

Sidedoor Season 3, Episode 13: Cheech Marin Gets Artsy

Haleema Shah: Just a note: This episode features comedy that may not be suitable for all ages.

[INTRO MUSIC]

Haleema Shah: This is Sidedoor. A podcast from the Smithsonian with support from PRX. I'm Haleema Shah.

Cheech Marin: Hi, my name is Cheech Marin and I do a lot of stuff.

Haleema Shah: In the 1970s and 80s, Cheech Marin became famous for being one of the goofs from the stoner comedy duo "Cheech and Chong."

["CHEECH & CHONG" FILM CLIP START]

Cheech Marin: Hey, I got it. Why don't you get a job man?

Tommy Chong: Hey listen, I already got a job.

Cheech Marin: Ehhh... What's your job, man? Rolling dope?

Tommy Chong: Yeah, at least it's steady work, man.

Cheech Marin: (Laughs) Something you're good at.

[END FILM CLIP]

Haleema Shah: But now, he is getting recognition for something very different — collecting art. Over the years, Cheech Marin has quietly collected some seven hundred pieces, and is now known for having one of the most extensive collections of Mexican-American art. He's creating an entire center at California's Riverside Art Museum called the Cheech Marin Center for Chicano Art, Culture, and Industry. And here's Cheech, describing the style of some of his favorite pieces:

Cheech Marin: Ah, que rasquache! You know?

Haleema Shah: Before I started working on this episode, I did not know what "que rasquache" meant.

Cheech Marin: Anybody that knows rasquache recognizes it immediately. Rasquache is being able to take a little pushcart that sells ice cream cones and... and add to it a three bedroom house. You know? That is the essence of "rasquache." (laughs)

Haleema Shah: In other words, rasquache is... Tacky? Crafty? Survivalist. Inventive. Defiant? If you talk to Cheech, you'll learn that "rasquache" is a word that Mexican-Americans have used for a long time. But today, it's entering the vocabulary of art-lovers, too.

Haleema Shah: That's because "rasquache" has given rise to "rasquachismo." An artistic style, aesthetic, and ethos that's gaining recognition within the art world. You can think about the difference between the words "rasquache" and "rasquachismo" as kind of like the difference between the adjective "minimal" and art movement "minimalism."

Cheech Marin: You have to make art or something resembling art in your life by baser objects. It's not gold. It's tin, or dirt, or mud. And you can make art out of any of those things.

Haleema Shah: Whether you know it or not, you've probably seen rasquachismo. It's prominently featured in art in cities like with large Mexican-American communities. Los Angeles, San Antonio, Denver... and it's all over Instagram. And now, thanks to people like Cheech Marin and an art collector who's pushing the status quo it's also in the Smithsonian.

Haleema Shah: This time on Sidedoor, we're talking rasquachismo. And we'll find out why Cheech Marin and others, are making sure people know this: Working with you've got isn't just an attitude -- it's art.

[BREAK]

Haleema Shah: Throughout his life, Cheech Marin has played many roles. Most famously, he was part of the comedy duo "Cheech and Chong." He even voiced a Hyena in the Lion King.

["LION KING" FILM CLIP START]

Hyena 1: Man, I hate lions!

Hyena 2: So pushy...

Hyena 1:...and hairy...

Hyena 2: ...stinky...

Hyena 1:...and man are they...

Hyena 1 and 2: UUUU-GLY!

[END FILM CLIP]

Haleema Shah: But another one of Cheech's roles is off-screen as an award-winning art collector. He's even been honored by the Smithsonian's Latino Center for his dedication to the art created by Mexican-American artists.

Haleema Shah: But before all of that, Cheech, born Richard Anthony Marin, was a kid from a blue-collar family in Los Angeles. And where he comes from is a big theme in his work. Here's a clip from his 1987 movie "Born in East LA."

["BORN IN EAST LA" FILM CLIP START]

(Singing to the tune of Bruce Springsteen's "Born in the USA")

I was born in East LA. Man, I was born in East LA

Man: Oh yeah, you were born in East LA. Well, let's see your Green Card, huh?

Green Card? I'm from East LA...

[END FILM CLIP]

Haleema Shah: Okay, but he actually grew up in South Central LA, and later moved to a suburb called Granada Hills. They were two very different places.

Cheech Marin: One day, everybody was Black. And then the next day, everybody was white. And I was Chicano in both situations.

Haleema Shah: The word Chicano is important to Cheech, which, just so you know, is a term that Americans of Mexican descent have used for a long time to describe themselves.

Cheech Marin: My life, growing up, I was always... all... all Chicanos were called Mexican. And I... and I'd go, I'm not Mexican, I don't speak Spanish, I never been to Mexico, so how am I Mexican? And so when I discovered the term Chicano -- that's what I am.

Haleema Shah (on tape): Can you give me the dictionary definition, or the one that you like?

Cheech Marin: I'm gon' give it to you right now. It's... it's... Chicano was originally a derisive term. It was an insult from Mexicans to other Mexicans. The concept being that those Mexicanos who had left their country, and who were living now in tin shacks along the border, are no longer truly Mexicanos. They were something less. There were satellite Mexicans. They're little Chicos, you know, Chicanos. And so, in the late sixties, and during the Chicano civil rights movement, they started adapting that term and turned an insult into a badge of honor.

Haleema Shah (on tape): When did you start embracing the term Chicano to describe yourself?

Cheech Marin: One day, I came home and all the grown ups were having a party, and my Uncle Rudy was in the middle of this story and he was saying how this... he took his car in to get it fixed and the mechanic wanted \$200. And he says, "\$200? Man, just give me a piece of tin foil and some pliers. I'll fix it. I'm a Chicano mechanic." And I thought, "Oh, that's what a Chicano is. Chicano is somebody that makes do and fixes it. Doesn't need the official version of it. And he will be ingenious in his approach."

[MUSIC]

Haleema Shah: And since we're having a bit of a vocabulary lesson right now, remember that word from earlier? "Rasquache?" That's a word Cheech's family might use to describe MacGyver-ing a car repair.

Cheech Marin: "Rasquache" is taking other elements that are not necessarily considered art and assembling them in an artistic way. And... but useful. Rasquache elements are incorporated into everyday life.

Haleema Shah (on tape): So it's more than an artistic style.

Cheech Marin: Yeah. Well, yeah, absolutely. Rasquache is a lifestyle. (Laughs)

[MUSIC]

Haleema Shah: We wanted to know about what happens when that lifestyle evolves into an artistic style. So, we went to one of our Smithsonian art experts, Josh T. Franco, to get his take on rasquachismo. And, here's what he said:

Josh T. Franco: Yeah! (Laughs) Cheech is right about everything.

Haleema Shah (on tape): (Laughs)

Haleema Shah: Josh is a collector for the Smithsonian's Archives of American Art. He compiles primary sources like records, personal papers, and photos that tell the story of American art. He has a pretty academic way of thinking about rasquachismo, and that's because he's devoted his entire career to it.

Josh T. Franco: My dissertation was about the relationship of minimalism and rasquachismo in the town of Marfa, Texas.

Haleema Shah: Okay, but Josh didn't just study it in grad school. He grew up in a Chicano community, close to his grandmother who couldn't get why Josh wanted to study rasquachismo. She didn't need to study it, because in her community, people lived it.

Josh T. Franco: You know, she was just kind of shocked at how long rasquachismo could be discussed. Because, to her, and the example she gave was, "when I was a little girl, one time, my friend asked me... you know, came to me and invited me to go get ice cream. And then when we got there, after she ordered, she said, 'I don't have any money. You have to pay.'" Like that's rasquache, being like super tacky.

Haleema Shah: So, before the word "rasquache" became a way to describe art, it was kind of a diss.

Josh T. Franco: So, I think it's just always important to keep in mind that it's not something that's owned by artists or the art world in any way. It's something that's organically part of Chicano culture -- and Mexican culture, too. It just is not so celebrated south of the border.

Haleema Shah: So, sure, it's a little tacky to invite a friend for ice cream and then show up with no money. But, there's also a certain genius to it. And, that inventive rasquache spirit also applies to customizing ordinary things to make them extraordinary.

Josh T. Franco: I think low riders are a great example.

Haleema Shah: Lowriders. As in those slow-cruising cars that are painted with intricate designs and often show up in west coast music videos.

[MUSIC]

Josh T. Franco: Customization is definitely part of rasquachismo. Making something your own through, like, really intense embellishment. I think that with rasquachismo, too... often it is messy and very ad hoc. But I like to argue that low riders are rasquache 'cause it shows the very non messy, very methodical, very polished, shiny expressions of rasquachismo. The lines are sharp. You know, the sharper the line, the more accomplished the artist. They're beautiful.

Haleema Shah: If you need help picturing one, here's one lowrider owner describing her car on the web documentary series "Lowrider Roll Models."

["LOWRIDER ROLL MODELS" CLIP START]

I have a 1962 Chevy Impala Wagon. It's a light blue candy paint with patterns and flake on the hood, the roof, the dashboard, and the tailgate. It has pinstriping, gold-leafing...

[END FILM CLIP]

Haleema Shah: But rasquachismo isn't just for the road. It's inside people's homes and in their backyards. And since most Mexican-Americans are Catholic, you'll find a lot of Church-related imagery in Chicano art.

Haleema Shah: As part of his job at the Archives of American Art, Josh collects pictures and other documents showcasing rasquachismo. And one very common item that keeps popping up in these photos are altars. People build them in their backyards using everyday objects that they've found.

Haleema Shah: Imagine an old, porcelain bathtub that has one end cut off, and is propped up vertically to make a kind-of shelter. This bathtub is painted a color that's a cross between turquoise and robin's egg blue -- a color that's often associated with the Virgin Mary. String lights dangle across the top of the tub. And inside the tub, sits a mass-produced plaster statue of Mary in one of her many manifestations. Cheech grew up with one, too.

Cheech Marin: My father built a little grotto-altar and installed in it, like, a two foot tall plastic statue of our Lady of Guadalupe.

Haleema Shah: But, growing up, Cheech put his own rasquache finishing touches on it.

Cheech Marin: So, in the days when I was in college, when nobody I knew was smoking dope except for me and a couple of guys, and the rumors spread faster than the Internet in those days. "The cops know everybody that has dope, and they're going to come and bust you!" It's like, "Where do I stash this?" I had like, you know, a bag of dope. "This statue. Perfect!"

Cheech Marin: And so, I turned it over and I cut a hole out of the base and I stashed it in there. "No one is ever going to look here!" And I was correct. Years later, my younger sisters were in the same predicament. They had some dope, and they went to the statue! "Where can we hide it? Oh cool. There's a hole in this already. I'll just stash it in here!" (Laughs)

[MUSIC]

Haleema Shah: I wanted to see this art out in the world instead of in an archive. So, Josh, our collector friend from the Smithsonian, suggested we go to a place called Taqueria La Placita.

Josh T. Franco: I come here all the time. I bring... It's like our go-to taco place.

Haleema Shah: Josh is a Chicano from Texas, so his endorsement is a pretty big deal.

Josh T. Franco: I think it just cures homesickness. It feels like a taco place in Texas, or a Mexican restaurant there.

Haleema Shah: We took a cab ride to Hyattsville, Maryland about a half hour from the National Mall.

Haleema Shah (on tape): This must be it. I see the Mexican flags.

Josh T. Franco: You can pull in the second driveway and make a loop, yeah.

Haleema Shah (on tape): Oh wow, the parking lot is full.

Josh T. Franco: Yeah it is full. So, maybe it's... maybe it's just always busy.

Haleema Shah: La Placita is hard to miss. It's painted orange and green, decorated with bright string lights, and there's a giant LED screen on the roof so people can watch soccer games and eat tacos from the parking lot.

Haleema Shah (on tape): This is amazing.

Josh T. Franco: There's a lot to see immediately, right? Yeah. (Laughs)

Haleema Shah: Oh, and also on the roof are sculptures of a 16-member mariachi. Some of the band members are men. Some are frogs. All of them are wearing embroidered suits.

Josh T. Franco: I think the frogs are made out of cut tin. My grandfather had a lot of those cut tin sculptures in his front yard. I don't know where they come from. All this stuff gets, I think, like, mass produced in somewhere in Mexico or on the border.

Haleema Shah: But, it's off to the side of the restaurant that we saw one of it's main attractions -
- besides the food.

Josh T. Franco: Should we start at the altar over here?

Haleema Shah: In between two trees is an at least eight-foot-tall altar. At the center, is the Virgin of Guadalupe.

Haleema Shah (on tape): So, it looks like there's this archway which is made out of stonework. And, right between the two trunks, if you stare directly between them, is our lady of Guadalupe. And there's three prayer candles in front of her. And then you see three sets of flower bouquets, which look fresh.

Haleema Shah: And Josh was able to point out the rasquache elements of it right away.

Josh T. Franco: You know, the tiling on the floor you can see is, like, probably from a house project and they just had leftover. So, like, using leftover tile for this is totally a rasquache move.

Haleema Shah (on tape): There's literally, like, a front porch light hanging at the front of this archway, and then, if you look inside, there's, like, a chandelier that, like, looks like it's from IKEA that you would find inside someone's bedroom.

Josh T. Franco: I never stopped this long to look at this. (Laughs) There's so much going on, yeah! Which is kind of a rasquache thing, like a lot. It's a density of imagery.

Haleema Shah: Altars like the one at La Placita and at people's homes have inspired rasquache art inside museums. In the 1990s, an altar was part of an iconic exhibition called Chicano Art: Resistance and Affirmation

Josh T. Franco: This was a huge, kind of, survey exhibition that started in L.A. and traveled the country through the first years of the '90s as a way to introduce, kind of, elevate the visibility of Chicano art, and it's definitely succeeded at doing that.

Haleema Shah: As we sat outside, Josh pulled out a catalogue from that exhibition, and he flipped to one particular piece.

Josh T. Franco: This is Amalia Mesa-Baines' "An Ofrenda for Dolores del Rio" 1984.

Haleema Shah: An ofrenda, or an altar, for the movie star Dolores del Rio, whose career in Hollywood and Mexican film spanned from the 1920s to the '50s. This altar is unique, because where there is usually a figure of a saint, is a portrait of del Rio.

Josh T. Franco: You know, the saint is a central figure in any altar.

Haleema Shah: But the artist, Amalia Mesa-Baines, did something different here.

Josh T. Franco: Here she's putting not a saint from, you know, from the Bible or from religion, but Dolores del Rio, the actress as a way to honor another woman, elevate a woman's status.

Haleema Shah: Del Rio's portrait is lined with layers of delicate fabric, which hang above her image like a canopy.

Josh T. Franco: You know it's not saying, like, "this is a middle finger to Catholic tradition." But it's also not saying, "women don't deserve altars." Which in some, that might not fly in all interpretations.

Haleema Shah: Josh said the altar of a classic starlet made of tulle and silk is both reverent and irreverent. In other words, it's rasquache.

Haleema Shah: And even though we've talked a lot about rasquachismo and altars...you'll find the aesthetic in all kinds of art. In photography: An artist creates portraits of herself in a quinceañera dress against a backdrop of dollar bills. In painting: An image of a sombrero and two cockfighting chickens on a velvet canvas. In fashion: A designer pieces together different kinds of found fabric to make an outfit that is rasqua-chic.

Haleema Shah (on tape): Alright. You wanna go inside and get a taco?

Josh T. Franco: Yeah, let's go get some tacos!

Haleema Shah: Coming up, rasquachismo isn't just for the visual arts -- it's also for the performing arts. We'll hear about Cheech Marin's rasquache comedy.

[BREAK]

Haleema Shah: We're back. And just in case you were wondering, the tacos were delicious. Also, we're getting a lesson in rasquachismo. The Chicano art, aesthetic, and attitude of working with what you've got. Our teacher is Cheech Marin, who is gaining recognition for having one of the most extensive, private Chicano art collections. It includes some seven hundred pieces, and he's launching a museum to display his collection and wants the world to know that Chicano art, and rasquachismo, are American art that belong in galleries.

Haleema Shah: But before Cheech started collecting Chicano art -- he was making it -- as an actor and comedian. And his early work with his comedic other half, Tommy Chong, was pretty scrappy. And that's because around the time they met, Chong wanted to create an improvisational theater. But all he had was a strip club. So he worked with who and what was available.

Cheech Marin: He formed an Improv comedy group with the topless girls. None of them had ever acted before. None. He told them, "Okay, you're not strippers anymore, you're actresses. Okay, you get paid less." (Laughs)

Haleema Shah: They needed at least one person with experience. But they had Cheech.

Cheech Marin: I introduced myself as this wonderful improv actor from LA and I had worked with their instant theater... and it was totally bullsh*t. It was called improv-ing a resume. (Laughs)

Haleema Shah: The two got to work with their improv comedy theatre, which led to other gigs for the duo. And despite being 1000 miles away from home in LA, Cheech stuck to his roots.

Cheech Marin: Well our comedy was very much rasquache. We were street level comedians -- that's very rough and very irreverent and really represents the underrepresented.

Haleema Shah: Eventually, they became the Cheech and Chong, starring in movies that are still iconic. But Cheech's obsession with art started long before Cheech made it in Hollywood as a comedian. It started when he was a kid.

Haleema Shah: His oldest cousin was a charismatic guy, and convinced the crew of cousins to study topics at the library and come back and present them to the group. Just for fun! Cheech was assigned art.

Cheech Marin: So, I went to the library and took out all the art books, as many as they would let me take out. I would just look at the pictures. "Okay, that Cezanne, that's Picasso, that's Miro." And so I educated myself in the history of world art that way. So, when I got to the point where I actually could buy art, that's when I discovered the Chicanos.

Haleema Shah: Eventually, Chicano art became Cheech's specialty. And he started his collection with two paintings.

Cheech Marin: Of those, there was kind of nothing about them was rasquache. Not all Chicano art is rasquache.

Haleema Shah: One of the paintings was by Chicano painter George Yepes. He's from East LA and is seen as one of the city's most celebrated muralists.

Cheech Marin: The Yepes piece was "Amora Matizado," it means "love mashed together." And, it's two people kissing -- you don't know if they're men or women, but it's a really lush, thick paint. It's like really sensual and really describes the act they are participating in, as well as the, the technique for doing that.

Haleema Shah: But, especially in the 70s and 80s, the Chicano art that Cheech collects didn't always get the appreciation it deserved.

Cheech Marin: Chicano artists in LA, when they wanted to show their art, they were told by the powers that be at the museum that Chicanos don't make fine art. They make agitprop folk art. Agitational propaganda.

Haleema Shah: And a lot of Chicano art is linked to the political art and posters of the 1960s and 70s that fought for farmworkers rights or resisted the Vietnam War.

Cheech Marin: But all these Chicano painters went to art school and/or university. They knew what they were doing. They could put in Rembrandt or Picasso or any of the other movements that were going around the world at the same time as well as incorporating into their Chicano rasquachismo. And so they kept insisting, "No, no, we're doing fine art." It took awhile for everybody to kind of see that, you know, because you're not allowed to be sophisticated in the art world when you come from that background.

Haleema Shah: Cheech said that the newfound recognition that Chicano art is getting from museums and curators has been hard earned. And with the museum that he's opening in LA, he'll ensure that the Chicano art movement, which started in the United States, is celebrated here too.

Haleema Shah: In Washington, D.C., Josh is on the same mission. He's making sure that Chicano art and aesthetics are preserved forever inside the Smithsonian.

Haleema Shah (on tape): Are we living in a special moment for rasquachismo?

Josh T. Franco: I think we're living in a long overdue moment.

Haleema Shah (on tape): What does it feel like to be that person who's kind of bringing this art into an institution like the Smithsonian?

Josh T. Franco: Yeah. I feel responsible and scared. Yeah. (Laughs)

Haleema Shah (on tape): Why scared?

Josh T. Franco: I just feel responsible 'cause it's... I have to be responsible to my peers, but also my elders. You know, people who, long before I had this job, I looked up to and either knew of or knew through their work. And their legacies are important to a lot of people and they're important to me personally, but they're also just important to what the art history of this country will be in 100 years or 1000 years.

Haleema Shah: Josh says that there are a lot of other people like him -- second or third generation Chicanos who are celebrating their culture and the culture of their parents and grandparents inside museums and in academia. Which were spaces that their elders didn't always have access to.

[MUSIC]

Haleema Shah: Cheech Marin and Josh Franco aren't necessarily changing the American cultural experience. They're updating it by elevating the work of Chicano artists who have already been part American culture for generations. Altars, lowriders, and huge expressions of

paint on canvas -- achievements that only come from the creative labor of people who've spent years perfecting their craft.

And they're saying that Chicano art isn't just for Chicanos. It's for everyone.

[BREAK]

Haleema Shah: You've been listening to Sidedoor, a podcast from the Smithsonian with support from PRX.

Haleema Shah: We wanted to give a special thanks to Josh Franco from the Smithsonian's Archives of American Art, and of course, to Cheech Marin, for working with us on our rasquachismo episode.

Haleema Shah: If you feel inspired to learn more about rasquachismo and Chicano art, we'll have photos of some of the works we mentioned -- and more -- in our Sidedoor newsletter. You can subscribe at si.edu/sidedoor. Every other week, you'll get bonus content, news, and updates straight to your inbox from me!

Haleema Shah: Sidedoor is made possible by funding from the Secretary of the Smithsonian, as well as the Smithsonian's National Board. And thanks to listeners like you -- your generous support helps make all the amazing work you hear about at the Smithsonian possible.

Haleema Shah: Our podcast team is Justin O'Neill, Jason Orfanon, Lizzie Peabody, Jess Sadeq, Greg Fisk, and Lara Koch. Extra support comes from John Barth, and Genevieve Sponsler. Our show is mixed by Tarek Fouda. Our theme song and other episode music are by Breakmaster Cylinder.

Haleema Shah: And, if you want to sponsor our show, please email sponsorship@prx.org.

Haleema Shah: I'm your host Haleema Shah. Thanks for listening.