



CHUCK RAMIREZ: ALL THIS AND HEAVEN TOO AT THE MCNAY ART MUSEUM

By Dan R. Goddard

The lonely, detached head of a Mickey Mouse piñata. The demolished remains of a Mexican breakfast. The empty inner lining of a black, heart-shaped candy box. A woman's purse opened to reveal personal items. A familiar orange-and-white Styrofoam cup from a favorite fast-food chain with the focus on the plea: "When I am empty, please dispose of me properly."

After years of making vegetables, meat and other grocery products look alluring and special while working as a graphic designer for HEB supermarket

brands, San Antonio artist Chuck Ramirez -- probably inspired by Andy Warhol -- turned the tricks of his trade to contemporary art, creating large-scale photographic "portraits" of smashed piñatas, purses, suitcases, trash bags and other inanimate objects.

Yet his advertising-influenced images -- usually enormous prints of a sharply-detailed, solo object engulfed by a white void stripped of context -- manage to be poignant and provocative, often spiced with humor and social commentary. And the objects often were intended to serve as

portraits of his many friends and people he knew in the art world.

A popular, gregarious figure in the city's contemporary art scene at the turn of the 21st-century, Ramirez was beginning to establish an international reputation as an artist before his death in a tragic bicycle accident in 2010. Gathering examples of all his work from his early photographs of the bottoms of religious statues, "Santos," from 1996 to his last, "Euro Bags," in 2009, the McNay Art Museum is presenting "Chuck Ramirez: All This and Heaven Too" from Sept. 14 through Jan. 14.

René Paul Barilleaux, McNay's head of curatorial affairs, said he wants to present a "holistic" view of the artist, including a re-creation of Ramirez's 2002 Artpace residency exhibit, "Bean & Cheese," exactly replicating Artpace's gallery and featuring all of his work from the exhibit 15 years ago, including oversize images of fruit cocktail and green peas, empty candy box liners and 12 smaller images of raw meat.

"People know the social side of Chuck, and in

some ways, he loomed larger than his work. But we wanted the art to stand on its own because it needs to be taken seriously," Barilleaux said. "Instead of everything lined up chronologically, people will be able to experience his work more as individual pieces. And we'll have more than just photographs. The first thing people will see will be the nine decorated Christmas trees that he created for (Artpace founder) Linda Pace."

The photographs will be displayed on white panels hanging from the ceiling throughout the gallery, inspired by the 2016 exhibit of Diane Arbus photographs Barilleaux saw at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York. The Artpace residency exhibit represents the major turning point in Ramirez's career, but the McNay also will be showing prints and a video shown at the Arlington (Texas) Museum of Art and a vignette from "Long-Term Survivor," his 1990 Hudson Showroom exhibit at Artpace that dealt directly with Ramirez's HIV-positive status.

"His work is all about mortality and how fleeting life can be," Barilleaux said. "Some people tend to dismiss his work because they consider it too advertising-



driven. He used humor, but there's more pathos than you might expect."

Semmes Foundation intern Hilary Schroeder, who assisted Barilleaux in organizing the exhibit, said she was immediately attracted to Ramirez's sense of humor and style.

"His work is beautiful and funny, but he was always thinking about deeper themes," Schroeder said. "His images say a lot about who we are. It took some detective work to track down everything, but we were able to select works from museum and private collections as well as the estate of Chuck Ramirez."

Ramirez's photograph of a lump of hamburger meat, "Ground Chuck," perhaps his most autobiographical image, is on the cover of the McNay's catalog for the show, which features essays by Elizabeth Ferrer, an expert in Latino photography and former director of the Austin Museum of Art, now based in Brooklyn, New York, and Edward Hayes Jr., who got to know Ramirez while working at Blue Star

Contemporary and now serves as the curator of exhibitions at the Museum of Latin American Art in Long Beach, California.

Ferrer notes Ramirez had a knack for creating an irreverent people's art, but his quirky imagery sets him apart from most Latino photographers who generally use the medium to explore their culture. With a Mexican-American father and Anglo mother, Ramirez straddled the worlds of traditional Latino culture and international contemporary art.

"The seemingly random things he showed us always held meaning for him," Ferrer writes. "They told bits of a story and acted as visual indices to what was then important in his life. By depicting his subject matter with such polish and in large scale, he demanded our attention, signifying that these kinds of things could be meaningful."

McNay Art Museum
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Page 72 (L-R)

Chuck Ramirez, 1964-201. Black Sack 2 from *Trash Bags*, 1998, printed 2001. Digital print. Collection of the McNay Art Museum, San Antonio, Texas, Gift of Elaine Wolff and Michael Westheimer. © Estate of Chuck Ramirez, Courtesy Ruiz-Healy Art, San Antonio, Texas.

Chuck Ramirez, 1964-2010. Whatacup, 2002 Digital print. Collection of the Art Museum of South Texas, Corpus Christi, Texas. © Estate of Chuck Ramirez, Courtesy Ruiz-Healy Art, San Antonio, Texas.

Page 73 (L-R)

Chuck Ramirez, 1964-2010. Whatacup, 2002 Digital print. Collection of the Art Museum of South Texas, Corpus Christi, Texas. © Estate of Chuck Ramirez, Courtesy Ruiz-Healy Art, San Antonio, Texas.

Chuck Ramirez, 1964-2010. Scott from Piñata, 2002 Digital print. © Estate of Chuck Ramirez, Courtesy Ruiz-Healy Art, San Antonio, Texas

Pages 74-75 (L-R)

Chuck Ramirez, 1964-2010. Black Heart from Candy Trays, 2008. Digital print. © Estate of Chuck Ramirez, Courtesy Ruiz-Healy Art, San Antonio, Texas

Chuck Ramirez, 1964-2010. Louis (Linda) from *Purse Portraits*, 2005. Digital print. © Estate of Chuck Ramirez, Courtesy Ruiz-Healy Art, San Antonio, Texas.

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