

Food For Thought: A Toast to Blondell w/ Jazmin Urrea

Joshua Oduga: Hello, thank you for joining us for this virtual program, Food for Thought: A Toast to Blondell, with Jazmin Urrea. I'm Joshua Oduga, public programs and exhibitions manager at Art + Practice. And we are very excited to share this virtual program. This program is organized in association with Art + Practice's current exhibition, Blondell Cummings: Dance as Moving Pictures, a co-presentation with the Getty Research Institute, and the exhibition is on view until February of 2022. For this program, we welcome Jazmin Urrea, visual artist and LA based sculptor working in multiple mediums including; installation, photography, video, sculpture, and performance. She received her MFA in photography and media from CalArts and a BFA in photography from CSU, Long Beach. Jazmin, nice to meet you or nice to see you. I don't know why I said nice to meet you.

Jazmin Urrea: Nice to see you and meet you too.

Joshua: Yeah, right. How are you doing today?

Jazmin: I'm doing good. Excited, nervous, but so happy to be with you today.

Joshua: Yeah, great. I want to give a little bit of context on why I invited you to this program, before we get into it. During Blondell's career, she created a series of dances titled Food for Thought. These works included a suite of performances collected on a single tape that represented Blondell's kinetic meditation on the importance and specificity of food. So she was really thinking about food a lot in her work. And as I was working on this exhibition and spending so much time with the work, I also started thinking a lot about artists and dancers and writers who I knew who were using food in their work and really acting as storytellers, like I think of Blondell is. And I wanted to invite you to do this because I had a chance to experience some of your work and really think about you as a storyteller before I had a chance to meet you and talk to you.

Joshua: So you and two other people are participating in this little program series within a program series. And one of the things that's really interesting is you are the one person I think that identifies as an artist out of those three people. For me, when I think of art, I always think of artists as like storytellers. So I invited you here to tell us a little bit of story and to do it in a way that you thought would be interesting. So why don't you kind of tell us a little bit about what you're going to do and then we can get right into it.

Jazmin: Yeah. So let me stand up real quick. So today what I wanted to do was start off with a champurrado. And champurrado is a Mexican hot chocolate drink typically made with masa de maiz, which is corn flour. And the reason why it's super special is because it's made for holidays, special occasions. And I wanted to make it today because as a series it's called, Food for Thought: A Toast for Blondell. So I thought, what better way than to bring in the holidays as well as A Toast for Blondell by making this for us today. Even though I can't share it with you, I still wanted to at least share the recipe.

Joshua: Yeah, definitely. And I was telling you before we started that, I'm definitely going to try to do it. So I think everybody watching could use it as a model to potentially do it on their own. And we also will share the recipe which you've shared with me below the program when everyone's watching it. So they'll be able to try it on their own, if they will.

Jazmin: Yeah, for sure. I mean, that's what I'm hoping for, for sure. So I'll just get into it really quick. So what we're going to need is any type of chocolate, but typically it's made with abuelita chocolate. Not sure if you've seen this tablet at your local grocery store. It's made with piloncillo which looks like this. It's like a sugar cane but in a shape of a cone. And then I'm using Maseca, which is super easy to get. It's just corn flour. A cinnamon stick, milk of your choice. Honestly, I kind of regret not trying it without milk because I feel like it would be really good, but we're just using 2% today and water. So let me get started before we get into the story. So I'm going to slide this out and I'm going to bring my stove in. Since I'm in my studio, I got to improvise. We're bring in like makeshift stove.

So what we do first is pour in our four cups of water and then we throw in our cinnamon stick. So essentially, think of this part kind of like steeping tea. And this will happen for about 10 to 15 minutes. And I'm just going to set a little mini timer for myself just to make sure we're on track. And what you want to do while this is happening, we get our flour, which this is... How much is this? Four cups of flour and we'll bring in our two-third cup of water. So this is really important, Joshua and everyone who will potentially see this. We want to pour this slowly and we want to take a little whisk. So I have the whole baby one from Dollar Tree.

So you want to whisk this in but you want to make sure that you have kind of like a soupy texture, because what's going to happen is that this is going to go in there and this... We don't want this to clump up. We don't want it to turn into something that it shouldn't be. We want it to be nice and mixed in. It'll kind of resemble like an Alfredo sauce. That might be the worst analogy but it'll be kind of soupy like this. This is what you want. And we will make sure that I got all the clumps out and then you just set it aside. And then now we can get into the story for now. So if it's OK with you, I'll be jumping back and forth. So once the timer goes off, we'll go to the next step. But we can start with the story, if you will allow.

Joshua: Let's do it.

Jazmin: Yeah. So I grew up in Compton, for the first nine years of my life or so, and my parents decided we should move over to Watts because it's the first home that they were buying. And I begged my parents. I remember I did not want to leave where we were living at the time. I was like, "No, I have all my friends there." And they made a deal with me. Right. They were like, "Okay, fine. We will move over to our new home in Watts and we'll drive you to school every day." So I was ecstatic. I was like, "Yes, this is what I want. What I've been dying for, where I get to be around my friends. It's going to be awesome." So I start going into middle school, sixth grade, and I start developing this really bad habit that goes along with also hanging out with my friends and stuff. And it was eating hot Cheetos and drinking a Gatorade every day for breakfast. So that's... You can already imagine how terrible that is, already snacking early on in the day.

So she dropped me off at around... My mom would drop me off like 7:30 every day and I'd run to the vending machine with my friends and grab a Hot Cheetos and Gatorade. And this started spiraling into me doing this for lunch and dinner too. It got to the point where I could kill a bag of Flamin' Hot Cheetos that looked like the super party size bag. It was getting to the point where I was seriously eating this a lot, so much.

So what ended up happening is I did this for about two months. This was going on for a very long time. And I remember, it was actually I believe around November, where I woke up and I woke up shaking uncontrollably in sweat. This was like 3:00 in the morning or so. And I couldn't stop throwing up.

Joshua: Oh my.

Jazmin: It was just constant. I know, sorry. Should have said trigger warning. But so trigger warning now... So my mom's freaking out and she's like, "What in the world was going on with you?" So she takes me to the ER and it a surprise this hospital is now close. It's called... Oh my gosh, what was it called? Suburban in Paramount. I don't know if you've ever... Have you ever driven to Paramount? It's super chill, little city kind of by Lakewood, Long Beach area.

Joshua: Yeah, I remember-

Jazmin: Super small. So she ends up driving me there. We spent this whole time in the ER. And at the time I remember them bringing me back and asking me, "Hey, so on a scale of one to 10, what's your pain level?" And they held up a little sign and they asked me to pick the smiley face because I was around 11, 12. So I was like, I didn't want to make anyone worry and I was like, "It's like a five." So they just brought me back and they were like, "Okay. She just probably had a really bad stomach ache. Not a big deal." Yeah. Which is terrible, which happened. But yes, it happened.

And so I end up going back to school, resuming my diet for the next couple of days, Hot Cheetos and Gatorade. And in the next couple of days, like about four days later, same thing happens again. I wake up sweating, chills, throwing up. I think my sister made it worse because she handed me... Oh my gosh, what is it called? Not Pepto-Bismol, but I don't... There are these dissolving tablets that fizz up in water. What is that called? Do you know what I'm talking about?

Joshua: TUMS?

Jazmin: I think it's like TUMS. I forgot what it's called, but yeah, it's supposed to be-

Joshua: Alka-Seltzer?

Jazmin: Alka-Seltzer, yes. She handed me an Alka-Seltzer to drink and it made it even worse. I was worse than before. So then again, my mom takes me again to this hospital and I'm just going through the same process again. The doctor is asking what's my pain level. And they obviously take it more seriously since I had already been there the same week. So they take me back and they start doing CT scans and they can't pinpoint anything. They don't see anything on them. And what they end up doing is, they choose to pump my stomach. And at that point I was like, "Oh gosh, no. I really don't want to do this." But obviously it's a process that they prepared me.

I was laying down. And the worst part is that, this is a trigger warning so avoid, leave, skip if you want to not to hear this, but they give me a glass of water and then they start inserting the tube through my nose. And they told me to swallow. And I remember it was the worst pain and feeling in the world because you can literally feel tubes going down through you, right? But this is the kicker. This is what I

remember. Now they lay me down and they start pumping and all I see is just red coming out. Just like red food coloring coming down through these tubes and I'm just like, "What is happening?"

So mind you, I'm like 12, I think I'm dying. My mom's in the background like, "What is going on?" So then they just tell her, "We really think we need to keep her here until we fully understand what's going on." So at this point, mind you, they just think it's something I ate. So couple of more days go by. They keep doing tests. It was to the point where they left me super bruised because of blood work, ultrasounds, CT scans. They were like, "What is going on? We know it has something to do with her diet." They thought maybe it was ulcers because I told them I like to eat a lot of spicy stuff, maybe. So they're like, "We've dealt that out." they were interviewing me, asking my mom all these different types of crazy questions. They were like, "Is she involved in anything weird? Is she..." They started to pry too much before my mom started to low-key getting offended. And she was like, "What do you think my daughter is doing?"

So it gets to the point where I have a final ultrasound and they tell my parents, "So we think we need to go into emergency surgery. It looks like it's her appendix that's about to burst." So they get my parents to sign all this crazy paperwork and then they wheel me off. And I vividly can still remember too. I know that nowadays they don't do it so much anymore. But when I was being put to sleep, they asked me to count back and I completely passed out at number eight or something super... I was like, "10, nine," and then passed out. And my mom told me too that they were just worried by the doors while this was all going on because they... Mind you, this was like... I guess I was their first child that had ever gotten this sick. So both my parents were there. At the time, they both worked warehouse jobs so this was like a for real financial moment for them. They were like, "Okay, we really have to be here. Something could go completely wrong."

So I get wheeled back out and then they let my parents know. They're like, "Okay, so surgery is a success." I was still drowsy, mind you. I can overhear them talking above my body. So if you can picture that, I'm laying down, my parents are here on the sides of me and then the doctors on the other side like, "So we just completed surgery. We removed her appendix, but we also found ovarian cysts. And we didn't have time to let you know, so we just removed them and tried to save her ovaries." And I just remembered going back to sleep again after that. And then they woke me up to let me know what had happened. And I was just in disbelief. Right. I was like, "What do you mean? What's going to happen to me now?" Oh, wait. So while we're at this high, I must stop because the timer has come up.

Joshua: Yeah, that's like a really suspenseful for me up in the story. I'm on the edge of my seat right now.

Jazmin: That's the point. I'm trying to be the Marvel of artists.

Joshua: Yeah, this is really tensed. I'm like, "It started with Hot Cheetos but there's so much more going on."

Jazmin: So at this point we remove our little lid and then our... Essentially, we have essentially cinnamon tea at this point. So we're going to go in with a little spoon and we're going to fish out our cinnamon. I'm going to put this in here. And this part it's optional but people like to also use a little strainer, something like that, to fish out any little bits that have broken down but I just use the spoon. So while our tea is still very warm, since we brought it to a boil... And I think I forgot to mention we do use

low to medium heat because we don't want it to burn, so that's what I'm using. What we're going to do at this point is we add in our chocolate.

So I'm adding about three ounces of chocolate. This is how much this is, but you can use cocoa powder, anything you want to experiment with. That's why this recipe's kind of fun. And you're... This is also the point where you want to adjust your sweetness level because once we add in the flour, it's going to be kind of difficult. So I already cut up my sugar cane, which was in this form again, just a little reminder. So I'm going to toss that in there and we're going to let it dissolve for a little bit. And in couple seconds we'll add in our milk. And like I said, you're able to do your milk of choice. This is what it looks like. It's already it's... I don't know if you can see it, it's already dissolving in there. So it's still pretty warm.

Joshua: I have a [inaudible].

Jazmin: So I'm going to bring in... Yes?

Joshua: What's the chocolate like? Is it just like a standard chocolate? That's a Mexican chocolate. So does it have spices in?

Jazmin: It is a Mexican chocolate. And typically it does not... Oh my gosh, what I'm I trying to say? It doesn't come with spices but it is a sweetened chocolate tablet. So it's already pre-sweetened but when we started our steeping stage with the cinnamon, that is when you're able to add in other spices. Some people like to add cloves. Totally up to you. This is what's fun about it, it's that you can experiment with it. So no fear in that. You can even play with the ratio. So some people like it milkier, but the traditional way is four cups of water and then you gradually add in your milk of choice. So you can even do evaporated milk if you want to.

So let me start another timer. Five minutes so that everything can dissolve. Okay. Let me see. Where did we leave off, Joshua? Oh yes, I left you at the height of all the drama.

Joshua: Yeah, you were like you just finished surgery. You just got out of surgery and [inaudible] as well and you were just too much, I think. You were just like, "That's too much."

Jazmin: Yeah. So, okay. So I get out of surgery. The thing that ends up being wild about this story is just because, secretly, I feel like there was a little bit of unprofessionalism that went on. Because I remember my parents were not in the room after I fully woke up out of my anesthesia state. And I remember a nurse coming in and telling me, "Yeah, we removed your ovaries. You won't be able to have children again." And I'm 12 and I'm like, "What does that even mean? What!" I freak out. My parents come back in. I let them know what happened. And I think they filed a report at that point because they hadn't even told me what had happened. So it just went into this whole different thing. But that's the story, the main story.

So I ended up having to stay hospitalized for about a month and a half after, as aftercare, because it wasn't just a traditional appendectomy. So it wasn't just like the little scar that you would get on your right side, it went across. So they called it like a bikini scar. So I even did a little bit of physical therapy after, because I wasn't even really able to really move around on my own.

And I remember, this is also another terrible side story but I'll add it in. This is going to embarrass me for days but I'll tell you, Joshua, because we're friends. It was the week that we were preparing or it was the week that they were preparing to let me go. But the one thing that they told me is, because it was a stomach type situation surgery, that I needed to have a bowel movement before I got discharged. So my dad had the worst idea in the world. I do not recommend anyone do this. But he ends up buying me a crazy smoothie from this super traditional Mexican shop. He sneaks it in, hands it to me and he's like, "Yeah, just take a little, take a couple sips." And I was like, "Okay." Because at this time all I was eating was hospital food. They literally had me on hospital food. So I was like, "Yeah, sure. I'll try it." And tell me why instantly five minutes I had to jog to the restroom and the nurses yelled at my dad. They were like, "That is not how you're supposed to do that. She has stitches. This could all go..." I mean funny now but terrible parenting then. But still shout out to my dad.

Joshua: Yeah, I mean, [inaudible]. Sometimes I think dads don't think about those kind of things, but...

Jazmin: They really, I mean, we love dads but sometimes it's too much. But totally fine, we're still here. So to circle back to this, that my whole Cheetos saga, so this all started because of my poor diet and they made me aware of that as they were discharging me. But the interesting thing and the reason this experiment, or not experiment, oh my gosh, this surgery sticks with me and it was the catalyst for a lot of the work that I'm doing now is because I remember a month later going in for my checkup. And it was not the primary doctor that used to see me. It was the person who did my surgery. So it was my surgeon. And I remember going to her, she's checking everything out. And I remember vividly asking, 12 year old me super excited like, "Can I still eat Hot Cheetos? Can I still keep eating the snacks I love?" And I remember her telling me, "Yeah, sure. Go ahead, knock yourself out." She's like, "Yeah, you can keep doing that."

And then, fast forward a couple months later, my primary physician told my mom, "You should really try to wean her off of eating that because a lot of that is what caused what she was experiencing." So from there I tried to change my diet, but I'm not going to lie to you that Hot Cheetos were super ingrained in me.

Joshua: Yeah. I feel like it's the LA thing.

Jazmin: And it's a terrible thing. It's... Well, exactly. It's totally an LA thing and it's still is now, more than ever. I mean, you see... I don't know if you've seen all of the great snacks that are now coming out. I mean, they even have it in traditional. You know how at Mexican shops you'll see esquites, which is the corn with the mayonnaise and the cheese. And now you get it topped over with some Hot Cheetos dough.

Joshua: I was at the park with my kid last weekend-

Jazmin: It's a super-

Joshua: ... and I saw some kids eating it with and they were really young. And I was thinking, I couldn't eat that back when I was that young. It took me a while to get there. And yeah, it's really interesting. I think, as you were saying all this, I was just thinking about how much I know people and how, myself, I used to eat that as a food all the time. And there are times when it's like, oh, you get kind of sick to the

stomach, eating it. It's this kind of weird manufactured thing that you don't really know what it is, but it's also really delicious at the same time.

And I think what's really interesting to me is how that is the catalyst to you thinking about other things really later in life. I talk to a lot of artists and sometimes they have these really crazy life experiences that often are the things that make them want to start making work or when they do make artwork, it kind of motivates them in one way or another. I always love those kind of stories because oftentimes I find they are really crazy things like what you just said. Yeah.

Jazmin: No. I mean, and honestly too, the reason why it pushed me to start exploring it even more is because right after high school, I started working for LUD and I was working at their preschool division. And a lot of my students I'd see them come in with Cheetos and a little soda and I was like, "Uh-oh." And then it just started making me think about just, I don't know, it just was making me think about my story and everything that had gone... What I had gone through. And it just kind of led me to start exploring with food as a medium.

Joshua: Yeah, and-

Jazmin: So here we're.

Joshua: ... I think that's the thing to bring it back kind of full circle that I really love about what you do is, thinking about food as a material and thinking about how that material it's different across cultures and how different people are going to have different experiences. Even if that's not necessarily so much of the attention and the intention, I think it's really exciting for me. And it's also a really interesting parallel to Blondell as well. I think that she has some artworks, even artworks that don't relate to food, where she's thinking about her own body. I mean the experiences that her body makes which are really interesting. There's one in the exhibition, a piece called Cycles, which is about the female menstrual cycle. And all of these things I think are really interesting because there's so many different reasons why a person can decide to be an artist or make artwork and then share that with other people.

But for me, I think it's often really powerful when you think about these personal experiences. And after Blondell made that work, she went on to start an organization called Cycles and it became a whole thing for her. And it was this really generative thing. She was really thinking about her body and then what happened to her body and then it became an outlet for other people. And so I see, even from what you just said, it's you became a teacher working in LAUSD and you started seeing kids with drinks. And it's really interesting to me that only nowadays are they really starting to advocate for better snacks and stuff like that. And I think [crosstalk]-

Jazmin: Yeah, seriously.

Joshua: ... Because Hot Cheetos are delicious and it's not that you shouldn't have them ever. It's more just like, maybe you shouldn't eat it every day. But if you don't know [inaudible] those things. Yeah.

Jazmin: Oh my gosh. No, you are totally right and I think, I honest... From workshops that I've done and also other conversations that I've had with other community members, it's like education truly is power and it's just knowing your nutrition. And like you said, it's eating in moderation. It's not that it's like

something that should be banned for life or... But it is education is power and knowing your nutrition and will, honestly, I think that'll benefit us all, right?

Joshua: [crosstalk].

Jazmin: And at the time, I didn't know. I thought I was... Oh, what was that?

Joshua: I said, maybe it's like a special occasion thing. Like the champurrado. Maybe you only have at times [crosstalk].

Jazmin: I know, right. It's a sweet drink. Oh yeah, speaking about that, we must move into the final step. So our corn flour is the final step. So at this point everything's dissolved. It's like a nice little chocolate. I don't know, I don't think this screen... I think my lighting won't show it, but it is a brown color now. So this is a spooky part. You have to spoon it in here super quickly. Want to drop it all in. And this is the part that, you know, the labor of love. It's a cool 10 minutes that you have to stir this in here. So, and the reason for that is, so that you don't have flour rising to the top and it doesn't stick to the bottom. Well, like a true chef that I am, Joshua, like the true chef that I am, this is your final result.

Joshua: Wow this is [inaudible].

Jazmin: I already have a cup of it made.

Joshua: It's like literally you are doing a pilot for your on freaking show right now.

Jazmin: I know right, my secretive pilot. But yes, here is the final result. It's super delicious. And the more that it sits, the more it will thicken. So that's what I was saying. Going back to saying that your ratios, you can play with, and it's a really fun and easy recipe. I feel a lot of people are scooped by it, but it's honestly super fun. And once you get it down it's alive.

Joshua: [Crosstalk] make it look easy and I love things where you can kind of throw your own flavor into it. And one of the things that, before we talked about, I was saying that I always see people around LA, at different taco trucks and restaurants that I go to, they're always ordering it. And I could tell that it was a special thing, but I didn't really know. But this is helping me understand a lot more. And I really love recipes and things that you can throw your own flavor into it. And so I already can tell that this can be some things that you can use a different milk, or you can throw in different recipe. So I'm sure from family to family, there's a different recipe and you can make it different ways.

Joshua: And I think it's really interesting. It goes back to your work in a really interesting way and the stuff that we were just talking about. It's kind of making it your own and yeah. I wish I had some to try, but I'm definitely going to try. I think you have to drink some. You have to like if [inaudible].

Jazmin: Of course, a toast to Blondell and thank you for inviting me too.

Joshua: Yeah. And like I said, we're going to share the recipe as well. So everybody will be able to make it on their own and they can do their own little toast to Blondell. I think this time is a really good time to do that as everybody's coming together and experience different holidays, and the celebrating.

Jazmin: Oh, for sure.

Joshua: Thank you so much for doing this. This is really heartening for me. Is there anything else that you want to add before we end?

Jazmin: Try the recipe. I'm Kidding. No, thank you so much. And honestly, I also want to thank you and Art + Practice for introducing me to the work of Blondell, such an icon. I'm so happy to have been invited to be a part of this. And I'm going to go back to the show before it comes out. I have to come by again.

Joshua: Yes. Thank you. Let me know when you're going to come by. I'll be excited to see you.

Jazmin: Yeah.

Joshua: Yeah.

Jazmin: Of course. Thank you so much, Joshua.