

## Ruiz-Healy Art opens exhibition of works by Ricky Armendariz



**SAN ANTONIO, TX.** -- It doesn't take a trained eye to regard the works of Ricky Armendariz and know that he is a rare kind of *maestro*.

From the outset of his career, nearly twenty-five years ago, he struck on an artistic persona that is an amalgam of artist, artisan, insurrectionist, and visionary, combining an ever more refined technical mastery of painting with an arduous practice of "crafting" his works, whether seeking out synthetic materials to etch upon that will achieve a greater granular fidelity for his block prints, or painstakingly wielding an industrial router to bevel and ornament his canny, mythic, and sometimes unsettling, narrative painted scenarios. He merged his long training as a painter with an early mastery of stone masonry (a vocation he practiced in Colorado), perhaps making it inevitable that his works would be exquisitely drawn, painted *and* carved.

His themes can be drawn from a broad panorama of literary, allegorical, pop cultural, and regional story sources. We might see a boy astride a whale in turbulent seas. A lean and menacing wolf stares at you with a burning twig tied to his tail, as if about to burn down the

world. A plastic gallon water bottle wears a halo, life-giving nectar for the undocumented border crosser, traversing arid lands.

Beginning with his earliest work---in prints, paintings, and his still gobsmacking large-scale signature “engraved paintings”--- Armendariz exhibited a rare confidence in their complex and unlikely conception, evolution, and execution. Whether landscapes, portraits, animals, or empty space, they are consistently struck with a daring chromatic vivacity, evoking subtle emotive gradations between luminous primary colors.

His evolving, meticulous engraving of his wood “canvases” has moved from deep, broad and baroque bevels on the wooden surfaces he painted early in his career, to the disciplined, spark-like hatchings that now appear almost digital in their regularity, giving his forms a unique and eerie hand-made dimensionality, heft and presence. And in the manner of a painterly griot, he marshals this battery of technique to stage his dramatic subjects and stories, often set against the epic backdrop of the desert horizons of his hometown of El Paso, incorporating vivid banners, inscriptions, and citations to catalyze the space between the written word and painted image, inviting the viewer to enter into this crackling mystery.

The result is an artistic oeuvre that seems at once *sui generis* and entirely vernacular.

*As heavy as Caravaggio, as direct as the Sex Pistol's “God Save the Queen.”*

That is mastery.

Yet, as immediate and visceral as Armendariz’s creations may strike you, they’re full of echoes and refractions of the broad range of artistic, literary and cultural precursors he carries inside of him, like an inward pantheon of spirit familiars. Indeed, Armendariz is an artist who exults in the “ecstasy of influence.” In speaking of his own work, he might glorify Freddy Fender Tex-Mex songs, an obscure lyric from Prince, the work of Rudyard Kipling, Josephine Baker, and Kiki Smith in one cascading riff, and continue on.

His draughtsmanship and portraiture often hearken to the central place of the 17<sup>th</sup> century Spanish court painter Diego Velazquez among his circle of mentors---particularly as an artist whose myriad ways of capturing the human form illuminated the body, face and attire as gross materials fraught with elusive emotional and psychological depth only the artist can reveal.

Closer to his origins in the miasmatic borderlands of El Paso/Juarez, Armendariz’s often gnomic use of elliptical inscriptions (such as “*Tu Amor Es Un Tornado*”) has a long tradition in Mexican painting, beginning in the Spanish colonial era, from the religious works of Cristóbal de Villalpando where biblical inscriptions might be unspooled by an angel, to the glib taxonomic labels of the *castas* paintings of Miguel Cabrera and others, purporting to trace the illusionary algorithms of race mixtures.

In modern times, Frida Kahlo regularly used text to intertwine mythic and autobiographical themes that limn, caption, or otherwise physically contextualize her often phantasmagorical painted images. And among contemporary American artists, artists such as

Ed Ruscha and Jenny Holzer make words and phrases loom large in their works, evoking references to cinematic realities in the case of Ruscha, or advertising and mass culture messaging in Holzer.

By turns, Armendariz's inscriptions can be wry and folkloric, haunting and prophetic, tragic and picaresque. Interweaving such diverse elements as personal memories, classical imagery, mythic themes, and cosmic twists on pop hooks, the artist is an exemplar of art historian Tomás Ybarra-Frausto's concept of "Rasquachismo," defined as a Chicano aesthetic sensibility that is "...a witty, irreverent, and impertinent posture that recodes and moves outside established boundaries."

With the new works represented in 2017's "Tell Me Where It Hurts," Armendariz transmutes many of his influences, inspirations, and experiences, into a suite of pieces that emerge as among his most personal and autobiographical statements yet as an artist. Made up of block prints and two series of paintings and engraved paintings, some adorned with inset light bulbs, the artist uses three genres of his repertoire to depict narratives that commemorate a period of personal upheaval and renewal in his personal and artistic life.

It's a plotline perhaps augured in a work from 2010, whimsically titled, "Yah me voy a Therapy," depicting the back of the artist's custom '57 Chevy sedan with those words emblazoned upon it.

"That's how I deal with a lot of things," Armendariz observed in a recent conversation, "...through humor."

Emerging from a divorce after a long marriage and a gradual loss of interest in painting over drawing, Armendariz speaks now of the works in this show as emerging from an artistic vision partly drawn from what he calls the unlikely "...resort to the method of therapy."

"I was in a place where I had to go back to the basics," Armendariz explained, "...landscapes, still lives, and portraiture."

It's clear much is at stake in such images as the one in "Cono de Fuego," a large "carved painting" self-portrait in which Armendariz depicts himself leaning forward against an apocalyptic fiery red sky, receiving a traditional Mexican healing of burning a wax candle into his ear. Used to remedy everything from earaches to *susto* (spiritual fright), this *cono* bears the inscription: "Revolution is in the air." Armendariz wears a t-shirt from The Cramps, a vintage psychobilly punk band from the '80s. His figure is skewed to the left as if the world itself is a tilt, his mien intense and resolute.

*All is not well. Healing is being sought.*

In the print that bears the title of the show, "Tell me it where it hurts," the legendary mythic trickster coyote stands, looking wry and bemused on his hind legs between a pair of inscribed Spanish Dagger yuccas, in a numinous blue desert tableau, surrounded by a menagerie of rabbits, iguana, scorpion and spider, moths, a rattlesnake and owl. They are all at alert, as if part of a coalition of *nagual* first responders from the spirit world.

*Some kind of healing is being offered.*

Another of Armendariz's healing strategies involved painting, and carving, homages to two of his artist muses, one of them American artist Kara Walker, whose drawings, silhouettes and sculptural installations have explored dark panoramas of African American memory and identity to conjure forms of resilience and resistance. In "Hun," Armendariz's Walker stares out with a fierce calm, her face tattooed with images of crocodiles, tears, and a palm. On her forehead, a female figure, reminiscent of Walker's silhouettes of women, sings out a line of birds who are flying into a pot. On her neck, there's a tattoo of crossed swords, on her chin the polysemic moniker "Hun." Her incendiary gaze challenges the viewer to anatomize themselves, to bring the stories they find.

*The promise of liberation and peril seem inseparable.*

In his thanotopic portrait of the late American artist Luis Jimenez, El Paso native and icon of Chicano art, Armendariz captures an equally dread insurrectionary stare of artistic vision *in extremis*. The artist, one eye alive, the other dead, is accompanied by his beloved companion bird. The sky above him is dotted with star maps of auspicious astrological import. On one cheek is tattooed a heart pierced with a dagger reading "Chuco," slang for El Paso, while on the other is a horse, Jimenez's legendary *nagual*, and the figure of the sculpture that fatefully fell upon the artist, fatally wounding him in 2009.

On Jimenez's forehead here, over his third eye, a burning skull appears to be intoning the words, "Only time will tell whether a river runs through Heaven or Hell..." This is no anodyne self-help saga. Armendariz's deathless Jimenez expresses a reckoning of art itself as a mortal undertaking, a stratagem in which healing can be undertaken, but never guaranteed.

In a second self-portrait, Armendariz represents himself as Pagliacci, the tragic clown of Leoncavallo's opera, in a sombrero festooned with oak branches, and a trio of companion birds. He is looking away, hiding away his gaze from us. After the opera's murderous finale, Canio, in the bloodied trappings of Pagliacci, exclaims, "The comedy is finished!"

In Armendariz's *retrato*, an ornately lettered tattoo on his neck reads "*Pagliacci Forever.*"

In his seminal essay, "Rasquachismo: A Chicano Sensibility," Ybarra-Frausto imagines how "Rasquachismo feigns complicity with dominant discourses while skillfully decentering and transforming them." Ricky Armendariz's creations in "Tell Me Where It Hurts" are afire with this insurrectionary inflection, *detourning* artistic conventions, imbricating them with historical and fictional narratives drawn from Western and Indigenous myth alongside deeply personal ones, all in the pursuit of an artistic stratagem to regather the self and carry on, in deeply uncertain times.

*Uncertain for the artist, and the society he finds himself in.*