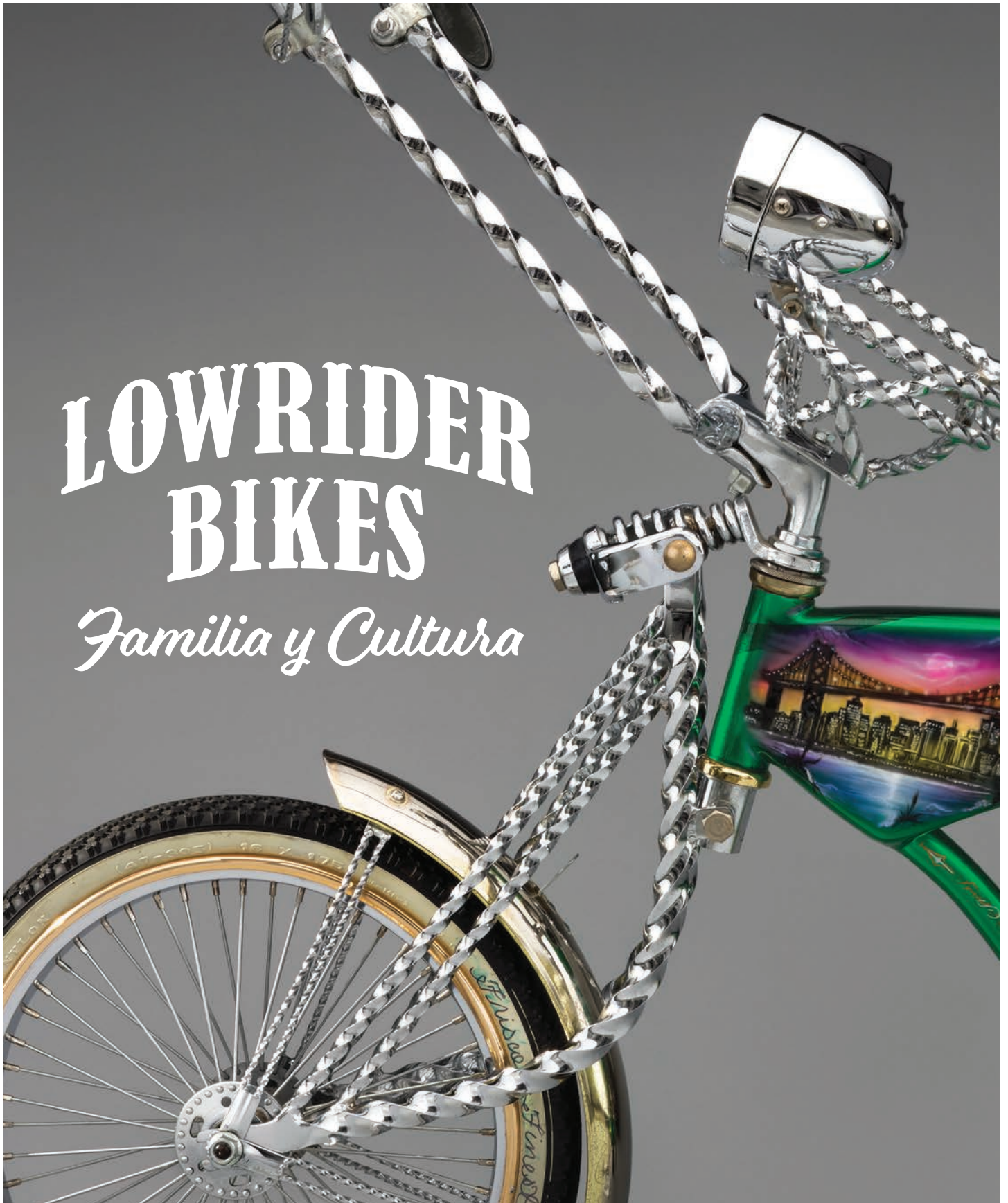


# LOWRIDER BIKES

*Familia y Cultura*



# LOWRIDER BIKES

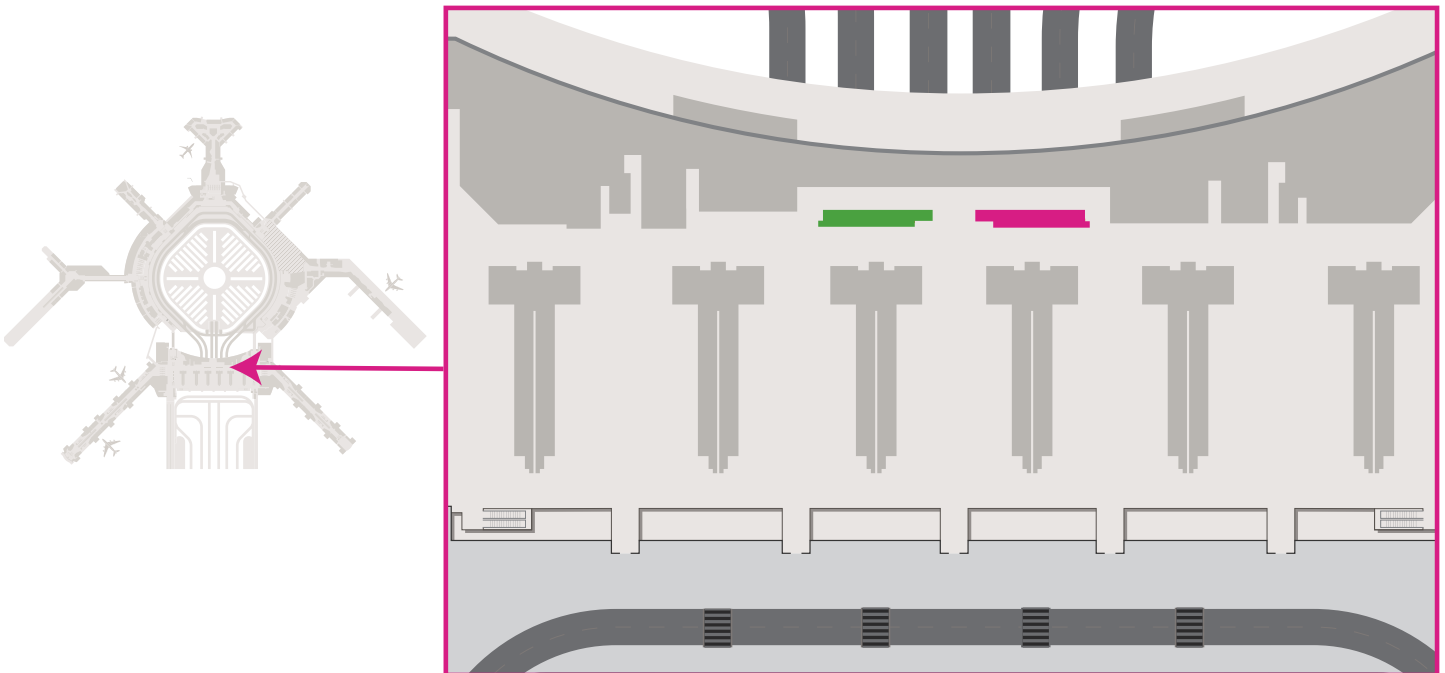
## *Familia y Cultura*

### Self-Guided Tour and Supplemental K-12 Teaching Materials

Thank you for visiting our exhibition, *Lowrider Bikes: Familia y Cultura*, located in SFO's International Terminal Main Hall, Level 3 Departures

This PDF provides parents, teachers, and other visitors with a self-guided tour of the exhibition and is comprised of three sections:

- **Introduction:** a brief background and summary of the exhibit. This is the large text panel that appears in each of the galleries at the start of the exhibit.
- **IT-A:** this is the long gallery located at the rear of the International Terminal Main Hall, adjacent to A-side departures and the Aviation Museum and Library (AML). The text for this section begins at the far right of the gallery and continues left towards the center of the terminal.
- **IT-G:** this is the long gallery located at the rear of the International Terminal Main Hall, adjacent to G-side departures and the BART station entrance. The text for this section begins at the far left of the gallery and continues right towards the center of the terminal.



## Introduction: Lowrider Bikes: Familia y Cultura

Lowriding is an artistic expression of identity. Far more than a style or pop-cultural phenomenon, lowriding is a way of life, a powerful movement that celebrates diverse cultures that are characterized by community, family, strength, and tradition. Both a person and a vehicle may be defined as a lowrider. Together, they move “low and slow,” proudly cruising at their own pace with pride. Lowriding is multigenerational and transfers culture, knowledge, tools, and vehicles through family lines. Parents often introduce children to lowriding by building bicycles as collaborative projects. People also discover lowrider bicycles through other family members, friends, or on their own. While some transition to customized cars as they grow older, many lowriders maintain a lifelong dedication to building, riding, and displaying their bikes.

Bicycles have been an important part of lowriding since the movement began in the late 1940s. Like their modern counterparts, early lowrider bicycles featured custom paint jobs, lowered seats, modified handlebars, and other parts and accessories that reflected the personalities of their builders. While various bicycle makes and models have been customized over the years, Schwinn remains the preferred brand. Schwinn’s legacy was solidified in 1963 when they introduced the Sting-Ray, a small, sporty bicycle that has reigned supreme as the lowrider of choice. As customized Sting-Rays took to the streets, lowrider car shows also grew in popularity and featured bicycles in their own categories. *Lowrider Magazine* included bicycles in its first issue in 1977, and in 1993 *Lowrider Bicycle Magazine* was created during a resurgence in lowrider bike building.

Modifications to lowrider bicycles abound. They include raking the handlebars forward and re-arc-ing or replacing the front forks to lower the entire bike. Custom parts are plated in chrome or

gold and may be engraved with swirling scrollwork designs. Accessories such as side mirrors and faux exhaust pipes mimic custom motorcycles, while intricate, multi-layered paint jobs emulate the artistry of lowrider cars. Sheet metal inserts are often welded between the frame and filled to provide a canvas for airbrushed murals that showcase the theme of a bicycle. The most elaborate builds feature custom-fabricated metalwork that encloses or replaces the frame to reshape the bike. Some lowrider bikes are made to ride and display, while others are built strictly for competition at shows. When he was a teenager, longtime bicycle builder José R. Laguna asserted: “a lowrider bike should be a way of expressing someone’s heart, someone’s style...you’re not just showing a bike—you’re showing an image of you.”

### Discussion questions:

**Many people think that lowriding is simply a style of a car or bicycle. How is lowriding more important than that?**

- Lowriding is an artform that showcases a car or bike owner’s personal identity. By building, cruising, and displaying lowrider bikes and cars, people are making themselves visible. They are sharing their interests, their pasts, and their beliefs. Lowriders also celebrate their cultures and communities by including references to them in their vehicles and participating in events, shows, clubs, and other organizations.

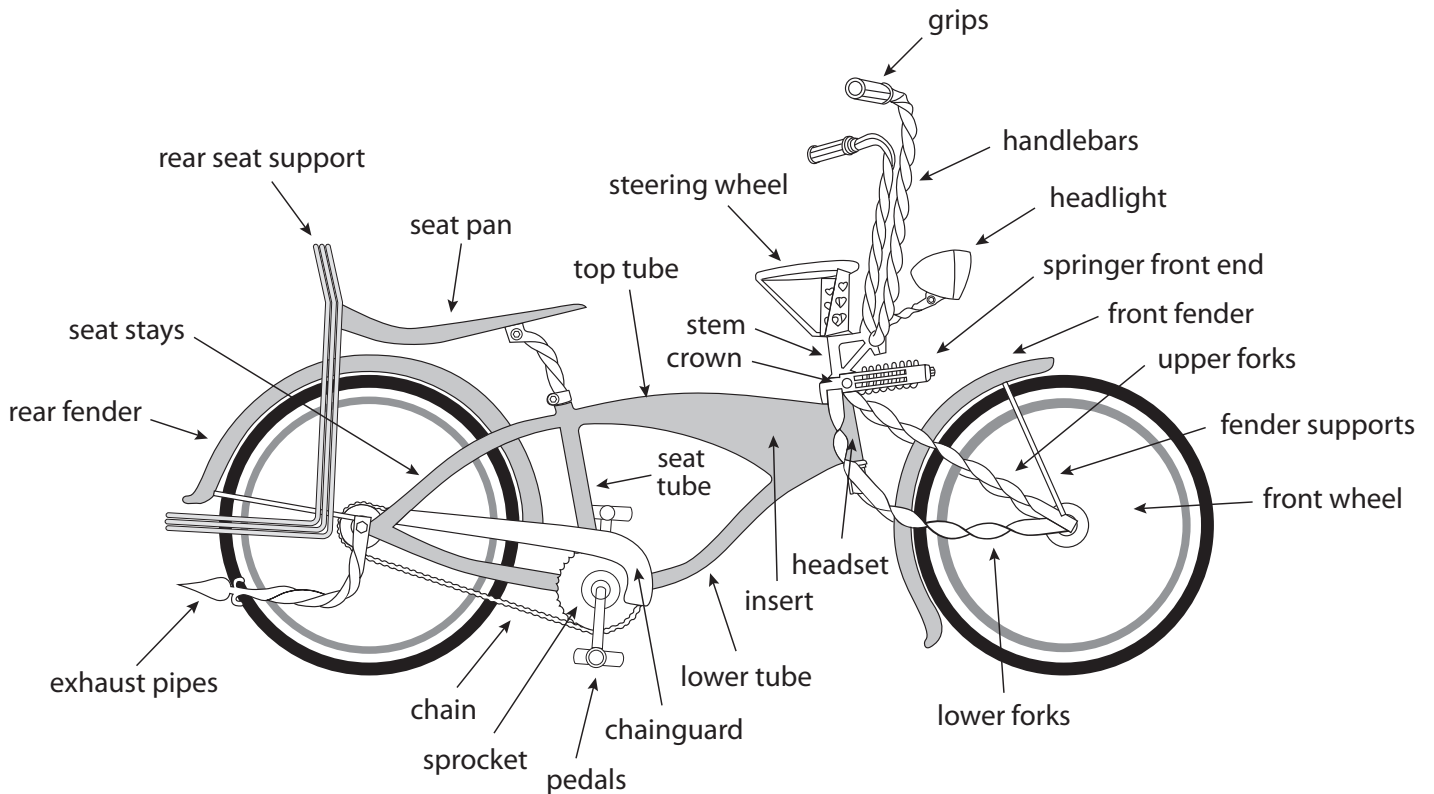
**Why is lowriding so important to families and communities?**

- People form and maintain bonds within their communities and families by lowriding. As they build cars and bicycles together, they share stories, rely on each other for help, and take pride in cruising and displaying their vehicles. In doing so, many lowriders honor longstanding traditions and generations of family, community, and cultural history.



**El Yezpez Customs Bicycle Club  
in the Mission District 2024**  
Tyrone “Malow” Diaz  
San Francisco  
Courtesy of the artist  
R2026.0311.001

## Lowrider Bicycle Diagram and Selected Glossary



**Exhaust Pipes:** these are often added to emulate the look of a motorcycle and are not functional. They are selected from the many lowrider bike accessories available or are custom made for a specific build.

**Inserts:** custom made from sheet metal or fiberglass, inserts are added between the top tube and lower tube to reshape the bike and add space for murals or other artwork and paintwork. Inserts may also be added at the rear of the bike.

**Handlebars, Stem, and Headset:** Handlebars are used as the primary steering for a lowrider bike. Handlebars may stand upright or be slanted ahead of the rider depending on the style of the bike. They are attached to a stem, which is set into the frame by a pair of bearings and races called a headset that allow the handlebars to turn.

**Seat Pan and Rear Seat Support:** Schwinn Sting-Ray bicycles feature an elongated “banana seat” and rear seat support that make them look more like a motorcycle. The seat pan is the metal structure that was originally padded and upholstered. Many lowrider bikes feature a custom-made seat pan that sits closer to the frame. Seat pans on bikes that are ridden are usually upholstered, while the pans on show bikes are often engraved and plated or painted.

**Springer Front End:** this replaces the single set of forks on a more traditional bike with upper and lower forks that are connected to the crown by a spring, providing suspension similar to a car. Springer front ends are popular accessories on traditional cruiser and Sting-Ray bikes. On lowrider bikes, springer front end forks are often re-arc'd (re-bent) or are custom made to place the wheel farther in front of the rider, rather than pointed down, to lower the bike.

**Steering Wheel:** many lowrider bikes feature a smaller version of the custom steering wheels that are found on traditional lowrider cars. While mostly for looks or “show,” riders can also use them to steer if they are careful.

**Top Tube, Lower Tube, Seat Tube, and Seat Stays:** these are the main parts of a bike frame and are normally made from tubular steel. Some lowriders modify their frames by removing or reshaping sections of tube and then welding them back into place, creating a truly customized bike frame.

## A Brief History of Lowriding

Lowrider cars showcase custom paint jobs, brightly plated and engraved metal, plush upholstery, and modified suspensions and wheels that lower them close to the ground. These rolling works of art reflect their owners' passions and personalities and can take hundreds to thousands of hours to complete.

Lowriding began in late 1940s California, when automotive enthusiasts in Mexican-American communities began lowering and personalizing cars that were passed down or purchased secondhand. These early lowriders modified their vehicles to drive *bajito y suavecito*, or "low and slow"—unlike the predominantly Anglo-American "hot rodders" who focused on racing and driving fast. During the 1950s, driving merely for fun and "cruising" was enjoyed by people in all types of vehicles. People from different cultures began customizing and lowering their cars to express themselves on the streets and at shows. However, in 1958 a California vehicle code made it illegal to drive cars that were too close to the road. In response, lowriders developed hydraulic suspensions using surplus aircraft parts, so that cars could be raised or lowered at the flick of a switch.



Lowriders from Brown and Black communities faced racial discrimination and targeting by police as the movement gained momentum. Chicano and Lowrider Studies professor Denise M. Sandoval points out, "the term *lowrider*, which began as an insult, took on new meaning as youth and young adults redefined it as a source of cultural pride." Lowriding was further criminalized in the 1980s and '90s when cities throughout California implemented anti-cruising laws, driving lowriding underground. At the same time, film, music, and other media portrayed lowriders as criminals and gang members, creating myths that have negatively stereotyped the movement.

Realizing the need for a positive outlet, *Lowrider Magazine* and other publications celebrated lowriding's creativity and culture. They organized competitive car and bike shows that still provide a public space for lowriders to express their artistry. Lowrider councils and coalitions formed to battle discrimination and negative stereotypes, standing up for their rights and strengthening their communities. Local and statewide action by lowrider groups prevailed on January 1, 2024, when California abolished anti-cruising laws and code that limited vehicle height. As the movement grows and evolves worldwide, lowriding remains a powerful counterculture, providing an avenue for cultural celebration, resistance, and education.

### Discussion questions:

**When did lowriding begin, and how was it different than other car cultures?**

- Lowriding began in the late 1940s when Mexican American car enthusiasts started personalizing their vehicles. Instead of building them to go fast like hot rodders of the day, lowriders customized their cars to drive "low and slow" and to stand out from the crowd. Lowriding has since grown in popularity among people of many cultures who live all over the world.

**What challenges did early lowriders face that are still being fought today?**

- Lowriders from diverse cultures have always been subject to racial and social discrimination. However, rather than hiding from prejudice, lowriders proudly display their artistry and culture for all to see. By remaining visible, staying active in the community, and challenging stereotypes, lowriders are moving into the mainstream and are breaking down cultural and racial barriers along the way. In this way, lowriding is both a form of activism and an artform.

**Lowrider at Blvd. Nights 2024**

Renée Lopez  
San José, CA  
Courtesy of the artist  
R2026.0312.002



*The Green Machine* 1996  
 c. 1969–70 Schwinn Sting-Ray  
 Built by John West  
 Courtesy of Vince and Joseph Mabutas  
 L2026.0305.001

## *The Green Machine*

Vince “Play” Mabutas began lowriding on a Schwinn Sting-Ray when he was ten years old. Although he was only fifteen at the time, Vince drove two lowriders: a 1963 Buick Riviera, and a 1963 Chevrolet Impala convertible dubbed *63Hogg*. By the mid-1990s, Vince had built and sold over a dozen lowrider cars. Vince explains his passion for the movement and the appeal of lowriding: “Every car and bike is unique in its own way. You’re taking creative ideas from your mind and personalizing the vision into the candies and chrome, the twisted metal and hopping... You just get into your own world. It’s like therapy.” Vince is a longtime member of Frisco’s Finest, a lowrider club founded in San Francisco’s Mission District in 1982. He was voted their first president in 1994 and still holds that position with honor.

Like many other lowriders who are also fathers, Vince introduced his children to lowriding by taking the family to shows and building bicycles and pedal cars with them. *The Green Machine* was created for his son Joseph “Mabz” Mabutas in collaboration with legendary lowrider bicycle builder John West in 1996. Starting with an original Schwinn Sting-Ray, West enclosed the front frame in sheet metal and filler and fabricated all of the twisted-steel metalwork for the bike. *The Green Machine* features a

two-tone, candy-green paint job by West, with pinstriping and engraving by Vince and a mural by airbrush and tattoo artist “Dreamer.” Riding on sixteen-inch “Baby Dayton” wheels capped by a matching front fender, *The Green Machine* retains an original twenty-inch fender on the rear—giving the bike a dramatic, traditional stance. *The Green Machine* has won numerous awards, including first place in its class at the 2000 *Lowrider Magazine* Las Vegas Super Show.



*The Green Machine* 2025  
 Tyrone “Malow” Diaz  
 South San Francisco, CA  
 Courtesy of the artist  
 R2026.0311.003



*Carlitos' Bike* 1997/2018  
 1960s Schwinn Sting-Ray  
 Built by Carlos Rodriguez, Jr. and Carlitos Rodriguez  
 Courtesy of the Rodriguez Family  
 L2026.0304.001.01

## Carlitos' Bike

Brothers Carlos Jr., Sair, and Uciel Rodriguez were introduced to lowriding by their uncle Che Shul Jr., who took the boys cruising in a 1953 Hudson Super Wasp that was modified with a hydraulic suspension, wire wheels, and custom paint. Years later, Carlos Jr. expressed interest in working at his father's shop, Tiger's Auto Body in Brisbane, California. Carlos Sr., a master painter who specialized in lowriders and other classic cars, asked him to build a lowrider bicycle as an apprentice's project. With help from his uncle Che, Carlos Jr. located a 1960s Schwinn Sting-Ray and enclosed the front and rear frame in a unique sheet metal design. Che sourced the wheels, lowered springer fork, and other parts from Los Angeles. Sair added a custom paint job with tape-fade graphics on the front frame. Airbrush and tattoo artist "Dreamer" painted Aztec-inspired murals on the rear.

Carlos dedicated the project to his four-year-old son Carlitos and entered the bike in lowrider shows. Following in his father's footsteps, Carlitos started to learn automotive bodywork as a teenager at the family shop. When he was twenty-four, Carlitos was diagnosed with cancer and given one year to live. Father and son pulled their bike from storage, updated it with new wheels and a reupholstered seat, and once again entered lowrider shows. The family later remarked that focusing on the

bike "kept him going for that last year." After Carlitos passed, they disconnected the front fork from the stem and placed the crown over the frame, lowering the bike further and making it unrideable. *Carlitos' Bike* now includes a custom-made sprocket and gold-plated plaque, both bearing his name in a loving tribute.



*Carlitos' Bike* 2022  
 Tyrone "Malow" Diaz  
 Bayshore Roundhouse, Brisbane, CA  
 Courtesy of the artist  
 R2026.0311.005



*The Warriors* 2022  
 twenty-inch lowrider bicycle  
 Built by Carlos Jr., Sair, and Uciel Rodriguez  
 Courtesy of Benny Romero and the Rodriguez Family  
 L2026.0302.001

## Benny Romero

Benny Romero received his first lowrider bike when he was three years old. Painted blue and gold in homage to the Golden State Warriors basketball team, the bicycle was built by Benny’s uncles Carlos Jr., Sair, and Uciel Rodriguez, who operate an automotive shop that specializes in lowrider paint and body work. Benny quickly took to personalizing the bike, requesting custom parts for Christmas and working with his family and friends on an ever-evolving design. Dressed in a custom-made charro suit, Benny rode in the Carnaval San Francisco parade for the first time when he was five years old—starting a tradition that earned him the nickname “The Charrito of the Mission.” When not riding with his cousin Tonantzin, who was gifted a lowrider bike and matching charro suit of her own, Benny entered his bicycle in local shows and rode throughout San Francisco with El Yezpez Customs Bicycle Club and other friends.

As he was preparing for the 2022 Carnaval parade, Benny discovered that his bicycle was missing. Only nine years old at the time, he remarked on the local news, “I was a little sad when it got stolen...seven years of money and work into it, I was emotional.” With the Warriors entering the NBA Finals, the San Francisco Lowrider Council searched for donations from the community to Benny’s bike. Working in the evenings while watching the Finals, Benny’s uncles

modified a new frame and applied a custom paint job. They commissioned airbrush and tattoo artist Miguel Santana Beltran to render the Chase Center on one side. Not wanting to jinx the Warriors, Benny decided to include only three title trophies on the other mural. After the team invited Benny and his mother to their 2022 championship-winning game, he added a commemorative trophy to the bike’s front fender. Recent additions include a spare wheel, sprocket, and pedals that were custom-made in Mexico City from drawings by his uncles.



**Benny Romero, Fiesta de las Américas festival** 2022  
 Tyrone “Malow” Diaz  
 Mission District, San Francisco  
 Courtesy of the artist  
 R2026.0311.006

*Queen of Hearts* 2024  
twenty-inch lowrider bicycle  
Built by Jesse James, Sunnyvale, CA  
Courtesy of Liz Perez and Izzy Dueñas  
L2026.0310.001



## Dueñas

Dueñas is an all-female lowrider car club founded in 2019 in Sunnyvale, California. Their name is derived from the Spanish word *dueña*, which translates to “female owner.” Club founder Angel Romero, whose mother Maricela Rodriguez was also a lowrider, explains, “I want it to be about women empowerment, because if it wasn’t for my mom, telling me to always be proud of who I was and to do what I wanted to do no matter what, I wouldn’t be where I am today.” In 2025, Dueñas was honored when a group portrait by photographer Renée Lopez was included in *Corazón y vida*, an exhibition at the Smithsonian’s National Museum of American History that celebrates lowriding culture.

Dueñas member Elizabeth “Liz” Perez remarked that her daughter Isabel “Izzy” Dueñas “love for the lowriding lifestyle keeps us together...she’s always down to ride with me, anywhere we go.” Fourteen-year-old Izzy is now the president of the Dueñas bike club, founded in 2022. Izzy and her friends display their bikes at lowrider shows throughout Northern California alongside their mothers’ cars before taking a traditional ride at the end of the day. Named *Queen of Hearts*, Izzy’s bike was inspired by her lifelong love of *Alice in Wonderland*. She selected the paint scheme and heart design with the understanding that it

would be a lengthy project. Putting aside a hydraulic upgrade for her 1987 Monte Carlo, Liz fast-tracked the bicycle to surprise Izzy for her thirteenth birthday. Izzy now plans to build a pink “Box Chevy” Caprice with rose gold wheels and trim.



Izzy Dueñas and the *Queen of Hearts*, Del Oeste Bike Show 2022  
Tyrone “Malow” Diaz  
San José, CA  
Courtesy of the artist  
R2026.0311.009



*Gigantes* 2009/2019  
 1970 Schwinn Bantam  
 Built by Peter, Syrus, and Giovanni Miranda  
 Courtesy of Peter and Giovanni Miranda  
 L2026.0309.001a-c

## Gigantes

Pedro “Peter” Miranda and his older brother José Jr. received their first lowrider bicycles from their father, José Sr., who owned an autobody and upholstery shop in Burbank, California, that specialized in lowrider cars. Peter’s father modified a 1970s Ross girls’ bike for him by adding an upward-curved top tube that was connected to the original downward-curved top tube with sheet metal and filler. Painted candy blue by Peter’s brother Ricardo and named *La Maranatha*, it was featured in *Lowrider Bicycle Magazine* when Peter was twelve years old. Years later, *La Maranatha* was stolen from Peter’s shop. He decided to build a similar bicycle with his son Syrus using a 1970 Schwinn Bantam girls’ bike. Peter fabricated an upward-curved top tube as his father had done on *La Maranatha*. Peter then cut, re-welded, heated, and bent the original top tube so that it curved at the rear—eliminating the seat post tube at the lower frame and creating a floating effect.

In 2019, Peter rebuilt the bicycle with his thirteen-year-old son Giovanni. Painted in House of Kolor’s “Sunset Orange,” the bike reflects Giovanni’s love for the San Francisco Giants baseball team and was renamed *Gigantes*. Pinstriping and silver leafing were applied by Ruben Holguin, and airbrush artist Shinji Hara rendered murals on both sides of the frame. Giovanni wanted to be more competitive at shows, so they added custom handlebars, a seat pan, and a rear

seat support that Peter’s father had made for another bike in the mid-1990s. Ben Herrera upholstered the seat and insert in two-tone, button-tucked velvet, and new forks, pedals, and a matching sprocket were custom-made in Texas. *Gigantes* has since won “Best of Show” at lowrider events throughout California. The bike is represented by Vajitos Del Valle Bike Club, founded in Tulare, California, in 1992 by Peter’s brother, José Jr.



*Gigantes*, Del Oeste Bike Show 2022  
 Tyrone “Malow” Diaz  
 San José, CA  
 Courtesy of the artist  
 R2026.0311.010



*Nueva Lotería* 2019  
 mid-1970s Schwinn Fair Lady  
 Built by José R. Laguna and Alejandra Laguna  
 Courtesy of José R. Laguna and Alejandra Laguna  
 L2026.0303.001a-b

## *Nueva Lotería*

José R. Laguna was captivated by lowrider bicycles at the San José Cinco de Mayo parade when he was ten years old. His older brother was in the Luxurious Car Club, and José enjoyed reading *Lowrider Magazine* and building plastic “hopper” model kits. Unable to afford a bicycle, José was given a 1968 Schwinn Sting-Ray. He disassembled the bike and cut sheet metal inserts for the frame, which were welded into place at a cannery where his father worked. At age thirteen, José joined the Luxurious Bicycle Club and decided to transform his bike through a competition build. With help from club members and additional custom parts, the bicycle went undefeated at local shows. José started building lowrider cars at seventeen: first, a 1981 Grand Prix customized with hydraulics, rims, and upholstery; next, a 1985 Cutlass that “went a little farther” with custom bodywork and paint.

José sold the cars in 2009 to support his growing family and stepped away from lowriding. Ten years later, José decided to build a bicycle with his daughter Alejandra. Starting with a mid-1970s Schwinn Fair Lady, José and his friend Shane Calamia enclosed the frame in sheet metal. Raul Alfaro designed and fabricated custom fenders and made the engraved handlebars, forks, and air system. Alejandra suggested that her bike pay tribute to Hispanic culture and *Lotería*, a game of chance referred to as “Mexican bingo.” José commented that she “really hit it

out of the park with the theme.” The *Lotería* card holders, sprocket, pedals, and fender supports were custom-made in Mexico City. Louis Delgado painted the bike silver before taping and painting it in multiple transparent candy colors. Freddy Alfaro rendered *Lotería*-themed murals on both sides of the frame. Delgado then applied pinstriping and gold leafing to accentuate the bike’s overall graphic design, topped with layers of clear coat paint to create a deep, reflective finish.



*Nueva Lotería*, *StreetLow Magazine* Lowrider Car Show 2024  
 Tyrone “Malow” Diaz  
 San José, CA  
 Courtesy of the artist  
 R2026.0311.011

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