

Sun Mad: Inverting the Imagery of Consumer Culture as Protest

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Sun Mad is a screen-print art poster measuring 22 inches by 17 inches first made by first-generation Chicana artist Ester Hernandez in 1981, and then as a second edition in 1982. The artist effectively appropriates and subverts one of the most well-known corporate logos, the Sun-Maid, for her own political agenda as a part of the Chicano Art and Civil Rights Movements. Hernandez's poster features the same bold red background, with a radial, stylized sun acting as a hallow behind the main figure of a woman and her fruits. However, in place of the young white woman, in traditional agrarian garb offering a fresh harvest of fruit, and of course herself, to the consumer as the ideal happy white agrarian worker, Hernandez places a leering skeleton woman holding a fresh bushel of grapes that stand in stark contrast to her brittle-boned fingers of death.¹ In addition, whereas the original logo reads "Sun-Maid: Natural California Raisins," Hernandez's rendition reads "Sun Mad Raisins: Unnaturally Grown with Insecticides, Miticides, Herbicides, Fungicides" directly contradicting the corporate giant's claim of "naturalness." Though the image was initially slow to gain momentum, by 1982 the second edition gained popularity as a symbol of the struggles and hardships that many Mexican and Mexican-American migrant farmworkers faced at the hands of exploitive agribusiness giants like Sun-Maid.² The image remains important in today's political climate, especially in the wake of anti-immigrant sentiments brought about by the economic depression in 2008. The anti-immigrant rhetoric which especially targets and vilifies Mexican and Mexican-American migrant workers prompted

¹ Consuelo Carr Salas, Meredith E. Abarca. "Food Marketing Industry: Cultural Attitudes Made Visible." In *Latin@s' Presence in the Food Industry: Changing How We Think about Food*, ed. Consuelo Carr Salas, Meredith E. Abarca (Fayetteville: University of Arkansas Press, 2016), 216

² Rowan Bain. "Ester Hernandez: Sun Mad." *Art in Print* 3, no. 6 (2014): 29. <http://0-www.jstor.org.luna.wellesley.edu/stable/43045621>. (accessed March 18, 2018)

Hernandez to issue an edited version of her original poster entitled “Sun-Raid” in 2008 (see figure 1).³

The political issues that Ester Hernandez’s poster addresses are complex and multilayered. A viewer unfamiliar with the Chicano civil rights movement or the formation of the United Farm Workers in the late 1960s, may glean only an environmental reading of the poster due to the text’s reference to various kinds of pesticides. Hernandez’s text pointedly contradicts the original slogan under the Sun Maid logo which reads “Sun-Maid: Natural California Raisins” causing the viewer to question the truthfulness of Sun-Maid’s claim. These references align the poster with the fledgling environmental movement that began with the publication of *Silent Spring* by conservationist Rachel Carson exactly twenty years earlier.⁴ Readers of *Silent Spring* were profoundly angered by pesticides’ impact on their precious national symbol, the bald eagle, but remained largely ignorant of the pesticides’ impact on humans, especially migratory farm workers.⁵ DDT, the chemical discussed at great length in Carson’s book causes a variety of human ailments ranging from male infertility to aggressive breast cancers, a fact of which the artist became painfully aware as her “friends and family in the grape fields were being diagnosed with cancer at alarming rates.”⁶ Humans like to believe themselves to be apart from the ecosystem, but as Ester Hernandez’s poster reminds us, human beings, especially those in poor immigrant communities like Hernandez’s parents and grandparents, are at risk of being poisoned too.

Hernandez, as a first-generation Chicana artist born in California’s San Joaquin Valley to a family of Mexican/Yaqui farm workers, was intimately acquainted with the realities of farm

³ Consuelo Carr Salas, Meredith E. Abarca, "Food Marketing Industry: Cultural Attitudes Made Visible." 218-219.

⁴ Clarence Cottam, Thomas G. Scott. "A Commentary on Silent Spring." *The Journal of Wildlife Management* 27, no. 1 (1963): 151.

⁵ Rachel Carson. *Silent Spring*. (London: Penguin Books in Association with Hamish Hamilton, 1962)

⁶ Maria X Martinez. "The Art of Social Justice." *Social Justice* 34, no. 1 (107) (2007): 9. <http://0-www.jstor.org.luna.wellesley.edu/stable/29768418>.

labor.⁷ However, she was not made aware of the impact pesticides were having on her family until she returned to visit her mother one summer during her enrollment in UC Berkeley. She recalls arriving home to find her mother boiling water on a “sweltering” summer day because the local water had been too badly contaminated with pesticides for human consumption.⁸

Hernandez’s time at Berkeley also exposed her to a diverse group of artists all invested in the Chicano art and civil rights movement. That movement had in turn developed out of the struggle by farm workers to unionize beginning in the 1960s.⁹ Though Hernandez was unsure at first whether to take on the issue or “let it go like everybody else,” she could not get the matter of poisoning agricultural workers out of her head.¹⁰ The pesticides used by the agribusiness were literally poisoning the earth, and in turn making the land uninhabitable for her family who tended it. Two years after that initial visit, the idea for the now iconic poster came to Hernandez, when she drove past the Sun Maid logo on a billboard along the highway.¹¹

Hernandez’s appropriation of the Sun-Maid logo is effective because of the way it ironically deconstructs every illusion its creators attempt to sell. Sun-Maid, today “the world’s largest dried fruit processor” representing “30% of California’s raisin growers” was established in 1912.¹² By 1915 the company hired Lorraine Collett Peterson, formerly a worker in their raisin packing house in Fresno, as their brand “ambassador” to the Panama-Pacific International Exposition “dressed in a blue bonnet and a white blouse” in which “she strolled among fairgoers

⁷ Ester Hernandez. "About Ester Hernandez." Ester Hernandez. Accessed March 4, 2018. <http://www.esterhernandez.com/about.php>.

⁸ Emily Wilson. "Sun Mad: Ester Hernández, One of the Bay Area's Las Mujeres Muralistas, Takes on Agribusiness." Cal Alumni Association . November 14, 2016. Accessed March 6, 2018. <https://alumni.berkeley.edu/california-magazine/just-in/2016-11-14/sun-mad-ester-hernandez-one-bay-areas-las-mujeres-muralistas>.

⁹ Sharla Hutchinson. "Recoding Consumer Culture: Ester Hernández, Helena María Viramontes, and the Farmworker Cause." *The Journal of Popular Culture* 46, no. 5 (October 23, 2013): 973-80.

¹⁰ Emily Wilson. "Sun Mad: Ester Hernández, One of the Bay Area's Las Mujeres Muralistas, Takes on Agribusiness."

¹¹ Emily Wilson. "Sun Mad: Ester Hernández, One of the Bay Area's Las Mujeres Muralistas, Takes on Agribusiness."

¹² Déborah S Sánchez, Michael A. Boland, and Daniel Sumner. "Sun-Maid Growers of California." *Review of Agricultural Economics* 30, no. 2 (2008): 360-69. <http://0-www.jstor.org.luna.wellesley.edu/stable/30225875>.

and passed out samples.”¹³ She was so well received by the public that the company continued to use her for ad campaigns, including one in which she “rode in an airplane over the fair and dropped raisins from the sky,” and another “Raisin Day Parade” in which she swapped the blue bonnet for a red one. One of the executives was so enthralled that he asked her “to sit for an oil painting that would ultimately serve as the basis for the famous trademark.”¹⁴

Sun-Maid’s choice of logo fits into a larger phenomenon in which agribusinesses seeks to mask their corporate natures by using as their logos “attractive young white women who imaginatively ‘come on’ to the viewer, smiling and seeming to offer themselves, or at least their fruit, to the consumer” alongside other idealized agrarian images of happy farmers and their smiling children.¹⁵ While it is true that the grape growing industry employed large numbers of women, by the mid 1930s the majority of those women were Mexicans.¹⁶ The grape growing industry, to this day, relies heavily on “indigenous Mexican” migrant workers for their cheap labor.¹⁷ The image offered by the Sun-Maid corporation “whitewashes the labor of many women of color who work in the fields of the Valley.”¹⁸ By replacing the white woman with a skeleton, one could argue that Hernandez deracializes the image. However, the connection between skeletons and traditional Day of the Dead celebrations in Mexican culture cannot be denied. Traditional Day of the Dead celebrations typically include various depictions of decorated *calaveras* (skulls) and skeletons meant to represent deceased family members. Turning the Sun-Maid into a skeleton not only makes her an eerie specter of death, but it also contextualizes her

¹³ Curtis Marez, Roderick A. Ferguson, and Grace Kyungwon Hong. "Farm Worker Futurisms in Speculative Culture: George Lucas and Ester Hernandez." In *Farm Worker Futurism: Speculative Technologies of Resistance*, (Minneapolis; London: University of Minnesota Press, 2016) 149.

¹⁴ Marez, Ferguson, and Hong, 150.

¹⁵ Marez, Ferguson, and Hong, 149.

¹⁶ Marez, Ferguson, and Hong, 149-150.

¹⁷ Consuelo Carr Salas, Meredith E. Abarca, "Food Marketing Industry: Cultural Attitudes Made Visible," 219.

¹⁸ Marez, Ferguson, and Hong, 149.

into Hernandez's personal heritage. In fact, Hernandez has used her poster in her *ofrenda* to her own father during the celebration.¹⁹

In addition to whitewashing the perils of labor, the Sun-Maid logo severely misrepresents the realities of agricultural labor. The Sun-Maid's smiling rosy-red cheeks and impeccably clean clothes stand in stark contrast to the physicality of both modern and traditional raisin production. Showing the true labor that goes into the making of their product would be detrimental to the companies that have relied on deceptive advertising and public relations campaigns to lull their white consumers into ignorant complacency. Americans love to believe in the mythologized idealistic small family farm, rather than the corporate agribusiness that represents the vast majority of growers today. "The illusion from farm to table" is meant to separate consumers from the reality of their food's production, which might lead them to have a moral dilemma on their hands if the living conditions of workers should be made visible.²⁰ By creating an illusion, advertisers make their product attractive to their consumers by distracting them from those who produce the food they eat. In doing so, both white consumers and agribusiness erase the struggles and labor most often performed by migrant Chicano workers. Ester Hernandez is aware of the irony behind the Sun-Maid's smiling representation and felt compelled to correct the image to provide a more truthful account.

While Ester Hernandez's poster creates awareness for the Chicano civil rights movement and the UFW, part of the reason it was so effective in capturing wide attention was because it made people aware that their own children and family were unknowingly exposing themselves to trace amounts of the same pesticides as the workers by consuming Sun-Maid raisins. Her image

¹⁹ Curtis Marez, Roderick A. Ferguson, and Grace Kyungwon Hong. "Farm Worker Futurisms in Speculative Culture: George Lucas and Ester Hernandez," 151.

²⁰ Consuelo Carr Salas, Meredith E. Abarca, "Food Marketing Industry: Cultural Attitudes Made Visible," 216.

doesn't just appeal on the basis of social justice, it makes consumers fear for themselves and their kin. That kind of fear and anger is hugely valuable, despite its self-centered origins. White, middle-class consumers demanding that companies end their use of pesticides to protect their children wield more power than the exploited farm workers. Their demands, even if they are selfish in nature, inadvertently protect farm workers suffering from those pesticides.

Sun Mad is a brilliant example of artistic appropriation that effectively counters the manipulative advertising of agribusiness for its own political motives. The print has entered into many well-respected collections as a premier example of the Chicano art and civil rights movement and as an early example of environmental awareness. The poster's popularity and efficacy hinge upon its ability to utilize and subsequently invert imagery of consumer culture. Most North Americans have seen and or interacted with the Sun-Maid logo in their lives, some in fact see it every day when they open their lunch boxes. To use this image is to draw upon people's preexisting relationship with the image and its connotations. Inverting it creates a feeling of uncanny that disorients the viewer by making the familiar unfamiliar. In doing so, *Sun Mad* and Chicano posters like it were able to give the Chicano movement visibility, pushing it into "mainstream" conversation in the art world by assigning to it a particular aesthetic.²¹ Hernandez's poster, made in the early 1980s, is still frighteningly relevant today. Anti-Mexican and xenophobic sentiments continue to thrive in the United States. In response to the political climate that continues to be hostile to her people, Hernandez issued a second poster in 2008 titled "*Sun Raid*" featuring the same skeletal woman, "but this time wearing a *huipil*, a native Mexican dress" and a "security-monitoring bracelet labeled 'ICE' which stands for Immigrations and

²¹ Catherine Flood. "Chicano Posters." *Print Quarterly* 21, no. 1 (2004): 95. <http://0ww.jstor.org.luna.wellesley.edu/stable/41826128>. (accessed March 20, 2018)

Customs Enforcement.”²² The bottom half of the composition is dominated by text which reads “Guaranteed Deportation.” “In smaller print underneath the declaration of deportation is a list of indigenous peoples from Oaxaca, Mexico—‘Mixtecos, Zapotecas, Triques, Purepechas’—who make up a large number of farmworkers in the United States.”²³ Below this in even smaller text is written, “By-product of NAFTA.” Both *Sun Mad* and *Sun Raid* fight the exploitation of agribusiness by using these companies’ own manipulative imagery against themselves. In doing so, the postes successfully gain much needed awareness for their cause, showing that art is and continues to be an effective political tool. Good art has the power to incite strong emotions.

²² Consuelo Carr Salas, Meredith E. Abarca. "Food Marketing Industry: Cultural Attitudes Made Visible," 219.

²³ Consuelo Carr Salas, Meredith E. Abarca. "Food Marketing Industry: Cultural Attitudes Made Visible," 219.

Figures

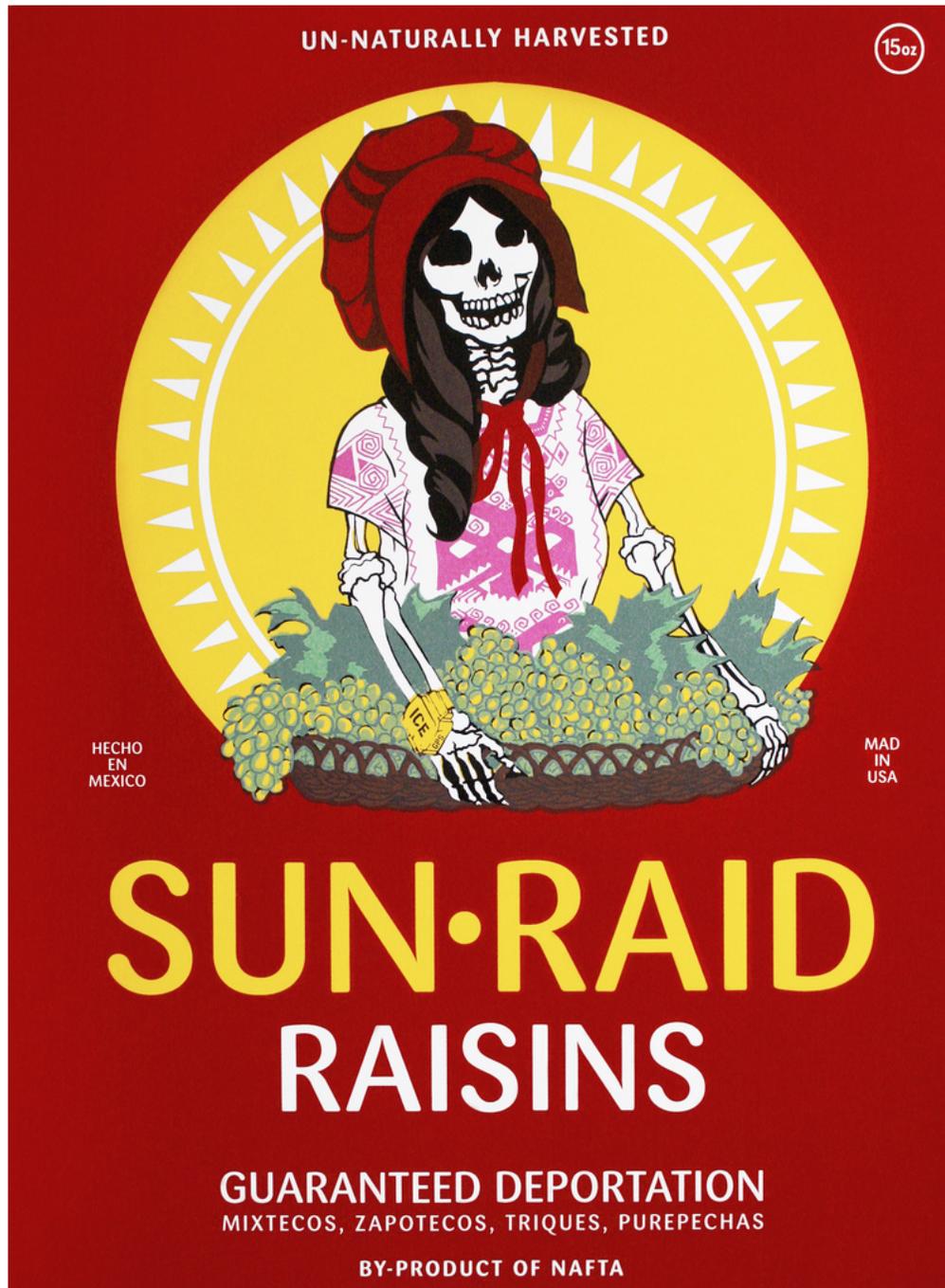


Figure 1: Ester Hernandez, Screenprint, 66 cm x 51 cm, 2008

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