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Food as Art

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Driven

THE GENERATIVE NATURE OF FOOD, ART, AND COMMUNITY

By Claude Smith · Photos by Matthew Chase-Daniel



Kim Chee, Mead, and Dandelion Wine from Axle Contemporary's The Fermentation Laboratory, at CCA's Armory Show, 2014.

"People often think we're selling burritos in there, so they walk in wanting burritos, and when they see that all we have is art, sometimes that makes them very happy; other times they'll get angry because they're really hungry," says co-director and co-curator of Axle Contemporary, Matthew Chase-Daniel, with a laugh.

Chase-Daniel founded Axle in September 2010 with long-time friend and fellow artist, Jerry Wellman. It began in part with a conversation about an old truck parked along the highway. "I really wanted to buy it," Chase-Daniel recalled, "but I had no reason to, so there we were throwing around ideas as to why I should or shouldn't buy the truck. Eventually our conversation just organically became this decision to buy it and turn it into a mobile art gallery." After going to look at the truck, both decided though it wasn't quite suited for their needs. Turning to Craigslist, they eventually found a Hostess delivery truck in Colorado Springs that they promptly bought and drove back to Santa Fe where they extended the roof, built out interior walls, and installed track lighting. Axle Contemporary was born.

Employing a radically unconventional gallery model by Santa Fe standards, Axle has quickly gained a reputation as an important venue for supporting experimental projects created by local artists. Recalling

early exhibitions and installations, Wellman remarked, "We used the inside of the truck to showcase a series of installations that proposed a newer or wider definition of what art could be or do." Axle has housed everything from conventional art practices—such as painting, drawing, and photography—to more experimental, performance-driven interventions, and food-related participatory exchanges.

Chase-Daniel acknowledges that while Axle has staged a surprising number of food-related projects, it was never an intentional decision on their part to highlight artists explicitly working with food. Wellman notes, "We've always been really interested in realizing a bigger sense of community in art, and I think working with food has enabled us to do that." The inherent social nature of cooking and eating parallels Axle's role in driving collaborative exchanges in the community.

In 2013, Axle was the recipient of Spread, SITE Santa Fe's community micro-grant program, which allowed Chase-Daniel and Wellman to present *The Royal Bread Show*. Beginning as an installation in SITE's exhibition *Feast: Radical Hospitality in Contemporary Art*, Chase-Daniel and Wellman honored bread, bakers, ceramic artists, and writers. In conjunction with their installation, they coordinated a tremendous community-wide effort in which some two hundred sixty

artists created porcelain miniatures that were then baked into the bread with the help of several Santa Fe bakeries. Individual breads containing the porcelain charms were then sold at SITE Santa Fe and other galleries, where the proceeds from the sales went to local food organizations that feed the hungry.

More recently, in *The Armory Show* at the Center for Contemporary Arts, Axle presented *The Fermentation Laboratory*, a sculptural installation of foods created through the use of traditional fermentation methods. Viewers were treated to a literal laboratory of living food comprised of sauerkraut, kimchi, kombucha, beet kvass, and rice beer. "It was great, because on one hand, you have what is essentially just food, but at the same time, it was this really beautiful, colorful, formal arrangement that an art critic would totally appreciate," Wellman recalled enthusiastically.

In a newly formed collaborative partnership with the Santa Fe Art Institute (SFAI), Axle invited a handful of artists participating in SFAI's artist-in-residence program to submit a proposal specially designed for the mobile gallery space. Albuquerque artist Jami Porter Lara, a former pastry chef turned visual artist, was selected to realize her project, *Bake SALiEnt*.

Porter Lara cites her short stint in the restaurant industry as a kind of catalyst for the project. As a pastry chef, Porter Lara would spend her mornings baking, often finishing her work before the savory chefs arrived to begin their dinner prep. "Being a pastry chef was such a solitary experience, you basically go in when it's cold and dark and put all your stuff on a rack and then leave," she said. Realizing that by not being present to see people eating and enjoying her creations, she was missing a fundamental step in the creative process and not getting the crucial feedback on how she might improve her craft. Deciding her ambitions lay elsewhere, she temporarily hung up her apron for the opportunity to go back to school to study art.

Porter Lara began working with clay after traveling to Mata Ortiz, Mexico, where she received instruction from local potters. Unlike many ceramicists who employ the wheel as a primary mode for quickly and efficiently building tall, cylindrical objects, Porter Lara embraced the ancient Pueblo tradition of hand-building using a repetitive coiling technique. She describes her current artwork as a kind of reverse archaeology in which she digs into the present and future using tools of the past, evident in her black ceramic pieces that appropriate the form of the plastic water bottle. Porter Lara was inspired not only by the techniques associated with ceramics, but also the contemporary social issues that have made the ubiquitous water bottle a contemporary artifact along the US-Mexico border.

Immediately aware of the logistics required to safely exhibit fragile works in the back of a truck that must routinely drive to new locations throughout the day, Porter Lara began to consider the idea of doing a project that was not only designed for Axle's unique confines, but that would also allow her to explore the intersection of her two passions: art and food.



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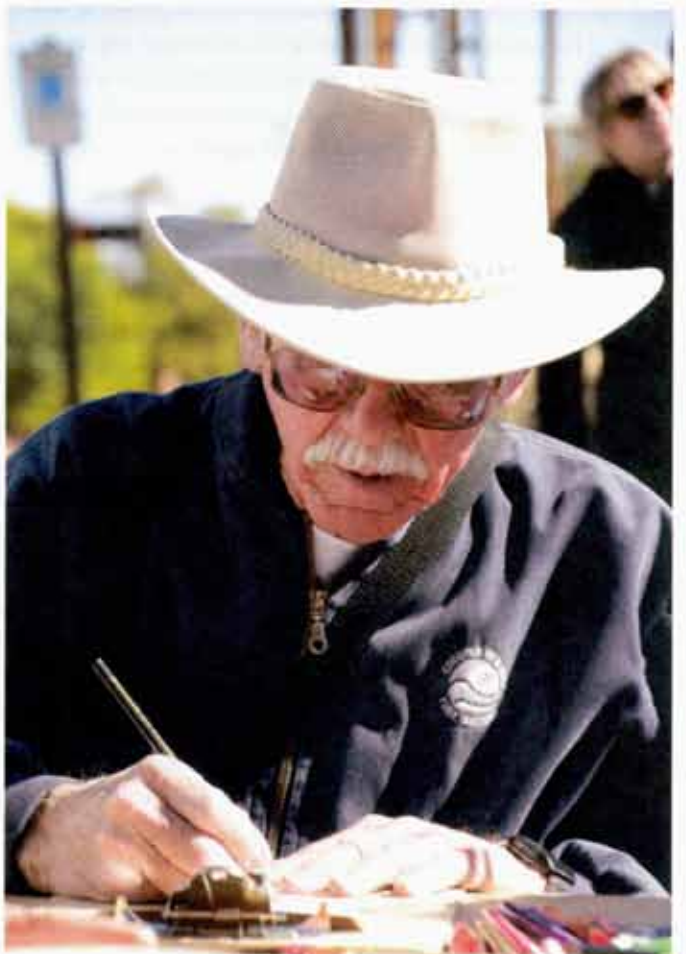
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"The cool thing about a cookie is that people will do things to get them," Porter Lara said. "Homemade cookies are kind of rare these days—just like the bake sale." *BAKE SALiEnt* was a temporary intervention in which Porter Lara wanted to engage the public directly. Using art as currency in order to question value, she propositioned the public to make a drawing in exchange for a cookie. "I wanted to give people an invitation to draw, especially adults. I was really hoping to engage with people who might not draw on a regular basis or who wouldn't consider it under normal circumstances," she said. As the participants completed their drawings, Porter Lara hung them up in the back of the truck for others to see, essentially staging an entirely new exhibition featuring the contributions of her collaborators. Participants also got another surprise: Porter Lara had baked a small drawing into each cookie, a token or memento for participants to remind them of their experience.

For Chase-Daniel and Wellman, highlighting food and art as part of Axle Contemporary's programming is a theme that continues to surface in 2016 as an effective way to engage people creatively. For example, in January, Rita Bard and Kathryn Davis asked Santa Fe artists to bake cakes that were given out in celebration of Art's Birthday. First proposed in 1963 by French artist Robert Filliou, Art's Birthday is an annual event recognized worldwide that celebrates the presence of art in everyday life. According to the story, Filliou suggested that "A million years ago, there was no art. But one day, on January seventeenth to be precise, Art was born," a declaration that allegedly was commemorated when someone dropped a sponge into a bucket. Bard and Davis' special one-day offering of free cake was the 1,000,053rd anniversary of art. In May, Wellman will present his project *Talk-as*, a performance piece in which participants will be tempted with mock tacos as a way of creating conversation around food and economics.

With Axle's packed programming schedule and desire to create genuinely unique experiences, their services are in high demand. "It's really the whole community that makes what we do possible," says Chase-Daniel. "If it was just us and our art, things would have gotten boring a long time ago." 🍪

www.axleart.com

Opposite page, top left, clockwise:

A group gathers near Axle Contemporary outside the Museum of Fine Arts in Santa Fe to create drawings as part of *BAKE SALiEnt*.


Axle Contemporary's exterior gallery signage for Jami Porter Lara's art event *BAKE SALiEnt*.

A man in Santa Fe creates a drawing in exchange for one of Jami Porter Lara's *BAKE SALiEnt* cookies.

Example of one of Jami Porter Lara's *BAKE SALiEnt* drawings which she baked into a cookie.


A woman inside Axle Contemporary selects her cookie during *BAKE SALiEnt* in Santa Fe.

Another example of one of Jami Porter Lara's *BAKE SALiEnt* drawings which she baked into a cookie.



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