

San Antonio art dealer breaks into NYC market

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Gallery owner Patricia Ruiz-Healy at her new gallery in Manhattan, NY on May 2, 2019.

Photo: JACKIE MOLLOY / Jackie Molloy

San Antonio's art market is small, but it's expanding, becoming more varied and complex — and Patricia Ruiz-Healy is one of its leading dealers.

A native of Mexico, she owns the highly regarded Ruiz-Healy Art gallery, which she opened in 2013 in Olmos Park. However, she'd started representing artists and selling their work seven years earlier. She operated by appointment-only out of an empty, second home her family owned, also in Olmos Park.

Ruiz-Healy's first love is contemporary Mexican art. But the sweep of her gallery also takes in Latinx, Latin American and Texas artists, including the late Chuck Ramirez, whose reputation has ballooned since his death in November 2010 following a bicycle accident in Southtown. Ruiz-Healy, 56, is the exclusive agent for his work.

On Friday, she took a huge, career-changing step: She opened a gallery on New York's Upper East Side, which she said will give her artists a chance to show their pieces in one of the world's premier art scenes.

Ruiz-Healy, who also chairs San Antonio-based Artpace's board of directors, spoke with the Express-News by phone the day before her gallery opening. The following transcript has been edited for clarity and length.

Q: How long have you been in New York preparing for the opening?

A: Let me tell you a little bit of background first. I actually started working in New York by appointment-only in early 2012. I also did art fairs. I have always, of course, wanted to have my own space here, and then this amazing opportunity came about. It's very close to my New York City home, and is so convenient. This location is on the Upper East Side, which has become a very dynamic gallery center. It's not just Chelsea anymore. There was a very good article published last week by the New York Times talking about the different districts in New York City for art, and they highlighted the Upper East Side — so that's good news for us, right? So I got this space. I signed the contract April 15. It's a two-year lease with the option to renew annually.

Q: Why did you decide to shift from doing shows in your apartment to opening a gallery?

A: Well, I have had the gallery in San Antonio for many years. It's very well-established. I have a good staff there, a very good team. But to be in New York City, to have a gallery here, is the dream of every gallerist. And even if the media and others say the model has changed, that bricks-and-mortar are not as important in the art market — well, they are important, especially with my concentration on what is now called Latinx artists. So I do all contemporary, with an emphasis on Latinx, Latin American, and Texas-based artists.

Even if I had this beautiful apartment where I was able to receive people or do pop-ups and do appointments, it's not the same. I needed to have a showcase. I needed to give it a try. And because all the stars aligned, I'm doing it. It's an OK rent — the terms are fine. And if I didn't have a place to stay, I wouldn't do it because it would be impossible. So I have a lot of things in my favor to be able to do this.

Our website is amazing. We do digital commerce and social media. But nowadays you have to do everything. I also believe in my material — work by Latinx, Latin American and Texas artists — and there are no galleries here that represent specifically this kind of material. But the scholarship is beginning to focus on these artists.

Latinx are artists of Latin American descent who live in the states either because they were born here or they're part of the immigrant experience. These are under-recognized artists who are now coming into the forefront, with scholars and institutions paying attention to them, because of the changing demographics. We have a huge Latino population in (New York), and they don't see art that reflects them.

Q: You've lived in Olmos Park for nearly 30 years, and you have your gallery there. What prompted you to buy an apartment in New York?

A: We have always liked the city, and at that time our youngest daughter was at Columbia University so we started coming to New York. Then my oldest daughter came to New York as well to do a master's of fine arts. My husband is from Mexico City, and he always wanted to have a place here. So we started looking in 2009 when the financial crisis hit, and because prices went down and down, we were finally able to close and move in 2011.

Q: Roughly where in the city do you live?

A: We live on the Upper East Side at 79th Street and Park Avenue. The gallery (also called Ruiz-Healy Art) is across the street.

Q: What will visitors see at your gallery's opening?

A: We're featuring the work of Cecilia Paredes, an artist from Peru who lives in Philadelphia and, of course, the late Chuck Ramirez, who we've represented exclusively since 2010. It's super exciting to have a show of only two artists.

Q: Is the gallery going to be an avenue for San Antonio artists who don't have an "in" in New York to be shown there?

A: Oh, yes, absolutely. Right now, I'm just going to continue working with the artists I have been working with because we have developed our relationships for several years. So, to give you an idea, my next show is going to be in September — because the summer here is a little dead — and it's going to be Margarita Cabrera (an artist from Monterrey, Mexico, who's currently living in San Antonio). I have been working with Margarita since 2016. You might

know her work – she’s an artist that is doing amazing public sculpture. She was shown in New York many years ago. She had a gallery that closed, so she hasn’t shown in a commercial gallery there since maybe 2010. So, this is a big deal to have a gallery representation in New York.

Then, after that, it’s going to be (Ohio-born ceramic artist and sculptor) Jennifer Ling Datchuk. That’s going to be my fall show in November, and I’m actually doing San Antonio and New York with her.

And then, January is (San Antonio artist) Jesse Amado – I have been working with Jesse for years –and Alejandro Diaz (who is a San Antonio native living in New York). Jesse last showed in New York probably in 2006. Sometimes this is what happens: A gallery closes, you don’t get picked up, or then you don’t have commercial gallery representation. So I’m very excited about Jesse and Alejandro Diaz – they have been friends for many years.

Q: How does an art buyer in New York compare to one in San Antonio?

A: At the end of the day, it’s somebody who connects to the work, somebody who connects with what the artist is saying to them. And it’s about the work – how the work is displayed, what city is the artist is from, where they studied, what collections they’re in. All those factors come into play. First, it’s the aesthetic. “Do I like this work?” Then comes the other aspects, especially if you’re talking about a higher priced item. That’s when people say, “Well, I need to research this.” And everybody should do that research.

So most of my artists have master’s in fine arts degrees, and a lot of them have been educators or they are continuing their education.

Q: So today you’re finding more interest in contemporary art and pieces by San Antonio artists. Are your clients willing to pay more now than they were maybe a decade ago?

A: Well, it all depends who the artist is. If I have a painting, for example, by Pedro Friedeberg, who has a secondary market, the American clients know that this painting goes for \$20,000 or \$30,000. So they feel OK buying a painting by Friedeberg from me for about that price. You know the price point is OK.

People don’t make a big differentiation unless you go to something too expensive. I mean, over \$20,000 is tough in San Antonio.

Q: What price gets buyers uneasy in New York? If it’s \$20,000 here, what is it there?

A: Above \$100,000. Even in the auction market, everything about \$100,000 to \$150,000 makes people think twice. Even if they're multimillionaires, they think twice. It's just sometimes we get all this confusion in the media because we hear about a \$20 million sale. It's very few people who like to buy at that point. It's a very small market, even though it can become a very good investment in most cases.

Q: How many clients do you deal with in San Antonio on a regular basis?

A: Oh, probably at least between 20 and 30.

Q: If your gallery in New York is successful, is there a possibility you'd close shop in San Antonio?

A: No, I think I can definitely manage having the two. You know, a lot of galleries have different locations — but, of course, they're large. I almost did a partnership with a gallerist from Switzerland who goes back and forth between Basel, Switzerland, and New York every month. She just comes for the openings and then she goes back. And if she's able to do it in Basel and New York, I can do it between San Antonio and New York.

I see San Antonio as the mother ship. A lot of my artists — like 50 percent at least — are based in San Antonio. Eventually, more artists are going to come to the (New York) gallery. I see the two spaces working together.

To be a successful gallerist, you have to be moving. You have to go to other places.

Q: One thing we hear consistently is how difficult it is to make a living as an artist in San Antonio. How hard is it?

A: Very difficult for the most part. But that's also how it is with New York artists or LA artists — unless you hit it super big, unless you create an incredible body of work and get discovered by several curators at the same time, and then museums start acquiring your work left and right. Then you go on to another level.

It's not unique to San Antonio, not at all. Back in the day, Jesse Amado was a fireman. He decided to be a fireman because he was able to make art on his off days. Gary Sweeney used to work for Southwest Airlines because that way he was able to make a living, pay the bills and get a retirement fund. And now they are able to be full-time artists.

Q: You were born in Sonora, Mexico?

A: Yes.

Q: How did you make it to San Antonio?

A: I grew up on my father's ranch in Sonora. I went to study English in England when I was 18, and I went to Mexico City when I was 19 to start college. I met my husband, Juan, and it was kind of love at first sight. So we married when I was 20. He was in broadcasting at that time, had a very successful news program. Eventually we went to Miami, where he was an anchor for what is now the evening newscast at Univision.

Juan's family had always had a connection with San Antonio — my father-in-law was a very prominent surgeon who had a lot of friends in the medical community. The family had apartments in San Antonio. In one of those Mexican financial crises, like a lot of Mexican nationals, they arrived just to have a safe place to land. So that's how we started coming to San Antonio.

Then my husband left TV, and he wrote for the political and economic section of a major newspaper in Mexico that doesn't exist anymore. We needed a place in the United States that was kind of close to Mexico City. We chose San Antonio. One of our girls was born in San Antonio, the other one was born in Miami. And my husband commuted for years, going back and forth between Mexico City and San Antonio.

Q: When did you decide to become an art dealer?

A: I founded my company in 2004, and had my first opening in the fall of 2006 — that's what I consider the start of my business. And I started with mostly Latin American art because that was the material that I knew — artists like (Mexico City native) Pedro Friedeberg. I'm still working with them. And then things started to evolve. My first San Antonio artist was Constance Lowe, who just retired from UTSA — she was a professor of drawing and painting there for many years — and then Chuck. So those were the two artists that I started working with in San Antonio, and that expanded.

I used to work by appointment-only in San Antonio, so my gallery started in a house in a residential area in Olmos Park. We used to own two houses. One house was basically my business, and the other was my house house. They were next to each other.

The growth of my business was very organic. Before I started the business, people would come to my house and they would say, "My gosh, I love your art. Where did you buy this?" It

was all art from Mexico. I have always liked art history – I was studying art history – and all of a sudden I said, “Well, maybe this is something that I can do professionally.”

I’m so blessed – I’ve had a big success since Day One. My first show was a big commercial success. The only thing I was lacking being by appointment-only was the reviews. Also, I couldn’t publicize the address of the space because then my neighbors would complain.

Q: What had you been doing up to that point?

A: I was a mom. I was also a student – I was doing my master’s at UTSA. Because I married very young and never finished college, when my youngest daughter started elementary school, I went back to college. I had credits from the school in Mexico City, so I was able to finish my bachelor’s degree quickly, and then I went on to my master’s and finished in 2005.

Most my time here, I was being a mom, being involved in the community. I was invited to be on the board of the San Antonio Museum of Art. I did a lot of things for them, like fundraising events, because I have always liked art. I discovered art when I was 18 in London.

That’s kind of the story.

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