

Purse Projects (2005-2007)

Chuck Ramirez

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There is an inextricable element of narcissism attached to the history of commissioned portraiture. Whether executed with the grandiosity of a Mannerist masterpiece or carrying the deceptively spontaneous feel of a Nan Goldin photograph, a portrait, in the traditional sense, is meant to capture not just the visage but the very essence of a subject. This in no way indicates a passive relationship between artist and sitter; rather, complicity is readily apparent, divulged in the accoutrements that surround the portrait subject. Grooming and attire, expression, posture and the composition of the overall scene are all part of an elaborate staging, executed to prefabricated effect. In this way, portraits both assemble and preserve not only history but a singular and constructed identity.

This is by no means an epiphany—art historical or otherwise. For me, however, it has always been far more interesting (and more telling) to study the elements that surround a figure in a traditional portrait than the figure itself: a comb left casually on a dressing table, for instance, or a hand mirror reflecting closed doors, indicating, perhaps, the privilege of entry into a very private domain. Here is where the subject—be they a nineteenth-century lady of leisure posing for a vanity portrait or the brooding, self-reflexive figure of the artist—injects their personality into the scenario. In such instances, subjectivity is neither serendipitous nor necessarily surreptitious; it is simply unavoidable.

The San Antonio-based artist Chuck Ramirez began producing his *Purse Portraits* in 2005. Quite simply, Ramirez invited friends, mostly women, to surrender one of their most intimate possessions—their handbag—to be photographed. As the series progressed, Ramirez received more and more commissions. The result is an ongoing ontological study in physicality, staging and referential embellishment, both on the part of the surrogate figure (the purse) and the artist. In these works, elements of staging—of women literally curating the contents of their handbag and the artist arranging these elements to measured effect—grow more and more unmistakable.

For Ramirez, this observation is not a critique of his patrons and subjects but, rather, is very much in keeping with the tradition of portraiture. As mundane as it might initially seem, the purse is arguably the modern woman's most private domain outside the corporeal self. To enter it without permission is a violation. (My mother taught me this rule as a child.) The physical form of the handbag references the female anatomy, and its clasp or closure is a reiteration of the feminine mystique. Its contents—staged or not—speak to matters of femininity, identity and, in the case of Ramirez' recent work, the projection of the imagined self onto others.

On the other hand, the *Purse Portraits* question the stability of the object and the concept of objecthood—a sentiment in keeping with notions like Jerry Saltz' definition of the “non-specific object,” relegating, to some degree, Ramirez' use of photography to a medium of opportunity. Each surrogate is so obviously an amalgam that any notions about the identity of the sitter can only be provisional.



Chuck Ramirez, *One hit*, (Stacey), 2005



Chuck Ramirez, *Carmex*, (Sonia), 2005



Chuck Ramirez, *Stoned & Wasted*, (Lori), 2005