

## San Antonio's arts community reflects on the milestones of another challenging year

By Bryan Rindfuss



Alexander Liberman's monumental sculpture *Ascent* visually anchors Mays Family Park — a two-acre green space added to the McNay campus as part of a recent landscape transformation. Courtesy Photo / McNay Art Museum

On the heels of one of the most trying years in modern history, 2021 was faced with not just great but arguably impossible expectations. But as we cautiously emerged from our COVID cocoons, some found solace, inspiration and a reinforced sense of community in a slightly improved version of the new normal.

To paint a perfectly imperfect portrait of the year that was, we reached out to 14 influential people and institutions and asked them to reflect on the milestones and accomplishments they reached in 2021. Condensed and edited highlights of their responses follow.

### **AnArte**

“I had two options during this pandemic: get depressed or bring back a colorful world,” AnArte gallery proprietor Ana Montoya said. “I decided to embrace happiness. AnArte is like a candy store — you walk in, and your heart is injected with joy. I feel blessed for my AnArte family team and all our amazing art lovers and supporters.”

### **Artpace**

“The unpredictable year that was 2021 was extremely difficult for all arts and culture organizations, with San Antonio losing a few established and long-running intuitions,” Artpace Director Riley Robinson said. “The true highlight of the year was the advocacy work done by CAUSA [Culture and Arts United for San Antonio] and the 46 organizations that spoke with a unified and collective voice to support all arts and culture in our city. Friendships, mutual respect and the bonds built from CAUSA will outlast the pandemic and create a stronger environment for artists and the public to experience.”



Work by artist Angelica Raquel Martinez, who exhibited at FL!GHT Gallery this year.

### **Blue Star Contemporary**

“Reflecting back on 2021, a couple of words that come to mind for me are: community and resilience,” Blue Star Contemporary Executive Director Mary Heathcott told the Current. “Blue Star Contemporary recently hosted its Blue Starry Red Dot on December 9, which was a celebration of community honoring artists of The Compound, Janet and Bruce Flohr and H-E-B. The evening was uplifting in so many ways: friends gathering together at last after too many months apart; sharing memories from a heart center of our artist community, The Compound; and having our honoree Janet Flohr so aptly state when passed the mic: “Don’t give up. Art is our salvation.” This event instilled so much hope for the future. BSC and its fellow arts and culture organizations across San Antonio continue to band together in support of our community through our collective work as CAUSA. As the pandemic stretched into year two, collaboration and finding strength together has never been more important. We are working together in new ways, finding power in our collective voice and supporting each other as we grapple with financial woes and the roller coaster of concern for our artists and participants.”

### **FL!GHT Gallery**

“After a COVID-induced pause in programming, it’s been great to sort of ‘start fresh’ in a sense with our curation and new shows coming in,” FL!GHT gallery founder Justin Parr offered. “I feel great about everything we’ve been doing — especially Angelica Raquel Martinez’s show. It was a mostly online/virtual opening that did not get a lot of in-person engagement, but it was one of my favorite shows we’ve had in this space.”



Courtesy of McNay Art Museum

“See-through” fencing was added to the perimeter of the McNay as part of a landscape transformation designed to turn the museum grounds into a “more inclusive, open campus.”

### **Luminaria**

“[This] was a challenging year for everyone in the arts — here in San Antonio and across the country,” said Yadhira Lozano, who became executive director of Luminaria in December 2020. “However, San Antonio rose to the challenge, rallied and helped us produce an amazing festival!” In addition to widespread community



support and a strong sense of a “united arts community,” Lozano counted the following among her 2021 accomplishments: handing over seven Luminaria Artist Foundation grants for the creation of new work; showcasing 44 featured artists and 206 festival participants; and providing more than \$100,000 in funding to local and regional artists.

### **McNay Art Museum**

Challenges aside, it’s been a big year for the McNay. In March, the museum attracted record crowds with “Limitless! Five Women Reshape Contemporary Art” — an exhibition showcasing the work of Martine Gutierrez, Letitia Huckaby, Yayoi Kusama, Sandy Skoglund and Jennifer Steinkamp. “The healing power of art was clearly needed this year, and the McNay was honored to be there with that power for San Antonio,” McNay Director and CEO Richard Aste said of the well-received exhibition. And in November, the McNay celebrated the completion of the first phase of a \$6.25 million landscape master plan that’s been percolating since 2004. Designed to transform the grounds into a “more inclusive, open campus,” the plan improved entrances, replaced a barrier-like wall of hedges along the perimeter with contemporary fencing and added more than 100 new trees and nearly 8,000 shrubs, grasses and perennials — not to mention two acres of green space at the corner of Austin Highway and North New Braunfels now dubbed Mays Family Park.



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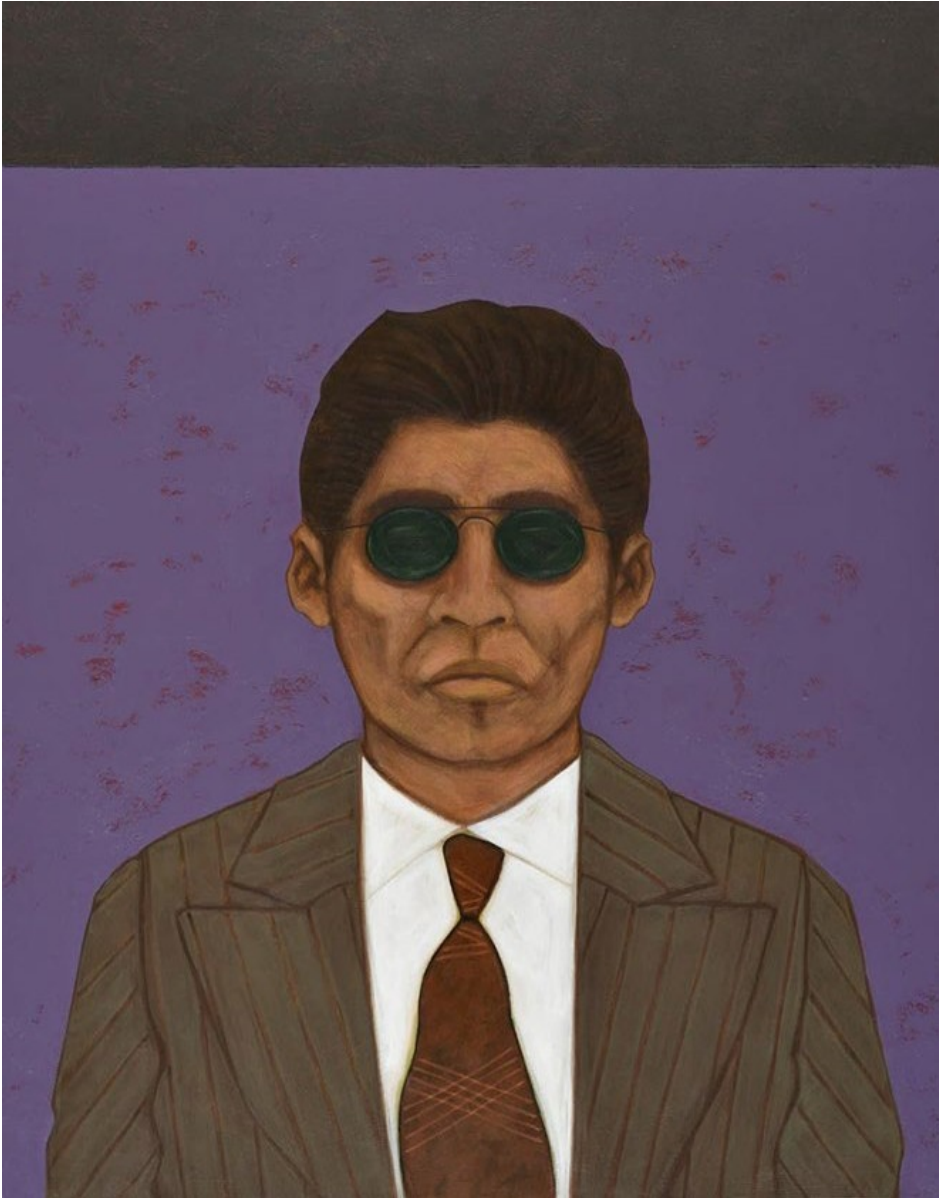
Presa House Gallery collaborated with Planned Parenthood South Texas during the first ever Fiesta House Float Parade.

### **Presa House Gallery**

“Having the opportunity to work alongside and support Texas Biennial curators Ryan Dennis and Evan Garza was the highlight for me,” said Presa House Gallery co-director Rigoberto Luna. “Engaging with them and the artists of this edition had a massive impact on me.” Addressing the work of his partner and gallery co-director Jenelle Esparza, Luna added, “Jenelle’s career continues to blossom in 2021. The San Antonio Museum of Art acquired her work and she’s in the middle of her first major public art project with the Methodist Hospital Metropolitan. As for Presa House, we’re grateful for continued growth and humbled by the visibility across the state and beyond.”

## Ruby City

“This year was a bit of a rollercoaster,” Ruby City Director Elyse A. Gonzales said. “There was so much uncertainty and also so many wonderful things that came out of this past year. We’re awfully proud of a great deal of things, but these are some highlights: We successfully reopened our facilities to the public after a 16-month closure. We never laid off or furloughed anyone and instead transitioned frontline staff to other responsibilities related to the collection and outreach efforts. We launched a new programming series with the Carver Center, called Taller Talks [that] will continue in 2022 and features artists speaking about their practice. The Texas Biennial was another highlight for us as we participated in this statewide exhibition among four other venues. [And] our collection also grew — we added significant artists to it like Deborah Roberts and Rick Lowe, two Texas artists whose reputation is international.”



César A. Martínez's 2021 painting *Bato Con Sunglasses* is featured in the Ruiz-Healy Art exhibition "Mi Gente." Courtesy Image / Ruiz-Healy Art

## Ruiz-Healy Art

Although 2021 started off on an uncertain note for Ruiz-Healy Art — which encompasses locations in San Antonio and New York City — director Patricia Ruiz-

Healy says it developed into one of the best in her gallery's 15-year history. "We placed significant works in museums and corporate collections; continued investing in publishing exhibition catalogs, which are so important for the dissemination of artists' work; and ended the year by giving Texas artist César A. Martínez his first solo show in New York City and celebrating our anniversary with a special 'Quinceañera' group exhibition in San Antonio."

### **Sala Diaz**

In March, Louisiana native and former Artpace resident Heyd Fontenot was named consulting director of Sala Diaz. After taking the reins at the pioneering Southtown art space, Fontenot helped place the Sala Diaz archives in the care of UTSA and organized a companion exhibition chronicling 25 weird and wonderful years.

Fontenot also welcomed author Clemonce Heard into the fold at Casa Chuck, a residency program that's under the Sala Diaz umbrella and housed in artist Chuck Ramirez's former home. Reflecting on 2021, Fontenot cited Heard's public reading from his 2021 book *Tragic City* — exploring the 1921 Tulsa Race Massacre — as well as collaborating with Blue Star Contemporary on its Red Dot fundraiser. "[It was great] seeing these two organizations share a moment of recognition — acknowledging the community and all of these artists who make the San Antonio art scene so rich," he said.



Heyd Fontenot

*Tragic City* author Clem Heard became poet in residence at Sala Diaz offshoot Casa Chuck this year.

### **San Antonio Museum of Art**

"For our 40th anniversary, we were glad to showcase some great exhibitions such as 'America's Impressionism: Echoes of a Revolution' and our collection in the exhibition '40 Years, 40 Stories,'" said SAMA Chief Engagement Officer Tatiana Herrera-Schneider. "We also worked on collecting the work of artists from Texas, and in particular San Antonio. ... Another important project this year was the creation of three murals in San Antonio's East Side, West Side and SAMA's campus. ... Finally, we were excited to share Emily Neff's appointment as the Kelso Director. Neff has proven to be an exceptional leader with a strong commitment to



community, a skilled fundraiser, and a thoughtful curator who brings to the fore important stories about people, cultures and places. As San Antonio continues to develop as a vibrant cultural hub, she is exactly the person we need to lead the institution into its next chapter.”

### **San Antonio Street Art Initiative**

“SASAI saw a very productive year,” said Shek Vega, founder and president of the San Antonio Street Art Initiative. “[We completed] 10 new murals early this year during our Pabst Mural Connection art walk connecting Southtown and the St. Mary’s Strip. SASAI also celebrated its 50th mural in Southtown, its first Pride mural on the Main Strip and our largest project to date at the main entrance to the Pearl Brewery — [bringing us up] to 62 pieces of public art in San Antonio.”



San Antonio artist Angela Fox contributed the mural *Secrets of the Wild Woman* to the San Antonio Street Art Initiative’s 2021 collaboration with Pabst Blue Ribbon. Bryan Kindfuss

### **Slab Cinema**

“Operating an indoor cinema was nowhere on our radar, much less opening an arthouse/gallery/event venue at Blue Star,” Slab Cinema cofounder Angela Martinez admitted. “Sustaining our business through COVID taught us to see through a different lens, and when the opportunity for a space serendipitously presented itself in June, we found it irresistible — even though we weren’t sure at first what we’d do with it. Not only a home for cineastes, it’s become a joyful community space. Our fifth art show opens this month, plus we’ve hosted live music, local businesses, onsite art-making and numerous parties. We are looking forward to what happens next.”

### **Southwest School of Art**

“During times of uncertainty and adversity, the arts are more important than ever, and it has impressed me how the arts community has rallied and worked together to recover from the impact of the pandemic,” said Southwest School of Art President Paula Owen. “In 2021, artists and arts organizations have applied their inexorable energy, imagination, and values in a multitude of ways to keeping the creative process moving forward in San Antonio.”