San Diego, she said. One report found that nonprofits in the Inland Empire received donor support in the amount of \$25.55 per capita, as compared with the state average of \$262.99.



Ignacio Gomez, “Zoot Suit,” 2002; John M. Valadez, “Pedro,” 1982; John M. Valadez, “Couple in Downtown LA,” 1984; Richard S. Duardo, “Frida Grandísima!,” 2000; Jimmy Peña, “#43 (Bruce),” 2018.  
Carlos Jaramillo for The New York Times

To raise the initial \$3 million investment needed to start the project the Riverside Art Museum relied on volunteers and Unidos, a local collective of Latino-focused community organizations. Their campaign produced multiple Chicano-themed fund-raisers, including a “Pachuco Ball,” a concert by Los Lobos (longtime friends of Marin) in downtown Riverside, and an upcoming “Chicano Gala” at the local convention center. Dozens of Riversiders got on a five-year payment plan to contribute \$5,000, the minimum donation to earn a spot on the center’s founders wall, said Ofelia Valdez-Yeager, a retired Riverside school board member who ran the initial campaign.

Marin’s ambitions for the Cheech are only a few degrees shy of world domination, including developing a film program, to be headed by the movie director Robert Rodriguez, with whom Marin has made several films. It will train independent

filmmakers in the principles of low-budget movie making, Marin said.

María Esther Fernández, the Cheech's inaugural artistic director, formerly the chief curator and deputy director of the Triton Museum of Art in Santa Clara, Calif., said the Cheech will also distinguish itself as a “dynamic scholarly hub.”

“We’re really at the beginning of establishing the center as an educational and research hub, a place that will generate research on Chicanx art, and support that scholarship as well as emerging museum professionals,” Fernández said. Two curatorial and conservation research fellowships designed to help increase Latinx representation in museums and archives, will be hosted at the center, she said.





Left to right: Judithe Hernández, “Juarez Quinceañera,” 2017; and the artist’s “La Santa Desconocida de la serie Juárez (The Unknown Saint from the Juárez series),” 2017. Carlos Jaramillo for The New York Times

Both Marin and Fernández want to position the Cheech as a venue for “non-contentious dialogues” around questions of identity, representation, gender-neutral terminology, and the mother of all questions: what exactly is Chicano art?

“Is it a style?” Marin said. “Do you have to have the right vaccinations to make Chicano art? Do your parents have to be Mexican, or maybe just one?”

“I want to have that conversation,” he added.

The center’s fundamental mission, Fernández said, is to showcase artwork that other museums don’t. Only 2.8 percent of artists in major U.S. museum collections are Hispanic or Latinx, according to a 2019 Williams College study.

There are also many mid- and late-career Chicano artists who should have had solo shows and retrospectives by now, she said, noting that the Cheech’s first major retrospective, scheduled for 2024, will be for the artist Judithe Hernández.

“We show this work every day. We don’t roll it every five years,” Fernández said.

Marin, who used to fall asleep to the scent of citrus groves as a young child in the San Fernando Valley, appears to have taken a shine to the Inland Empire. He hopes to repurpose some of the historical citrus packing houses in the area into art studios and hints at wanting to found a second museum, this one devoted to the lowrider (car culture reigns in the Inland Empire), which Marin sees as a uniquely Chicano cultural product.

“Riverside has a real chance to emerge as one of the most important arts centers in the United States, and maybe even around the world,” Marin said.



Einar and Jamex de la Torre, "Colonial Atmosphere," a mixed-media installation that includes their take on an Olmec mask. It draws associations between religion and the moon landing. Carlos Jaramillo for The New York Times

As a native Riversider, hearing all this makes my head swim. This is the part of California, after all, that Joan Didion famously dissed as a cultureless backwater, where the local historical society celebrates the orange grove owners, and not the people like my parents, who harvested the fruit. And where Chicano culture has existed for generations, but never in our museums.

During our walk-through, installation was still underway for the center's two inaugural exhibitions, a survey show called "Cheech Collects," and the inaugural temporary exhibition, "Collidoscope," a midcareer retrospective of the artist-brothers team of Einar and Jamex de la Torre, produced in partnership with the Smithsonian's new National Museum of the American Latino.

The Cheech's showpiece is the 26-foot-tall lenticular installation in the lobby, which was commissioned from the de la Torre brothers. Using lenticular printing technology, which turns 2-D prints to stereoscopic images, the piece projects an animated image of the burly Aztec Earth goddess Coatlicue, who shape-shifts into a transformer-like machine made out of lowrider Chevy Impalas. From a distance, it appears like moving stained glass.

“Just when you think you got a bead on it, you step a little bit to the left and it changes. It's remarkable,” Marin said, pointing out one of many Easter eggs lurking in the display panels — a map of the Inland Empire, stretching from East Los Angeles (a reference to Marin's 1987 film, “Born in East L.A.”), eastward to the windmill farms of the Coachella desert.

In the middle of the map is Riverside. Marin, grinning, said, “This is the center of the universe now.”

---

### **The Cheech Marin Center for Chicano Art & Culture**

Opens June 18, 3581 Mission Inn Ave., Riverside, Calif., (951)-684-7111; [riversideartmuseum.org](http://riversideartmuseum.org).

Patricia Escárcega is a journalist based in Los Angeles.

---

A version of this article appears in print on , Section C, Page 1 of the New York edition with the headline: New Home for Chicano Art