

ARTS & CULTURE

New Ruby City exhibition a constellation of dynamic artist portraits



by **Nicholas Frank**
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Angel Rodriguez-Diaz photographed by Celia Álvarez Muñoz for her 2002 series, *Semejantes Personajes/Significant Personages* series. Linda Pace Foundation Collection, Ruby City, San Antonio, Texas. © Celia Álvarez Muñoz. Credit: Courtesy Ruiz-Healy Art, San Antonio, TX

In *Los Brillantes*, opening Saturday in the Studio at Ruby City, Arlington-based artist **Celia Álvarez Muñoz** presents 18 of her singularly styled portraits of familiar San Antonio artists.

On the walls are the likenesses of **Chuck Ramirez**, **Mel Casas**, **David Zamora-Casas**, **Ethel Shipton**, **Cruz Ortiz** and others in multiple-image portraits that Álvarez Muñoz has collaged together to capture the essences and moods of each artist.

During a Thursday morning walkthrough of the exhibition, Álvarez Muñoz pointed out a wall-filling NAS image of a nebula.



Artist Celia Alvarez Muñoz at Ruby City Studio. Credit: Brenda Bazán / San Antonio Report

“As I see it, I’m featuring them as stars of their city,” she said of the artists she had originally photographed for her 2002 series *Semejantes Personajes/Significant Personages*. Nebulae are the seedbeds of stars, she noted, quoting aloud her poem superimposed over the image:

*We are one cosmos of different brilliance;
Scandalous poets
Lovable agitators
We scream and whisper the joy and anguish
Of being human brothers united by the color of caramel
We are your echo, your star – See yourself!*

Family albums

Early on in life, a young Álvarez Muñoz learned the narrative power of photography to tell the stories of her family and her ancestors by paging through her family’s photo albums.

“All the characters, all of the black sheeps, all of the good sheeps of the family were there. They just came magically out of those albums,” Álvarez Muñoz said.

Now 87, the artist recalls once nationally popular photography magazines such as LIFE, LOOK and National Geographic, which she called “our society’s family albums” in the pre-internet era.

She appreciated the documentary approach of photographer Gordon Parks and the arresting crime scene aftermath images of Weegee. Taken together, these “mass-produced photography albums ... narratively told the news, how to capture the common folk into a national subject matter.”

And growing up on the border in El Paso, she loved going to cinemas around town. “The magic of the movies! We were prime products of that,” she said of kids of the era. Movie-going at the time was not just about entertainment because newsreels were attached to the featured attractions.

“There’s layers and layers and layers of visual information that come from these documenting tools,” she said. “If you’re inclined that way, you’re going to follow those routes.”

Revealing a community

Álvarez Muñoz’s inclinations are apparent in the film reel frames she digitally inserted into her collaged portraits, which suggest not only the movement of motion pictures but the flow of the artists’ lives.

Ramirez is pictured flashing a radiant smile and playfully kissing a piñata that appeared in his own photographic artwork that same year. Casas is shown in six continuous images that reveal his concerned, thoughtful, pensive and joyous sides, and a young Vincent Valdez is dominated by one of his massive-scaled portrait paintings looming over his shoulder.





Artist Chuck Ramirez photographed by Celia Álvarez Muñoz for her 2002 series, *Semejantes Personajes/Significant Personages*. Linda Pace Foundation Collection, Ruby City, San Antonio, Texas. © Celia Álvarez Muñoz. Credit: Courtesy Ruiz-Healy Art, San Antonio, TX

“I think that shows a very good illustration of his ambition” that she had noticed at the time, long before he won wide acclaim and relocated first to Houston, then Los Angeles.

Some prominent San Antonio artists chose not to be photographed by Álvarez Muñoz. Notably, muralist and painter [Jesse Treviño](#) evaded her pursuit at the time, she said. “He had a wall I couldn’t penetrate ... sometimes you bend over backwards to get what you want, but it didn’t happen.”

Another artist viewed the project as creating competition among artists rather than Álvarez Muñoz’s goal of “revealing a community, showcasing a community, acknowledging that community ... for them to know that they are part of a special group.”

And for members of the public, Álvarez Muñoz hopes the artists will be recognized for their dedication. “The fact that there’s an objective behind the life of that person that you’re seeing and that they’re acting upon it, not waiting for somebody else to do the work.”

Celia Álvarez Muñoz: Los Brillantes opens Saturday with a 2 p.m. artist talk followed by a reception from 3-5 p.m. in Ruby City’s Studio building accessible through Chris Park. Several artists in the portraits will also be in attendance.