

# San Antonio Express-News

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## Beloved San Antonio artist gets first career survey seven years after his death

By **Elda Silva**

September 14, 2017



Photo: Courtesy Ruiz Healey Art

"Dia de Los Muertos," an image from Chuck Ramirez's "Seven Days" series, is part of a survey show at the McNay Art Museum.

Worn out brooms, wilted flower arrangements, battered piñatas, remnants of a meal. Even literal garbage stuffed in plastic bag.

Artist Chuck Ramirez used a camera lens to transform the detritus of everyday life into elegant reflections on mortality and the ephemeral nature of existence.

Although Ramirez's career was relatively brief, spanning 15 years, these throwaway items have had remarkable staying power. Almost seven years after his death at 48 following a bicycle accident, Ramirez is getting his first career survey at the McNay Art Museum.

"Chuck Ramirez: All This and Heaven Too," an exhibit of more than 100 objects, including the artist's signature images of single items photographed against a pristine white background,

opens today. “Chuck in Context,” a companion exhibition featuring never-before-exhibited works, opens Friday at Ruiz-Healy Art.

One of San Antonio’s most beloved artists, Ramirez was a galvanizing force in Southtown, creating a nexus for the art community in his half of a weathered duplex on Stieren Street that also housed the contemporary art gallery Sala Diaz. Some believe the artist, who started out as a graphic designer, was on the verge of breaking out when he died, with a string of exhibitions in Mexico City, Spain, Berlin and Paris to his credit.

“I think he was very much on the precipice of being recognized outside of the state of Texas as an artist to be contended with,” said Anjali Gupta, a member of the advisory board of Casa Chuck, an artist residency program established in honor of Ramirez in his former living space.

Damaged by an electrical fire last year, Casa Chuck has been restored “as accurately as possible” using old photographs of the space as a guide, Gupta said.

Posthumously, Ramirez’s reach has continued to grow, largely because of the efforts of Patricia Ruiz-Healy, director of the Olmos Park gallery that exclusively represents his estate. Since 2010, the number of museums with holdings of Ramirez’s work has doubled, with the Smithsonian Institution and El Museo del Barrio in New York among them. The demand for his work has remained steady among private collectors, Ruiz-Healy said, with values having risen from 50 percent to 100 percent depending on the piece.

“A lot of people have come to me and said, ‘I wish I had bought his work. I knew Chuck. I liked his work, but I just never came around to buy it.’” Ruiz-Healy said. “I have a lot of clients like that.”

Even as Ramirez’s reputation has begun to solidify, René Paul Barilleaux, chief curator and curator of contemporary art at the McNay, is trying to shake up how the artist and his work are viewed.



Photo: Express-News File Photo

Chuck Ramirez posed with his work in “Chocolate: A Photography Exhibition” at the San Antonio Museum of Art in 2008. Almost seven years after his death in 2010, Ramirez is the subject of a career survey at the McNay Art Museum.

Entering the exhibition, visitors are immediately greeted by a host of artificial Christmas trees that Ramirez created for the home of the late Linda Pace, a patron, friend and fellow artist. The kitschy more-is-more aesthetic of the trees is seemingly at odds with the minimalist nature of his best-known work, visible just beyond limbs laden with decorations and strings of lights.

“I wanted from the moment people walked in, (for them to know) this is not the Chuck Ramirez show they think it is,” Barilleaux said. “Everybody has an idea about Chuck and his work, and we wanted to prove that there’s this whole dimension of Chuck that people either forgot or don’t talk about or lost. He was a much more multifaceted artist, and the work was much deeper than the allure those photographs create.”

Barilleaux and Hilary Schroeder, a curatorial intern who worked on the project with him, used installation photographs from previous shows to replicate as closely as possible how Ramirez arranged specific works, such as a suite of photographs of his grandmother’s kitchen. An early work, it is the only photographic series in the show that features an image of a person, though, as Barilleaux points out, other works, such as Ramirez’s pictures of the contents of friends’ purses, function as portraits.

“We’ve been incredibly fastidious about how things are installed here, because we’ve been trying as much as we can to replicate everything he did — his aesthetic,” Barilleaux said. “When you talk to people, nothing was by chance. Everything had a logic to it.”

The photographs are displayed side by side on long, shallow shelves, a reference to the way that Andy Warhol — another artist who started out as a graphic designer — displayed his iconic soup cans early on.

As part of the exhibition, Barilleaux re-created Ramirez’s 2002 Artpace International Artist-in-Residence exhibition, “Bean & Cheese,” which features the artist’s images of raw meat, including the winkingly titled “Ground Chuck.” There is also a vignette from “Long-Term Survivor,” a 1999 exhibit in Artpace’s Hudson Showroom that dealt with the artist’s HIV positive status. Videos Ramirez created for the Artpace show will be screened on old TV sets purchased on eBay to “capture the aesthetic of the period,” Barilleaux said.

Along with mortality, themes of cultural identity and consumption and waste permeate the show.

“I think a really important goal of the show is to get emotional response from people, whether they knew him or (not).” Barilleaux said. “I think that he would want that kind of response from the work.”

Rick Liberto, a close friend of Ramirez’s and collector of his work, was the lead sponsor for the McNay’s exhibition. He believes Ramirez’s work has been worthy of a museum exhibition “for a long time.”

“For an artist to get put into a museum, it’s a step they all strive for,” said Liberto, owner of Rico’s Products Co. “Unfortunately, Chuck’s not here.”

If Ruiz-Healy had her way, Ramirez would have had a survey show years ago. She began working with the artist in 2009. After his death, she started talking to institutions about the possibility.



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