

# SFBG

SAN FRANCISCO BAY GUARDIAN ONLINE

Published on *San Francisco Bay Guardian* (<http://www.sfbg.com>)

[SFBG](#) > [Pixel Vision](#) > Printer-friendly

## The family Yañez and their evolving altars

By *caitlin*

Created 10/05/2010 - 4:18pm















To hear father and son artistic team Rene and Rio Yañez talk about San Francisco's Day of the Dead celebration is to realize how much the holiday has taken on its own light here in the city. "It's about personal experience, but also politics," Rene says. The duo have crafted another year of homage to the dead around us -- and in so doing also reflect a shifting scene in San Francisco art.

No art event in the city reflects evolving tradition more than the Yañezs' yearly exhibit of Dia de los Muertos altars <sup>[1]</sup> at SOMArts Cultural Center (opening Fri/8). As the three of us sit in Rene's office at SOMArts next to the cow brain in a mason jar on top of which the elder Yañez -- the center's director of special projects -- has stacked a pair of headphones and a plush Taco Bell chihuahua, Rene tells his son and myself about the first public Day of the Dead celebration in San Francisco.

Rene, a seminal figure in the Mission art scene, held the first year of the altar installations in the early '70s at his neighborhood community art hub from that time, Galería de la Raza. In an area full of Central and South American activists who had lost their home due to oppressive regimes and political exile, he and other artists figured it was time to start acknowledging the Mexican holiday of death, parody, and remembrance in their new community.

In Mexico, Dia de los Muertos is celebrated by the gathering of family, of processions to the cemetery to mark loved ones' graves with *ofrendas* of marigolds, sugar skulls, and refreshments. In the Mission, that feeling of community and import was to be replicated with a distinctly San Franciscan twist. "We talked about creating a ritual, ceremonial exhibit," Rene says.

In those early days, it was mainly the Latinos that lived in the neighborhood that came to see the

altars that Yañez and fellow artists created in the Galería. But soon, word of the popular exhibit spread, and it became a teaching moment for those outside the culture. School groups would come by for a field trip, occasions for which the Galeria printed out Day of the Dead lesson plans.

Still, not every one immediately understood the holiday's significance. "It's not really a morbid holiday," Rene tells me. "People use it to make fun of death, some people make political statements, some people use humor." That approach "made some people preoccupied," Rene says, a smile flickering over his face. "They were seeing skulls and things like that." "It's about celebrating death as a part of life," Rio supplies.

Of course, things have changed over the last forty years. Nowadays, the esoteric procession that began in the Mission in the '80s to mark the holiday has grown into a 15,000 person yearly event, and has been jokingly termed "Day of the Dead Gringos" and "Gringos Gone Wild" by some local blogs for the Burning Man-style theatrical costumes, stilting, and concept artwork contributed by those with nary a drop of Latino blood in their body.

Which, Rio Yañez says, is just fine. Rio – who dad Rene jokingly calls "a cholo hipster" – was born and raised in the Mission, watching his family stave off eviction notices during the dot com boom and beyond during times when rent prices in his neighborhood have soared. Unlike many of his childhood friends, he has chosen to remain in the Mission, and having graduated from CalArts, now partners with his father at SOMArts.

In the Day of the Dead celebration's cultural inclusivity, Rio finds a positive benefit for the city's diverse tribes. "It's a way of sharing culture – even with all the drunk hipsters just having a good time marching there's still a community spirit." When I ask him whether the Mission Latino community can still claim ownership of the procession, he replies diplomatically. "The neighborhood has changed so much -- the parade is a reflection of that."

Rene concurs. "I haven't experienced a neighborhood that hasn't changed," he tells me.

That kind of cultural shift is reflected in the Yañez-curated SOMArts exhibition. Past years' exhibits have paid homage to deceased family members, to the victims of disasters like Hurricane Katrina, and even to the artists themselves – last year one contributor passed away during the altar's run at SOMArts, and her installation was augmented by fellow mourners to reflect the snuffing of a creative life. Although the *papel picado* and traditional iconography remain a part of the vast labyrinth of artists' contributions at SOMArts, the things mourned and celebrated ring universal, hurts and hopes accessible to everyone present in the melting pot of the city.

This year, the Day of the Dead artists come from all over, and hail from all age groups. Some, like CJ Grossman, Susan Matthews, and Jos Sances have been working with Rene on the exhibit since the late '80s. Others, like photographer Amanda Lopez, have been brought in by Rio, who is aiding in the transition to online culture, contributing his own photographic skills to the effort, and scouts talent from the younger artistic circles he runs in.

Which isn't to say that Rene hasn't taken advantage of some of today's most cutting edge art technologies, including the *Avatar*-inspired mania for 3D. Before I leave SOMArts, he produces a

sheaf of 3D renderings he's created on the computer and a flashy pair of red and blue-lensed glasses – far more impressive than anything that I've been handed en route to *Toy Story 3*.

I put them on, and a galaxy of Mexican masked wrestlers, women, and designs pop up at varying levels in front of my eyes. The images, Rene tells me, will be projected on the walls of the Day of the Dead exhibit to create a saturated visual experience. More evidence of tradition – and the family Yañez – gathering no moss in the name of art.

## **Dia de los Muertos Exhibition: Honoring Revolution With Visions of Healing**

**(through Nov. 6)**

**Opening reception: Fri/8 6- 9 p.m., \$5-10 sliding scale**

**SOMArts Cultural Center**

**934 Brannan, SF**

**(415) 863-1414**

**[www.somarts.org](http://www.somarts.org)** <sup>[2]</sup>

[Art](#) [Events](#) [Caitlin Donohue](#)

**Source URL:** [http://www.sfbg.com/pixel\\_vision/2010/10/05/family-ya%C3%B1ez-and-their-evolving-altars](http://www.sfbg.com/pixel_vision/2010/10/05/family-ya%C3%B1ez-and-their-evolving-altars)

**Links:**

[1] <http://www.somarts.org/2010/09/30/2010-day-of-the-dead-exhibition/>

[2] <http://www.somarts.org/>