



## Prominent local artist Chuck Ramirez dies at 48

By [Elda Silva](#) - Express-News

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Mark Hogensen and Andrea Kirschner hug near an *ofrenda* for Chuck Ramirez during a memorial for the artist. Edward A. Ornelas/Express-News

Anne Wallace recalls a conversation she had with Chuck Ramirez, her friend and fellow artist.

“I remember him telling me a few years ago that the song he wanted played at his funeral was Elton John's ‘Rocket Man,’” she said. “And it's just so funny, and so Chuck, but also poignant. But he was kind of like a rocket man or a meteor.”

Ramirez, 48, who was known for his large-scale photography and sculptural installations, died Saturday.

Ramirez was riding his bicycle around midnight near St. Mary's and Stieren streets in Southtown when he had an accident that caused him to fly over the handlebars. The cause of the accident remains unclear.

Ramirez was rushed to Brooke Army Medical Center with severe head trauma, and died there after being removed from life support.

Attorney Mike Casey, owner of the duplex where Ramirez lived next door to the contemporary art gallery Sala Díaz on Stieren, said loved ones gathered at the hospital Saturday morning.

“A whole bunch of his friends were out there in the waiting room, and we got to go in and whisper in his ear and tell him goodbye,” Casey said.

As the news spread, Ramirez's Facebook page quickly filled with posts from friends and admirers.

On Saturday afternoon, people gathered at “the compound,” a stretch on Stieren where several artists live, to celebrate Ramirez's life. Artist Chad Dawkins volunteered to take down his exhibition at Sala Díaz to make room for an impromptu memorial show pulled together by friends and collectors.

Ramirez, a San Antonio native, exhibited his work extensively throughout the United States. He explored themes including cultural identity, consumerism and the ephemeral nature of life in glossy images of everyday objects such as stuffed garbage bags, tattered piñatas, wilted flowers and empty candy boxes on a stark white background.

His “Suitcase Portraits” series — mixed-media sculptures of pieces of luggage opened to reveal the personal belongings of fictional owners — was displayed at San Antonio International Airport.

“He was a brilliant artist with a great eye for understanding how everyday objects encapsulate the way we relate to each other, and the way that he could capture them made us think about those relationships and reconsider them,” said Elaine Wolff, former editor of the San Antonio Current.

In 2009, Wolff and husband Michael Westheimer invited Rene Barilleaux, curator of contemporary art at the McNay Art Museum, to select works from their collection for the museum. One of the pieces Barilleaux chose was a photograph of an opaque garbage bag by Ramirez.

“We didn't choose that for the McNay, Rene chose that for the McNay,” said Westheimer, a local business man. “That was important to us because it made us feel good about our collecting that Rene wanted something from our collection to be in a preeminent museum, and it said something about Chuck and his work that Rene — of all the 40 or 50 pieces in our collection from San Antonio artists — chose that one.”

Ramirez was a longtime member of the Blue Star Contemporary Art Center's board and a friend of executive director Bill FitzGibbons.

“I think Chuck was one of the most innovative artists that I've ever known,” FitzGibbons said. “His medium was photography, and he brought a creativeness to photography that I've never really seen before, and feel that he was just in the midst of his career. He had great things ahead, and obviously (his life) was cut too short.”

Artist Franco Mondini-Ruiz, a Whitney Biennialist and Rome Prize winner, became close with Ramirez in the mid-'90s. At the time, Ramirez lived in an apartment above Mondini-Ruiz's junk store/art gallery Infinito Botánica on South Flores.

“He had a profound and tender sensitivity for special things that were overlooked in San Antonio by others, like his mother's kitchen,” Mondini-Ruiz said. “He turned a Tex-Mex grandmother's kitchen into international exhibits, and he did appreciate the vulnerability of life and the ephemeral nature of it.

“For example, he has the Whataburger piece — a photo of the words on a Whataburger cup that says, ‘When I am empty, please dispose of me properly.’”

Recently, Ramirez received a commission for an interior design project for the UT Health Science Center expansion, a project he was excited about, Wallace said.

Ramirez had battled health issues in the past several years. In 1999, he addressed his HIV-positive status in a photo installation at Artpace. Two years ago, he had heart surgery to replace an enlarged aorta.

Wallace attended an artist talk by Ramirez at the San Antonio Museum of Art at which he spoke frankly about living with HIV.

“He was so forthcoming and honest about his situation,” she said. “It was astonishing and very moving. I think it just grabbed people by the heart. I’d never heard him or really anyone talk in that open and public way about what he was living with and what it was like, but also how he was coping with it through his work. That’s what made me fall in love with Chuck.”

Among his friends and neighbors, Ramirez was known as Tía Chuck for his generosity and nurturing spirit. He was also known for his zest for life.

“Chuck was great in that for the last 10 years or so, he wasn’t tied to a corporate job, and he lived his life exactly how he wanted,” said artist Alejandro Díaz, the founder of Sala Díaz who now lives in New York. “He traveled extensively and he had a good time, and he was always the first to arrive and the last to leave at a party and was always very personally giving of his time and his company.”

Artist Rudy Choperena, a photographer Ramirez mentored, was one of many who echoed those sentiments.

“He lived life to the fullest, to the last second,” he said. “He should be remembered as an amazing aesthete with perfect taste, with the biggest heart to match.”

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