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I FIRST SAW CHUCK RAMIREZ'S WORK IN A 1997 San Antonio solo show called "Coconut," the Latino equivalent to the African American slur "Oreo," meaning dark on the outside, white on the inside. On the walls hung crisp photographs of coconuts, both whole and cracked open--a deadpan illustration of the word and, at the same time, a portrait of the artist.

Ramirez, who is forty, has had several shows in San Antonio, at Sala Diaz, Finesilver Gallery, and ArtPace. His photographs, of ordinary objects against white backgrounds, are large scale and sharply focused. The unforgiving style splits the difference between the food photos on Chinese restaurant menus and Richard Avedon's point-blank portraits. Quarantine, 2000, depicts bouquets retrieved from hospital rooms, the flowers' hothouse glamour offset by their past-prime wilt and droop. Ground Chuck, Lengua (Tongue), and Sausage (all from the "Meat" series, 2002) are tough pictures of butchered flesh but without the blood-and-guts drama of Francis Bacon. In the "Ingredients" series, 2002--which includes works with titles like Spaghettios, Strawberry Pop-Tarts, and Bologna--he lists the organic and polysyllabic chemical components of popular prepared foods in uniform, generic print, like a Kitchen Kosuth. Ramirez is by day a graphic designer for one of Texas's biggest grocery store chains, and his lack of sentimentality toward food is a bit like a farmer's toward animals.

Not all of his art is so brutally matter-of-fact: His piñata pictures, for instance, have all the sinister, poignant charm of works by Jeff Koons or Takashi Murakami. These papier-mâché playthings are souvenirs from birthday parties and celebrations held for various friends for whom they're named; they also become portraits of those friends, fragile and tender. Marked by the violence that released their yummy treats, the princesses and kitty cats and mice often lack heads (Ethel) or even bodies (Alex) (both 2002)--and in each case the birthday boy or girl probably wielded the stick.

Like the coconuts, the food labels, and the piñatas, much of Ramirez's work takes on some aspect of the relationship between outside and inside. In a recent two-person show at Dee/Glasoe Gallery (now Elizabeth Dee Gallery) in Chelsea, Ramirez showed enormous photographs of chocolate boxes without the candy, the vision of an existentialist Forrest Gump. The gold Godivas glowed like Byzantine churches, full of glistening niches; on the sliding scale of taste and class, a Fannie Mae box looked like a down-market Agnes Martin, its white paper cups forming a slipshod grid. In a similar vein, Whatacup, 2002, a rather austere plastic fast-food beverage cup, reads in small print, WHEN I AM EMPTY, PLEASE DISPOSE OF ME PROPERLY.

The only occupied containers in Ramirez's oeuvre are garbage bags. A series of photographs of see-through bags reveals their contents and tells their stories: the cleanup after a party, filled with liquor bottles (Absolut); storage for grandma's afghans (Afghans); the refuse of a vegetarian (Vegan) (all 2001). And then, a midseries modernist moment, a switch from transparent sacks to opaque ones, moves the images from representation to abstraction, pure form. But both views keep us conscious of inside and outside at once--a neat trick for any artist.

A 1999 show, "Long Term Survivor," featured photographs such as Chaps and Cocktail (a day-of-the-week pillbox) that, like "Coconut," owed something to identity-based art. Like the best of that art, his work stretches beyond the personal, opening onto wider issues of physicality and mortality. The artist insists on the materiality of our world, the short shelf life of a shared consumer culture, without limiting meaning or feeling. For Ramirez, facing the fact that this is all there is--piñatas, garbage, Pop-Tarts, pills--argues not for the poverty or superficiality of our condition, but for its impossible sweetness and depth.

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