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Chuck Ramirez Career Retrospective Spans Venues, Decades and Distance

By [Sarah Fisch](#)
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LASTING IMPRESSION

Images courtesy of Ruiz-Healy Art, the exclusive representative of the Estate of Chuck Ramirez

Chuck Ramirez, American ... photographer?

“I don’t think it matters at all who pressed the button,” says Justin Parr, a friend and frequent collaborator who helped San Antonio artist Chuck Ramirez in digital photography. “He wasn’t a guy who cared to own a bunch of equipment. He was an artist, first and foremost. What he wanted was to get his idea across, and I was super-honored to be involved in that.”

“He was a contemporary artist who [worked] in numerous media, and [made] use of photography,” says Rene Paul Barilleaux, Head of Curatorial Affairs and chief curator of “All This and Heaven Too,” a stunning, close-to-comprehensive career survey exhibition which opens September 14 at the McNay Art Museum, one of several arts institutions celebrating Ramirez’s work this month.

If the name doesn’t ring a bell, if you’ve spent time in San Antonio you may have come across one of his images, likely a large-scale, micro-detailed, blazingly lit and colorful depiction of, say, a broom, a shopping bag, or a wilting bouquet. You can encounter these in private homes, in the downtown H-E-B, numerous collections public and private, in business and medical facilities, at the San Antonio International Airport, and on the covers of local publications.



Chuck Ramirez, *Brooms series, Untitled, 2007*

And here's the simplified bio: Chuck Ramirez was a San Antonio-born artist who went to Jefferson High School, studied art and graphic design at San Antonio College, and worked as a graphic designer for H-E-B and *San Antonio Magazine* (before its purchase and transportation into an anodyne glossy). He left the 9-to-5 in order to launch himself into the contemporary art world. As a gay, HIV-positive Latino man, Ramirez, alongside artists Alejandro Díaz and Franco Mondini Ruiz, spearheaded a queer-lensed, rasquache-informed new wave of humor-laced, graphically arresting art. He quickly became one of the city's most loved artists and celebrated personalities, and a deeply involved and welcoming member of the creative community, before dying an untimely death seven years ago at the age of 48 as the result of a bicycle accident.

If there's one aspect of the Chuck Ramirez narrative that gallerist Patricia Ruiz-Healy would like to disrupt, though, it's that ascent from humble graphic design career into the contemporary art world. "It's too easy," she says, "too dismissive. His art transcends this classification." She feels there's a whiff of the remedial about this storyline, a faulty reckoning with the inherent vision he brought to his commercial work, and an over-emphasis on the chops it's assumed he gained from it. She's concerned, too, that his reputation as a local celebrity eclipses the true power of his oeuvre.

Ramirez himself had trouble with self-categorization. During an interview filmed at the San Antonio Museum of Art in 2008 with then-Curator of Contemporary Art David Rubin, he makes a distinction between graphic design and advertising that will reveal something of his dilemma.

"Graphic design, if you need to know the difference, is more the science of aesthetics, so to speak," he said. "You have a problem and you solve it aesthetically with typography, form and shape, things like that, color. In advertising, then, you're applying that to the promotion of a product. I wasn't so big into the promotion of the product."

The products he refers to here are primarily those of H-E-B, the San Antonio-based grocery chain for which he worked for first as a production artist, later as an art director. But he may have also been talking about Chuck Ramirez, Contemporary Artist, as the product he was reluctant to promote.

This is one of many ironies in his life and work.



Chuck Ramirez, *Words series, Abuelita*, 2004

Days after Ramirez's death, Ruiz-Healy sent out a call via social media, email, and more conventional means of communication, asking which collectors had which pieces, the purpose being to catalog his existing work. While organizing "Chuck in Context," a companion exhibition opening on September 15 that highlights a photographic series not covered in "All This and Heaven Too," Ruiz-Healy poured copious research into an exhaustive and instructive CV, part and parcel with her deeply felt commitment to his legacy. During this process, she noticed a gap in Ramirez's exhibition history. It roughly correlates with his open-heart surgery, she notes, but wonders what else was going on.

During this period, roughly from 2006 to 2010, the products of the distinctive Chuck Ramirez brand seemed locally omnipresent in logos, invitations and merchandise design for arts institutions, friends, nonprofits and private clients. He had some thought-provoking and clever shows, including an exhibition at Michele Monseau's Three Walls in the Blue Star Arts Complex, and some very competent gallery presence, including with his friend David Shelton.

But he was often un- or under-paid per-gig, and the exigencies of making a freelance living, at times, got in the way of the kind of regular studio practice that gets residencies, art fairs, and representation. He also struggled with depression, and whether he was a commercial or a fine artist. The tightrope between bright accessibility and interrogative depth which enriched his works of photography, video, and readymades, sometimes sat uncomfortably with him, and undermined his gift for self-promotion.

"He wasn't manipulative enough for his own good," Parr muses. "San Antonio has a neat way of including and sustaining art, but it's almost pathologically hard to push [your art career] past this city."

At the time of his death, Ruiz-Healy was well on her way to amending this state of affairs. She was in the process of exposing his work to international curators and heads of museums, and representing him at major art fairs. "Whatever you may think of art fairs, or how you think of the commercial realities of the art world, that's how an artist gets [enough exposure] to make enough money from the work, to keep working," she says. These steps now seem to be catapulting him onto a much larger contemporary art stage than San Antonio's.



Chuck Ramirez, *Candy Tray series, Black Heart*, 2008

And there is no better staging area than the McNay, where “All This and Heaven Too” encompasses the whole of the Stieren wing. It’s an undertaking that took Barilleaux more than two years — constant communication with collectors and institutions combined with 500,000 details including shipping, mounting, knocking down walls, painting and restoring — but he has pulled it together brilliantly. The result of this long preparation and meticulous design (complete with a to-scale recreation of Ramirez’s 1999 Artpace show “Long Term Survivor”) is a bright, exciting, searching and deep exhibition, the finest liberation from and promotion of Ramirez’s context as I’ve ever seen. It’s so deep and all-encompassing an experience, whether or not you know Chuck Ramirez or his work personally, that I hesitate to give spoilers.



Chuck Ramirez, *Whatacup*, 2002, originally commissioned by Artpace San Antonio

Chuck Ramirez: True Value

In his 2008 interview with David Rubin, which occurred before a live audience, Ramirez addressed some of his canonical works, including the chocolate trays he illuminated and photographed. He took particular care to explore one of his other personal favorites: *Whatacup*. He explained that in addition to its formal elements, what drew him to this particular object was the legend it bore.

“That little first-person statement, it said ‘When I am empty please dispose of me properly.’ And it just seemed to typify everything I was trying to talk about — about this consumption. It seemed like an epitaph for something, for this cup.”

Much has been and should be made of the theme of mortality running through Ramirez’s work. Having been diagnosed with HIV in 1990, he labored under the sentence until the late ’90s, during which time protease inhibitors and other post-AZT cocktail treatments began lengthening the lives of the positive. But even beyond this lived memento mori, Ramirez struggled with the tensions between disposability and value, in his life and in larger human culture.

Here’s an example. While he was represented by Chris Erck at Finesilver in the 1990s, Erck tasked him with creating take-away Christmas gifts for major collectors. Together they devised the idea of giving away the gold Godiva chocolate trays, each enshrined in a Plexiglass box. The chocolates themselves, he gave away to artists. Which gift is more valuable? And which aspect of Ramirez, the high-profile exhibiting artist, or the gift giver? Because the objects had value beyond their appearance — both aesthetic and functional. The objects and the images he made of them represented the body, the culture, the ache, the longing, the love. All is portraiture.



Chuck Ramirez, *Purse Portrait* series, *Louis (Linda)*, 2005

Of his *Purse* series, Ramirez said tenderly, “Some purses are smiling the moment they sit down on the table, others you really have to work with, it’s just like a human being ...”

He encountered the brooms from his *Brooms* series in a pile behind his friend Chris Hill’s house in Careyes, Mexico. He brought them back to the United States to photograph them in Houston, where he puzzled customs officials.

“What’s in these boxes?”

“Brooms.”

The customs officers decided that the agriculture inspector should take a look. They opened the boxes. “...Brooms?” they asked. Exasperated, they told him to just take them and go, already. But Ramirez knew what they were and who they were. “The brooms are the metaphors for the human spirit, resilient, always colorful and optimistic.”



Chuck Ramirez, *Brooms* series, *Untitled*, 2007



Chuck Ramirez, *Coconut series, Inner Shell*, 1997

And his *Coconut* series, a triptych of which appears in “All This and Heaven Too,” Ramirez ticks elements off his checklist: playful dissection with melancholy undertones, revelation of stark contrast between interior and exterior, a moment of meditation on something captured already on its way to the trash. What’s easily overlooked in this particular series is the fibrous interstitial layer between skin and meat, representing all connective tissue that holds anything together. And here too comes the Ramirez dilemma, crux of value and meaning. Whether or not you are familiar with the disparaging joke (i.e. brown on the outside, white on the inside), neither was exactly true of him, exactly. On the outside, he was ruddy-faced, blond-haired, and blue-eyed. And on the inside, if Ramirez wasn’t all-white, it’s because that’s where the connective tissue of his grandmother dwelled.

He made an *ofrenda* to her every year on Día de los Muertos, and derived from her not just physical but spiritual DNA. He described her as fierce, opinionated, wise and loving. He appeared Anglo, spoke little Spanish, and the Catholicism in which he was raised was of the white suburban variety. Hers was the authentic Mexican American experience, in his eyes. She was a devout Catholic, and he a devout grandson, both a product and chronicler of *abuela’s* kitchen. Almost miraculously, Barilleaux and curatorial intern Hilary Schroeder were able to locate this early and formative series of photographs. They are the Alpha and the Omega of his practice, the territory from which much of his output and product sprung. Not just the Catholic iconography he tweaked in his *Santos* series and elsewhere, but in its communality, practicality and generosity.

Several of the most striking pieces in “All This and Heaven Too” were never shown conventionally in an exhibition space, but were instead one-time or gift-related commissions. The visual hug that envelops visitors at its entrance, a suite of cheeky Christmas trees, was conceived and fabricated by Ramirez for the late Linda Pace, who founded Artpace and was arguably Ramirez’s first collector/champion.



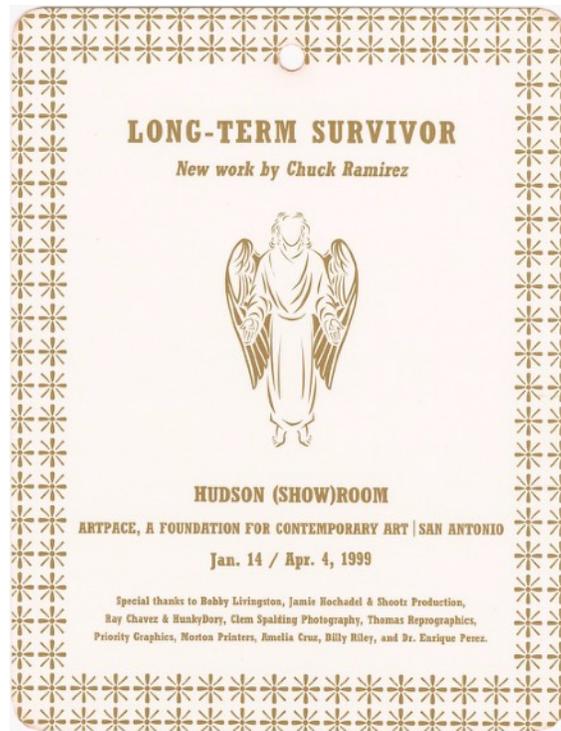
Chuck Ramirez, *Piñata* series, *Montana*, 2002, Linda Pace Foundation Collection

Currently on view in the Linda Pace Foundation’s SPACE gallery, the group exhibition “Incite” includes two first-edition photographs from Ramirez’s *Piñata* series, in which he chose particular piñatas — all used, whether bashed or broken or almost surgically punctured — to represent specific friends as a form of subversive portraiture. In one, *Montana*, a flame-haired Power Puff girl stares down the viewer in joyful defiance. In the other, *Greg*, a Hello Kitty piñata in a pink dress poses her head at a sharp, coquettish angle from her body, the bent-frame connective tissue sprouting from her broken neck. These are celebrations of specific people, and simultaneously an affectionate acknowledgment of how Mexican disposable handicraft appropriates and alters the generic images of cartoon culture.

In the spirit of Ramirez’s art practice of gifting, the McNay fabricated replica cards from his “Long Term Survivor” exhibition. “We have an original vintage card in a vitrine, which again is this sort of memorial to him, but then people can take away, something he made intentionally for viewers to keep.”

As with the primary object in *Whatacup*, these prayer cards bear a funny, haunting first-person legend. “I think people forget how prominent text and writing are to his overall practice,” Barilleaux says. “His titling was often very funny, and full of allusions.”

Let’s take a look.



Chuck Ramirez, *His Prayer Card*, 1999

His boots, black Dingos – one of many pairs, \$85, used, from army surplus. Jeans, \$19, from Gap. Cotton pocket T, \$12, by Fruit of the Loom. Uniform shirt with insignia, \$3, from Thrift Town. Cotton boxers left by a friend. Socks, \$3.99, from the Gap. Glasses \$6, from Texaco. Hair, \$25, Marlboros, \$2.50 plus tax, by Phillip Morris. Cocktails at Liberty. Ghosts arrive at 6 PM, sharp. Sweet boys working the bar. Pint of beer, \$3, usually Shiner. Goat cheese with chili morita and piloncillo sauce, \$6.75. Martini, \$5.25, by Absolut. Lamb sausage with grilled potatoes, \$8.50. Slice of lime chess, \$4. His sheets warm and comfy, cool and soothing, his touch delicate and caring. 3 AM, Carnitas de puerco, \$8.95, by Mi Tierra. Another Sunday brunch with Veuve Cliquot, \$50. Test results Thursday at noon, \$20 co-pay. His lifetime cocktail, \$13,200 per annum, penicillin ,ampicillin ,amoxicillin, Diflucan by Laurel Heights Clinic. Tonight, Margaritas at 7 PM, \$4.75, by John. Center cut pork chops with garlic sauce \$8.50. Dancing, no cover.

The prayer begins like a caption in a fashion magazine, with the pictured celebrity's wardrobe and preferred products itemized by make and price; think starlet or fashionista in a *Vanity Fair* spread (e.g. "wristwatch: Rolex. Hat: her own."). His take on this trope is subversively humorous; his wardrobe items are thrifted, discount, generic, or most touchingly, intimate acquisitions from a loved one. The prayer then shifts gear into a personal activity agenda-cum-journal entry, the intimacy furthered in a saintly lover's bed. Among his objects, practices and appointments, he receives test results which necessitate the most striking of his budget items: the expensive drug cocktail necessary to treat HIV. But then he ends with his night's list of plans, another meal, more celebrating, and joy with no entrance fee.

It's such a good textual fortification of his complicated ethos and experience, such a masterful verbal synthesis of his form and his functions that reading it made me shiver. He couldn't take it with him, but you can.

Of the many heartfelt weapons in Ramirez's arsenal, Barilleaux observes, "I also think he made use of minimalism, but I think overall it's a misreading of his work. He was an exuberant maximalist. Another descriptor I hear applied to him, particularly his photography, is 'clinical.' This may sound corny, but I think a better word is 'healing.'"

Where to Find Chuck Ramirez

“All This and Heaven Too”

The first major career survey of Chuck Ramirez’s work, from beginning to end. \$5-\$20, *Sept. 14-Jan. 14, 10am-4pm Tue-Wed, 10am-9pm Thu, 10am-4pm Fri, 10am-5pm Sat, noon-5pm Sun, McNay Art Museum, 6000 N. New Braunfels Ave., (210) 824-5368, menayart.org.*

“Chuck in Context”

Ruiz-Healy’s curation of her space includes an emphasis on exhibiting entire series, giving fuller context to images that the viewer may have seen only as single works; his Words series will be shown in its entirety for the first time. A percentage of sales from this showing will benefit Casa Chuck, a residency program for critics, artists and writers housed in the artist’s former residence. Guests have included Barbara Perea, Jeff Wheeler, and Barbara Sturm. *Free, opening reception 6-8pm Fri, Sept. 15, on view 11am-4pm Tue-Sat through Oct. 14, Ruíz-Healy Art, 201 E. Olmos Drive, (210) 804-2219, ruizhealyart.com.*

“Incite”

Two Ramirez piñatas are shown alongside work by Hills Snyder, Frances Stark, Diana Thater and Cheyney Thompson. Brazilian artist Rivane Neuenschwander’s room-sized installation *Secondary Stories* will remain on view. *Free, noon-5pm Wed-Sat through Jan. 27, SPACE, 111 Camp St., (210) 227-8400, lindapacefoundation.org.*

“Purse Series”

In conjunction with its Art Initiative, the Tobin Center for the Performing Arts partners with Casa Chuck for an exhibition of Ramirez’s Purse series. *Free, Sept. 16-Jan. 13, on view during performance hours and by appointment, Tobin Center for the Performing Arts, 100 Auditorium Circle, (210) 223-3333 x 7016, tobincenter.org.*