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By Erika Thomas
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ICON FOR A NEW ERA

LA’s 900-Ton Homage to the Jet Age is the Centerpiece of the $4.9 Billion Electric Train System at LAX

BY ERIKA THOMAS

CREDIT: PHOTO COURTESY OF FLIGHT PATH MUSEUM LAX
For generations, the space age landmark at LAX with the giant parabolic arches has been a memorable place for locals and travelers to watch the planes from the observation deck or enjoy dinner and cocktails from the restaurant. A pristine example of Googie architecture and at a time capsule from commercial air travel’s golden era, the Theme Building was, and still is, the place that when you see it, you know you’ve arrived in Los Angeles.

Today, the Bob Hope USO occupies the suites at the base of the building. What to do with the expansive glass-encased room 80 feet in the air – the room that’s played host to tourists, movie stars and aviation enthusiasts for 60 years – is yet to be revealed. With a design allowing passengers to be standing level with the Theme Building, the Automated People Mover is sure to attract a new generation of admirers to the midcentury landmark.

Los Angeles Conservancy Senior Director of Advocacy, Adrian Scott Fine, says, “There will definitely be a different perspective. The People Mover is being designed so that the view of the Theme Building is wide open. The train will bring passengers in so that when they exit onto the platform, for the first time ever, they’ll be at eye level with the Theme. This is the building that reminds everyone of The Jetsons. People still get really excited when they see it.”

In 1960, construction began on the brand new LAX Jetport, officially ushering in the jet age. It would be the world’s first “total concept” airport – perfect for Los Angeles, which was poised to become the city of the future. It covered 3,000 square acres and 7 million passengers were expected to travel through it during its first year. With themed architecture for each terminal and a futuristic 13-story, 172-foot control tower, both L.A. and its glamorous new airport epitomized modern culture.

When the Theme Building opened in 1961, it became an instant icon with its part-spider, part-UFO aesthetic. On opening day, the Los Angeles Times wrote, “The structure will house a restaurant, ‘floating’ like a satellite 80 feet above the airport and on top of the glassed eating facility will be an observation deck with 360-degree views of the $50 million jet-age airport.”

Chief Architect Gin Wong partnered with leading firms Pereira & Luckman and Associates, Welton Becket and Associates, and Paul R. Williams, to create the $2.2 million Theme Building. Richard Bradshaw, who served as the structural engineer on the project, said, “These firms were well-known. This was a very prestigious job, but they really didn’t enjoy working together; they were actually shot-gunned together by the politicians at the airport!”

When it came to design, the building department at LAX rejected the original proposal for a shell-style edifice because of California’s propensity for earthquakes. The architects went back to work and came up with the current design. Upon its completion, Bradshaw said, “The Theme Building was the center of attention. Nobody had ever seen anything like it. Since then, it’s become the symbol of Los Angeles.”

Curator of Flight Path Museum LAX, Mike Machat, says, “Both the airport and the Theme Building were decidedly modern. Everything was inspired by space age culture at that time. Disneyland was just five years old when the Theme Building came along and The Jetsons aired just one year after it opened. Before that, the idea of flying from New York to Los Angeles in five hours only existed in the movies. The expansion of LAX and the addition of the Theme Building made it all possible.”

Midcentury aviation artist Ren Wicks’ illustrations depicted life aboard a modern aircraft as otherworldly, with spacious cabins, plush seats and ample room to recline. The TWA 707 featured the Starlight lighting effect, an in-cabin constellation projecting from the ceiling, giving passengers the experience of being transported through the galaxy in luxury and comfort.

The Theme enjoyed a robust existence for decades. As the airport grew, traffic congestion became a major issue. A sizeable expansion before the Summer Olympics in 1984 created more parking and increased road space outside of the terminals. Although it worked for a time, it wasn’t enough to accommodate the millions of people coming and going from the airport each year.

Increased security after 9/11 rendered once-bustling areas off limits to visitors and exacerbated existing problems with passenger drop-offs and pick-ups. The Encounter restaurant opened in 1997 and was a popular dining spot for most of its 16 years in operation, though heightened safety measures throughout the airport contributed to its downturn. Fine recalls, “After 9/11, it was hard to enjoy travel the way we had before. People couldn’t explore the airport anymore. They couldn’t meander like they once had. The restaurant inside the Theme at that time suffered because of it.”
In 2007 the building underwent a three-year $14 million seismic retrofit after a piece of one of the arches detached and fell, hitting the restaurant's roof, though Fine notes, "The building is in very good structural standing today."

As far as how to reinvent the space, ideas have been discussed by airport and city planning officials, including a hotel similar to the revamped TWA terminal at JFK Airport. But Machat explains, "The People Mover will border the northern edge of the Theme Building. Because it's surrounded by roads, a hotel won't work. The secret to the TWA hotel is there was ample space to work with. That original iconic terminal is untouched with two six-story hotel structures built behind it on open land."

The installation of the People Mover will not only ease the long-standing issue of bottlenecked traffic, it will change the way the Theme Building is experienced.

Fine notes, "There's been lots of talk about how we can reactivate the Theme. LAX is constantly evolving to accommodate the large volume of travelers. We have to find a way to address that growth while preserving the cultural legacy of this important landmark. People love the Theme Building and it will always be the centerpiece of L.A."

The building was nicknamed "the Spider" during construction because the look of the four arches resembled something akin to an arachnid creature from a science fiction film.

The Theme Building sat empty for some years after the original Host International restaurant closed. Never waning in popularity, it was designated as a national historic-cultural monument by the city of Los Angeles in 1993.
EPISODE
The State of Our State w/ Lieutenant Governor Kounalakis

Listen at rebuildsocal.org/podcast
I t's time to do away with or at least redefine the term “mom jeans.” Used to describe ill-fitting high-waisted denim, it implies that jeans on people who have kids can't be attractive. The assumption that once you become a mother (or pass your twenties) you needn't care about how you look is even more off base than the recent Gen-Z proclamation that millennials and Gen Xers shouldn't wear skinny jeans or part their hair a certain way.

When someone feels confident in their body, in-seams, waist-bands and leg room are arbitrary. It's about wearing what's flattering to you and putting it together in a way that suits your taste and attitude, no matter what size or age you happen to be. Daniella Clarke is the poster girl for looking hot in any kind of pants or jeans one chooses. The alluring 52-year-old mom and wife of former Guns n' Roses guitar player Gilby Clarke is a successful businesswoman and arguably one of the biggest trend-setters ever when it comes to jeans and L.A. style.

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For over 20 years she's been creating, styling and celebrating the rock 'n roll aesthetic in fashion, first as designer for her extremely evolved into the very '90s g-string revealing trouser brand they owned called Dittos. If you were a girl growing up in the '70s and '80s, you know the horseshoe butt design and bell-bottom cut of Dittos, which was both flattering and casual, and sort of pre-dated the darker disco designer jean onslaught.

“I was a huge fan of Dittos,” Clarke tells us. “In the early '80s I used to love their details and I just thought they made the booty look amazing. It had been dormant for many, many years, and they said 'we think you might be a perfect person to bring these back into modern day' and I was like, 'hell yeah, I'll do it.'”

“The minute the first collection debuted, it just was a hit. It's funny because I'm wearing my Dittos again. I just wore them yesterday,” she adds.

Though she only worked with Dittos for one season, the success cemented Clarke's rep as a fashion powerhouse. After she sold Frankie in 2011, she was contractually obligated to stay on the board for four years as a consultant. The difficulty of starting one's own company, building it and making it your baby, and then selling it and becoming an employee was humbling she says, but once she moved on, new opportunities came her way.

She left the brand she founded on a Friday and the following Monday had a new gig as the creative director of Solow, a chic and unique active wear line. After a couple years doing that she bought the company with friend Lisa Cronin, a producer who worked on VH1's Rock of Love with Poison's Bret Michaels (which many will recall was a hair metal precursor to The Bachelor). Clarke – along with Riki Rachtman and Sharon Osbourne – was a judge on the

ROCK N' ROLL MAMA

How Wife, Mom, Designer and Podcaster Daniella Clarke is Redefining Sexy Style at Any Age

BY LINA LECARO

Clarke sitting pretty

Clarke's concept. It would be a dumb (as their age) is not only a disservice to self expression and personal style, but simply a dumb (as f**k) concept.

When someone feels confident in their body, in-seams, waist-bands and leg room are arbitrary. It’s about wearing what’s flattering to you and putting it together in a way that suits your taste and attitude, no matter what size or age you happen to be. Daniella Clarke is the poster girl for looking hot in any kind of pants or jeans one chooses. The alluring 52-year-old mom and wife of former Guns n’ Roses guitar player Gilby Clarke is a successful businesswoman and arguably one of the biggest trend-setters ever when it comes to jeans and L.A. style.

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spin-off show called *Rock of Love Charm School*, where the girls from the ROL went back to school to learn how to better themselves.

“I always tell Frankie my daughter, just keep your eyes and ears open and you know, just be open because you never know what adventure you’re going to go on,” Clarke says of the connections she’s made that led to creative pursuits. “I always instilled that in her – take every meeting, take every phone call, you never know where it’s going to lead you. Even if the meeting doesn’t work out, it might spark something else.”

Currently Solow continues to offer women great basics that work for athletic activities as well as day-to-day wear. “It’s a very edgy, sexy active wear brand, it also stays true to who I am,” Clarke asserts. “I like to dress sexy, so I love it.”

It can’t be overstated: 2020s’ 50-year-olds are not the same as previous decades’ 50-year-olds. J-Lo, Gwen Stefani and Jennifer Aniston for example, are all 50+ and they continue to wear what they want and look fabulous doing so.

Clarke is definitely part of this inspiring club of seasoned creative women. “I like to feel good about myself,” she says. “I work hard on my body and so I like to show it off sometimes. That might not be for everybody but it’s what I like to do for myself.”

Solow’s subtly vampy and versatile pieces include leggings, tops and more. “You can throw on a cute pair of shoes, and a blazer and go out in them,” Clarke suggests. “Or wear like a cute one-piece little bodysuit or leotard underneath a pair of jeans or shorts or whatever. I like to make sure that you can incorporate everything into your everyday wardrobe.”

In addition to Solow, Clarke also works with ballroom dancer and food business exec Robyn Shreiber on a stylish yet comfy footwear line called Beautisol. “I basically take her vision and incorporate it into the styles,” she explains of the women’s shoes, which promise relief for those of us who’ve spent years abusing our feet in heels and now want to be comfortable but still look hip and fashionable.
Badass Broadcast

Clarke’s fashion projects are in sync with her newest endeavor, the Honest AF podcast. Sharing information publicly that she and Wylde used to share privately with each other via text, the show aims to help women with tips and tales on aging, looking good, menopause, marriage, children, and more.

“We’re both trying to figure out ways to keep things fresh and sustain being healthy and looking our best,” Clarke says of the broadcast which she tapes out of her home. “There are women out there that want to discuss this stuff. There’s a lot of things that are going on with our bodies now that nobody told us about. It’s been a freaking lifesaver during the pandemic and it’s just been so much fun. Barbara and I are both with guitar players, we both have kids, both business women and we’ve both been married forever.”

The duo’s uncensored convos cover a lot and guests – such as Osbourne, Kathy Valentine, Patti Stranger and the wives of Nikki Sixx, Mike Dirnt (Green Day) and Robert Trujillo (Metallica) to name a few – give it a convivial vibe. “They’ve even had both their husbands on the show, and Clarke says both are supportive, even when their wives spill the beans on their private lives.

Clearly both have solid and supportive families where communication and keeping it real are key. Making time for each other no matter how busy is important too. And everyone is busy. Gilby has a new record out, and daughter Frankie (yes, she named her brand after her baby) is following in dad’s footsteps with her rock band Frankie + the Studs.

“When Gilby’s on the road I try to go as much as I can. We always have the rule that we try not to stay apart more than two weeks,” she says. “We respect what we each do, but we also prioritize our family.”

While Honest AF covers topics anyone with a brood can relate to and learn from, it is particularly on point when it comes to fashion, beauty and feeling food. A recent episode discussed the dreaded topic of “dressing your age” plus some intriguing tangents, such as kids who rebel against rocker parents, social media trolls and what’s appropriate when. As someone who influenced fashion in such a big way and continues to do so, Clarke’s takes on these topics are informative and inspiring.

“Fashion is supposed to be fun and dressing for yourself should be fun,” the designer insists. “I don’t believe in rules and don’t believe in the saying that if you remember the trend you shouldn’t do it again. Musicians have such individuality and they express it through their style and that’s one thing I’ve loved about being married to one – it kind of gives you license to do whatever you want.”

Learn more about Solow here.

Honest AF available on Apple Music or wherever you get podcasts.
PFIZER VACCINE MAY START BEING USED FOR CHILDREN AS YOUNG AS 12

As access to vaccinations continues to expand, Pfizer’s vaccine received emergency use authorization for children as young as 12 years old.

BY ISAI ROCHA

The Pfizer-BioNTech COVID-19 vaccine received emergency use authorization (EUA) for children between the ages of 12 to 15, Monday. The vaccine’s use may begin after Wednesday when the federal vaccine advisory committee releases its recommendations for adolescents, according to AP News.

The FDA’s expansion of the emergency use authorization for the Pfizer-BioNTech COVID-19 vaccine to include adolescents 12 through 15 years of age is a significant step in the fight against the COVID-19 pandemic, Acting FDA Commissioner Janet Woodcock said. “Today’s action allows for a younger population to be protected from COVID-19, bringing us closer to returning to a sense of normalcy and to ending the pandemic. Parents and guardians can rest assured that the agency undertook a rigorous and thorough review of all available data, as we have with all of our COVID-19 vaccine emergency use authorizations.”

In Pfizer’s U.S. studies, they administered two doses to 2,260 children between 12 and 15, three weeks apart in a randomized, placebo-controlled clinical trial.

Pfizer’s studies showed 100% effectiveness in its 1,005 volunteers who received the vaccine, while 16 positive COVID-19 cases were recorded in children who received a placebo.

Los Angeles County has been preparing strategies to vaccinate roughly half a million younger adults for weeks as Pfizer got closer to the end of its third phase trials, according to L.A. Public Health director Barbara Ferrer.

“We’ve been planning for about three weeks now, maybe even more I think, for vaccination strategies that will work with younger people,” Ferrer said. “One strategy that we’re working with the state on is to get many more private practitioners signed up with federal and state programs so that they can in fact administer COVID-19 vaccines. I feel a lot of parents will feel more comfortable to take their younger teen to their younger teen’s regular provider to get this vaccine.”

Like with adults, the most common side effects were pain at the injection site, tiredness, headache, chills, muscle pain, fever and joint pain, one to three days after receiving the second dose. The most common side effect after a first dose was pain at the injection site.

Also, like the past EUA vaccines, research on length of effectiveness and rate of transmission is ongoing.

Up to this point, COVID-19 vaccines have only been authorized and administered to those 16 or older and according to the FDA, the new regulations will aid in protecting middle and high school children from the virus as they return to in-person schooling.

From the start of the pandemic in the U.S. back in March, there have been approximately 1.5 million persons between the age of 11 and 17 infected with the COVID-19 virus, according to the Center for Disease Control and Prevention.

Receiving emergency use authorization does not mean the FDA has licensed or approved the Pfizer vaccine’s use, or at this point, any of the other vaccines.

L.A. City Vaccination Sites Taking Walk-Ins

All COVID-19 vaccine sites run by the city of Los Angeles began taking walk-ins without appointments this week.

While appointments for the vaccine could still be made at the city sites, they were no longer required at all sites, including its drive-through sites such as in Dodger Stadium, Hansen Dam and Crenshaw Christian Center.

“We stand at a critical juncture in our fight to end this pandemic, and our city will keep doing everything possible to knock down barriers to vaccine access and deliver doses directly to all Angelenos,” Mayor Eric Garcetti said in a statement. “Our vaccines are safe and effective, and we will continue working to get shots into the arms of our local families, protect ourselves and our loved ones, and start Los Angeles on the road to health, economic growth, and a lasting recovery.”

The announcement for walk-ins came a week after a handful of the city’s vaccination sites began accepting walk-in patients, such as USC to Cal State L.A.’s sites.

Expanded operating hours also took effect this week, with mass vaccination sites at Pierce College and Southwest College taking patients in from 8 a.m. to 8 p.m, and several “mobile clinics” operating from 9 a.m. to 9 p.m.

With 42,000 expected doses of the Moderna vaccine, 34,000 of Pfizer and 27,000 doses of Johnson & Johnson, combined with leftover doses from last week, the city projects to administer more than 255,000 vaccines by the end of the week.

Newsom Proposes Expanding $600 Stimulus Checks To California’s Middle Class

Under California Gov. Gavin Newsom’s proposed economic recovery plan, Monday, $600 checks would be distributed to Californians earning $75,000 or under.

The payments would be part of Newsom’s $100 billion “California Comeback Plan,” and what the governor’s office is calling the “biggest economic package in California history.”

“California’s recovery is well underway, but we can’t be satisfied with simply going back to the way things were,” Newsom said Monday. “We are tripling the Golden State Stimulus to get money in the hands of more middle-class Californians who have been hit hard by this pandemic. Two in three Californians will receive a check from the state.”

Expanding the payments to middle class families, the new round of stimulus checks would potentially cover two out of every three Californians, as $600 checks were already being distributed to lower income residents under the Golden State Stimulus.

Undocumented families and some families with dependents would also qualify for an additional $500 stimulus check.

The California Comeback Plan would also aim to distribute $5 billion in renter’s and utility assistance to cover 100% of back-pay in the coming months.

The plan will be formally introduced to California lawmakers Friday with a June 15 deadline on a final state budget looming.

Echo Park Lake Expected To Finish Construction By End of May

The city of Los Angeles is expected to reopen Echo Park Lake by the end of May after removing the homeless community and fencing it for construction on March 25.

According to City News Service, 35.7 tons of solid waste have been collected since the park’s closure, as well as 723.5 pounds of biological waste and 300 pounds of hazardous waste such as paint and remnants of drug use.

The $600,000 renovations at the park also went toward playground surfaces, restrooms repairs, drinking fountain replacements, light poles, bridge repairs, turf replacement and sprinkler systems.

Before the renovation process began, a stand-off between LAPD and hundreds of homeless advocates took place.

The protesters felt the homeless community was being purposely displaced and they marched the streets through the night before LAPD began dispersing the crowds, arresting 182 people in the process.

Both Los Angeles Mayor Eric Garcetti and Councilman Mitch O’Farrell, who represents the 13th District, promised that every person on the Echo Park Lake homeless community would have a hotel room to stay in, but the homeless advocates have said the living conditions in those hotels had “prison-like conditions.”
BIANCO CHOOSES HER OWN ADVENTURE

L.A. electro-pop artist lets her creativity fly free during lockdown

BY BRETT CALLWOOD

L.A.-based artist Biianco is a classically trained pianist, a former member of garage rock bands, a guitarist, a producer, a singer— you name it. As far as she’s concerned, a career in music was her only option. It’s been, she says, the singular love of her life since childhood and her primary focus.

Things are going well. She’s described in her media kit as a “queer-femme producer, singer-songwriter, poet, director, and multi-instrumentalist,” which about covers it. She describes her sound as “music to dance and ugly-cry to,” a dichotomy highlighted by recent single “Teeth Bared” and new single “That’s What Friends are For.”

“I feel most comfortable in my skin when I’m writing from a deeply raw and emotional place,” she says. “I find that’s the voice that comes to me very naturally when I’m examining really intimate themes like that. It’s ultimately electronic music, but I went to school for film scoring. My influences are strings, really big drums, arranging for different things. So it’s highly emotional electronic music. That’s probably where I live.”

It’s an effective songwriting approach. Other artists might pull influences from a variety of different places, but Biianco writes about whatever she’s experiencing at that time. However, she can collaborate too.

“I write with a lot of artists too,” she says. “I have sessions a lot and produce a lot of other artists’ stuff. I sometimes pick up on their energy too, and we can write from their perspective. But ultimately, it’s always personal experiences. Like looking at my diary with a microscope.”

Biianco was born in Manhattan Hospital and grew up in the Yonkers, just outside of the city. In high school, she was in a bunch of bands that would perform in the city as she learned her craft.

“We lived right outside of the city,” she says. “I remember playing at Trash Bar, Sidewalk Cafe and Pianos. I had shows at the Bitter End. All things are going well. She’s described in her media kit as a “queer-femme producer, singer-songwriter, poet, director, and multi-instrumentalist,” which about covers it. She describes her sound as “music to dance and ugly-cry to,” a dichotomy highlighted by recent single “Teeth Bared” and new single “That’s What Friends are For.”

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“We lived right outside of the city,” she says. “I remember playing at Trash Bar, Sidewalk Cafe and Pianos. I had shows at the Bitter End. All

big venue. There’s not really a middle ground. But in NYC, there are a lot more options to play. In L.A., I feel like all the starter venues are still a little bit more elite. In New York, you can just fuck up on stage a lot more. There’s places to do it at. In L.A., your dive bar is like The Echo. That’s still a fucking great venue. Don’t fuck up on stage at The Echo.”

If New York acted as a giant music school, honing her skills for the discerning venues in Los Angeles, then the education has served her well. While there’s little in the way of “rock” in her pop-electronic sonics now, the DIY lifestyle intrinsic to punk is something that she has fully embraced. In lockdown, it allowed her to thrive. Rather than drown, she swam in creativity and came up with the idea of a Choose Your Own Adventure style video for the “That’s What Friends are For” single.

“I grew up with Goosebumps books, the Choose Your Own Adventure stories,” she says. “That was probably the number one influence for the game. Horror really influences a lot of the visuals for my brand and my creative expression. I’ve explored a lot of different horror film themes, and I’m going to continue to do that with a couple of videos I have coming out. But I was like, a zombie video would go perfectly with this song, and we did it as a Choose Your Own Adventure. That was how it was born, and then we spent a couple of months unpacking what that meant and how much harder it would be. At the end of the day, everyone was like ‘Fuck it, we’re doing it.’

That final statement sums up Biianco’s energy during the difficulties we’ve all faced this past year. While it’s hard to hire people, she says that she feels blessed to be surrounded by talented actors and actresses, makeup artists, etc.

“I was able to mine my peers for help on that front,” she says. “There’s a lot of trust that went into a lot of these sets, everyone getting tested beforehand. Smaller productions, no one on set. You had to be really meticulous. But actually, it fostered a super intimate environment where we were really isolated and people were more focused. We shot all that stuff back in October, right as the industry was just starting to figure out shooting schedules again. It was a breath of relief to actually be on a set and not just super locked down.”

It’s impressive. Gone, she says, are the days when musicians can rely on others. They have to fend for themselves and figure it out. That, despite the fact that we’re all emotionally exhausted.

“We’re just so over gaslighting, so over toxic behavior, everybody is just calling shit out,” she says. “There’s no tolerance for bullshit. I probably would have lived in the horror genre any- way with my visuals, but it’s nice that it might be resonating more with people because the whole world felt like a horror movie for a minute.”

With an album on the way and the earliest signs of touring possibilities, 2021 should be another great year for Biianco. But there are things she learned during lockdown that she doesn’t want to let go of.

“I really love how quarantine and being isolated like this has forced me to connect with my fans digitally way more,” she says. “Whether it’s Twitch livestreams, DJ sets, more videos in the studio, things like that. No matter what, even when we start touring again, I’m going to always lean into that.”

Biianco’s “That’s What Friends are For” single is out now.
Ai Weiwei is a prolific artist, whose works in sculpture, installation, photography, film and LEGO bricks have captured imaginations around the world. His high profile as a critic of the Chinese government’s human rights abuses (and by extension, the oppressive actions of regimes around the world) has galvanized international activism, earned him backlashes of his own, and famously landed him in a toxic stew of surveillance, detention, intimidation and exile -- even as his career boomed. A new exhibition at the Skirball gathers portraits of 83 free speech advocates from around the world whose tribulations mirror and even surpass his own experiences.

Ai Weiwei: Trace culls the selection of LEGO portraits from the 173 which debuted in the landmark site-specific exhibition @ Large: Ai Weiwei on Alcatraz, a widely visited installation at the former Alcatraz Federal Penitentiary in San Francisco. As depicted in the feature film documentary, the Alcatraz project included an array of different uses of space, light, imagery and interactive calls for participation -- all designed to offer the audience entry points into this urgent yet difficult discourse. Though pared down in scope, the same dynamic is at work at the Skirball’s elegant iteration curated by Yael Lipschutz. The exhibition creates an engaging cognitive dissonance between the light-hearted, Pop-infused medium of brightly colored toy pieces and the gravely serious subject matter at hand.

The portraits depict well-known figures such as Nelson Mandela, Martin Luther King, Jr., Edward Snowden and Chelsea Manning -- representing people from 25 countries, whose names and fates are not widely known in the U.S., including Vietnamese labor rights activists.
activist Do Thi Minh Hahn and Rwandan journalist Agnès Uwimana Nkusi. A beautifully produced mobile audio/video guide narrates the stories of each individual in the gallery, along with commentary by Ai and Lipschutz. (Pro tip: this downloads to your smartphones so bring your headphones to the museum with you.)

As you enter the installation, the display of cheerful-at-a-distance pictures arrayed on the floor and the long hall’s wallpaper of intricate, elegant decorative motifs rendered in regal gold give the overall impression of a chapel or an interior courtyard a place of refuge and pleasure. But just as on approach the true content of the portraits becomes clear, with closer inspection the wallpaper pattern reveals itself to be made of images of surveillance equipment, including and especially social media platform icons, as well as handcuffs and weapons. This dissonance works in favor of the educational mission of this project, as the aesthetic temperament creates a welcoming state of mind, open to learning, even about pernicious injustice.

And the portraits themselves also change with proximity and contemplation. As a whole, the effect is lively; but many of the images are themselves degraded or out of focus -- even before the pixelation effect of being constructed of thousands of tiny bricks further desharpens them. The graininess itself evokes the low-res quality of surveillance photographs, just as the metaphor of their puzzle-like assembly evokes both game-playing and dossier-building. Their faces hover in the middle distance, disorienting both physically (on the floor) and in the piquing of the viewer’s own political conscience. As the pleasurability of the portraits and wallpapers themselves make for prolonged viewing, the knowledge of the widespread abuse becomes impossible to forget, and the show becomes a call to action without ever uttering a slogan.

Although this exhibition marks the museum’s return to in-person viewing, besides the audio app, more online content is also available around the show. A virtual conversation with Ai and a talk by Lipschutz are streaming on the Skirball’s YouTube channel, along with on-demand screenings of four of the artist’s recent documentaries: Cockroach, Coronation, The Rest, and Viros. TRACES is on view at the Skirball May 15–August 1; $12, free on Thursdays; skirball.org.
RAW CEO DEFENDS BLUNT SMOKERS FROM FDA FLAVOR BAN

The founder of one of the biggest rolling paper companies on the planet is coming to the defense of blunt smokers ahead of the FDA’s menthol and flavored cigar ban.

BY JIMI DEVINE

The greatest disruptor in the history of rolling papers is coming to the support of those who will be impacted by the FDA’s plans to ban menthol and other flavored tobacco products like Backwoods.

The FDA is in the process of writing new tobacco standards within the next year to ban menthol as a characterizing flavor in cigarettes and ban all characterizing flavors in cigars. The agency argued this authority, bestowed on it by Congress, is one of its most powerful tobacco regulatory tools.

"Banning menthol – the last allowable flavor – in cigarettes and banning all flavors in cigars will help save lives, particularly among those disproportionately affected by these deadly products," said acting FDA Commissioner Janet Woodcock, M.D. when announcing the plan. "With these actions, the FDA will help significantly reduce youth initiation, increase the chances of smoking cessation among current smokers, and address health disparities experienced by communities of color, low-income populations, and LGBTQ+ individuals, all of whom are far more likely to use these tobacco products."

Woodcock went on to argue the combined action represents "powerful, science-based approaches that will have an extraordinary public health impact."

The counterargument is that bans aren’t always that effective. As we sit here in the twilight of cannabis prohibition, 101 years after an alcohol prohibition began that would last 13 years, and nearly 50 years into our attempt to eradicate drugs from society, there are some reasonable questions of whether bans work. Many argue the anti-tobacco education campaigns of the last 20 years have had a far more devastating impact on the industry than any regulator’s pen could.

After you get past the negative health consequences of tobacco, it becomes a personal freedom discussion. When RAW Rolling Paper CEO Josh Kesselman got in touch to give us his take, we were familiar with the energy he brings to pretty much everything he does but weren’t quite sure if it would carry over to the discussion. It certainly did.

It would seem like Kesselman has a lot to gain if things were to go the FDA’s way. There is a reasonable argument to be made that the cannabis that wouldn’t make it into blunts would find its way to a product he owns or consults on. But Kesselman quickly emphasized it’s much more than that fueling his drive to see this ban fail. Kesselman would even argue this may all be the seeds of homogenized cannabis.

“You’re looking at it because of your personal vantage point. You look at it from the cannabis side. I don’t look at it from the cannabis side. I look at it from the smoking side. My roots are all tobacco thanks to my dad. We were always rolling our own tobacco cigarettes," Kesselman said. "To avoid the legal headaches, he didn’t want to say he introduces folks to something cleaner, but he’s definitely trying to get people into a mindset of an older, more natural way of smoking."

“I’ve even sold tobacco seed over the years and tried to get people to just grow it themselves. That way, you know exactly what the fuck is in it. There’s no question, just call yourself, that way you know, and it’s the same thing with my papers," Kesselman said. "The same thing with everything. It’s a matter of trying to provide people with a more natural way of experiencing the magical nature of smoking fucking plants because there isn’t just one plant, there isn’t just two, there isn’t just three … there’s a lot of plants out there, and each one of them has a different effect, and a different benefit."  

As the conversation moved towards the forthcoming FDA actions, he was quick to show his disgust at the idea of people thinking it’s something he might be in favor of. He doesn’t want the money of someone that’s been forced to use his product. He wants them to enjoy cannabis or tobacco however it works best for them.

“’It’s actually something that I’m heavily opposed to. People think I would be for it. I am completely against it. I surveyed my customer base on Instagram, and we have over 10,000 responses and 86% are completely against the ban,” Kesselman said. “It really comes down to freedom and bullshit. And the bullshit is, we never want to see a plant get criminalized. Because when you criminalize something, you’re creating criminals, you’re criminalizing a behavior.”

Kesselman argues his community feels that adults choosing to partake in using menthol cigarettes or flavored backwoods know the risk of what they’re getting into. Kesselman himself has spent years lecturing people on the dangers of all the nasty chemical–treated things in both the cannabis and tobacco spaces. He stands by the education model as being the way forward.

Kesselman traced this new wave of regulation back to an uptick in tobacco regulation during the Obama administration in 2009.

“Around 2009, I sued the FDA over them trying to claim that my flavored rolling papers, my juicy Jay’s papers, were illegal. They were not illegal, and we had to go to court, and it was a fucking nightmare. I got to understand their mentality, and their mentality is not science-based," Kesselman said.

In the process of building a defense for his products, they looked a little more into the background of the legislation that led to the
court challenge. He believes the legislation was one giant effort by Monster Tobacco to regulate medium and small tobacco out of existence, and stop more natural alternatives from getting wind in their sales.

“The senators that were for the bill defended it, saying, ‘Of course we want it written by Monster Tobacco. Who else knows how to regulate this industry better blah blah, you know, than the industry itself,’” Kesselman said.

The ethos of the claim here is that Monster Tobacco is helping push the public health argument to help consolidate what’s left of the industry in America while making it difficult to enter the space. Also concerning is the idea they’re prepping to make a similar run at weaponizing bureaucracy to take control of as much of the cannabis industry as possible.

Kesselman argues this would be accomplished through language in the MORE Act that will put cannabis under the control of the FDA, the PACT Act and other stuff written by Monster Tobacco. The scariest rumor Kesselman pointed to was a bill where cannabis would become an exact control product leading to some kind of process for homogenized FDA-approved cannabis.

“If you got a patent on that process, which you will, then you now have complete control over marijuana,” Kesselman said. “Little by little, people are smoking less and Monster Tobacco is fighting to hold on to them. They’re trying to keep people. They’re trying to keep vaping out. They try to get everything out to keep you buying those packs of cigarettes. Now they can phase, slowly but surely, from tobacco into cannabis and get trillion-dollar profits for another couple 100 years, and also, of course, outlaw everything that stands in their way.”

One of the aspects of the ban currently being debated is the potential for communities of color to face increased enforcement due to the more widespread use of menthol tobacco products and blunts. The FDA argues they’re targeting distributors, but would people from those communities be the lowest rung on the distribution ladder because the product has been regulated off the shelves?

Kesselman gave his take on the prospects of enforcement: “We are humans, man. We are very induruous. If you make it illegal, and people still want it, whatever the fuck it is, they will find a way to make it. And they will sell it, and then you’re going to bust them for it. And the number of laws that are against these, like if you’re selling black-market menthol cigarettes for example, the number of laws that are written to criminalize that are already over the top, you have all the taxes and all the FDA.”

But most importantly, how well will it work? Researchers in Canada found 59.1% of pre-ban cigarettes; 21.5% quit smoking and 19.5% still smoke; 79.5% of people had all the taxes and all the FDA. “To criminalize that are already over the top, you will find a way to make it. And they will sell it, and then you’re going to bust them for it.”

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