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ARTS & CULTURE

Chuck Ramirez: Works from the Dust of Everyday Life



NICHOLAS FRANK | September 12, 2017



COURTESY / MCNAY ART MUSEUM

"Seven Days - Dia de los Muertos" is a work by the late San Antonio artist Chuck Ramirez in which everyday items convey a larger meaning.

Walk past the [Blue Star Arts Complex](#) along South Alamo Street, and you might just hear the ghost of San Antonio artist Chuck Ramirez chuckling. Long after Ramirez debuted there as an artist in 1995, a stone bench was installed, featuring an unsourced Picasso quote: "Art washes from the soul the dust of everyday life." In his own art, the typically irreverent Charles Anthony Ramirez (1962-2010) flipped his famous forebear's equation. Chuck, as he is widely known among family, friends, and colleagues, made art precisely from the dust of everyday life.

All that “dust,” mostly in the form of glossy, large-format photographs of common leftovers like plastic bags, empty bonbon trays, and the messy aftermaths of parties, has been collected and is now on display in four local exhibitions. *Chuck Ramirez: All This and Heaven Too* at the McNay Art Museum opens Sept. 14 and runs through Jan. 14, 2018, with many educational programs for the public in between.

Ruiz-Healy Art will host *Chuck In Context*, an exhibition of a 2004 series of prints created with Hare & Hound Press, from Sept. 14 through Oct. 14. The Linda Pace Foundation will put two Ramirez *Piñata Series* prints on display in the

group show *INCITE*, from Sept. 8 through Jan. 27, 2018, and through February, the Arts Initiative at the Tobin Center for the Performing Arts will host selected Ramirez *Purse Portraits*.

Chuck’s sudden death at age 48 was a shock to many in the city, and the outpouring of grief was widespread. “He was the glue that held the art community together,” said Christopher Hill, an early supporter and collector of Ramirez’s work. As “unofficial social arbiter” of San Antonio’s contemporary art culture, Chuck hosted many a gathering to connect artists and culture goers from inside and outside the community. He died on his way to one such gathering at his home after an event at The Monterey, a former Southtown social and culinary hotspot.

Celebration turned to tragedy. Chuck had a bicycle accident and was hospitalized in grave condition. More than 100 people gathered there after hearing the terrible news late that night, said Anjali Gupta, who runs contemporary art space Sala Diaz and Casa Chuck, a residency program in Chuck’s former home next door.

As it became apparent that Chuck would not survive, those hundreds gathered at the hospital.

“Our parents were so private,” Ramirez’s sister, Patricia Marcus, said at a gathering of docents at Casa Chuck in preparation for the McNay exhibition. She and her parents were only just learning of the breadth of Chuck’s impact on the community. Ramirez’s friends and supporters filed into the hospital room two by two to say goodbye, Marcus said, until the gathering became so large the hospital had to shut it down.

“I was overwhelmed by the warmth and support shown to us, all the love and hugs” she said. “No one knew us, but they wanted to touch us because we were part of Chuck.”

Chuck’s family identity was part of what makes his work so complex. A seemingly straightforward work like Coconut, for example, contains a political message, Marcus said. “A coconut is ugly on the outside. People might perceive skin tones that way, but inside there might be a beautiful person.” The blue-eyed, blond Chuck was raised as an “Anglo kid,” she explained, but family heritage made him



COURTESY / RUIZ-HEALY ART
Dust Collection – Yellow Flower

Mexican on the inside. Chuck didn't speak Spanish, nor did the common slur "brown outside, white inside" fit him, Gupta said, since he appeared white, with his Mexican origins visible only in his surname.

"A lot of us are in between worlds," McNay Art Museum director Richard Aste said during an interview before the opening of *All This and Heaven Too*. Aste relates to Ramirez's work in a personal way, having also been "raised Anglo" in Miami despite being born in Peru. He now believes we all share a complicated racial makeup.

"Immigrants feel pressure to assimilate," he said. For him, also an openly gay man, one power of Ramirez's work is to help those who feel similarly to take pride in who they are. "Identity is complicated. Chuck conveys the power in being multiple identities. He sees that complication as beautiful," Aste said. As a whole, Chuck's work shows the complexity of San Antonio's urban and ethnic makeup, Aste said, and *All This and Heaven Too* is "an opportunity to reduce the empathy deficit" at work in American culture today. Aste hopes that just as he does



COURTESY / MCNAY ART MUSEUM

Acenar – Dulce de Coco

in Coconut, visitors will see something of themselves in Chuck's work. "He's such a good mirror of our community," Aste said. "His work helps us understand ourselves."

In a relatively short 15-year career, perhaps in part because of his HIV-positive status, Chuck produced an unusually focused and prolific body of work. He used techniques learned in his early career as a graphic designer for H-E-B. Advertising aims to turn brands into icons that we identify with to help shape our own identities. Chuck used such iconography to convey far more complex messages than advertising usually allows. He used ideal lighting, perfect camera work, and bright, cheery colors to address what it means to be stuck with the identities we're born with, and the ones people project on us for better or worse.

That Chuck's work was not along the traditional lines of Chicano art was disconcerting to some, said Patricia Ruiz-Healy, owner of the Ruiz-Healy Gallery that now manages Ramirez's estate. His clean, iconic images ran counter to the overtly politicized, narrative, figurative muralist tradition. "There was a demographic shift happening" during Ramirez's time, Ruiz-Healy said. "Many Chicanos were becoming doctors, lawyers, professionals. They had another kind of experience" of a more complicated identity, harder to place along strictly ethnic lines. Yet both kinds of work, traditional murals or Ramirez's Coconut, were essentially about community identity.

Both Ruiz-Healy and Marcus said that the Hispanic tradition in the Ramirez family was best represented by Chuck's grandmother Lydia, who appears in the McNay exhibition's first room. The framed set of photographs was found in a closet at Sala Diaz, and is one rare instance where a human figure appears in Chuck's work.

Casa Chuck preserves Ramirez's living environment, but family photos were removed at the outset because of his father's privacy concerns. Marcus admits that Chuck's openness was eye-opening to her and her San Antonio Police Department detective husband, who by profession are naturally guarded. "Chuck saw all the good in people," she said, adding that she learned by seeing through her brother's eyes. She now regrets removing images of their grandmother, father, and her own children, who were very close to their uncle, from the site of her brother's living memory. In a Chuck-inspired spirit of openness, she allowed documentarians Angela and Mark Walley access to the entire archive of family photos for *Tia Chuck*, a filmic portrait currently in production.

Perhaps the greatest irony of personal art is that it can speak to so many, even those who are seemingly unlike the artist. Therese McDevitt, head of external affairs for the McNay, as a purse-bearing woman contemplating Ramirez's *Purse Portraits*, wondered aloud during a walk-through of the exhibition, "What would he have seen if he'd looked in my bag?" What of our own identities, that we carry with us every day almost unwittingly, would such a picture reveal? McDevitt thinks anyone with a purse entering the show can easily relate.



COURTESY / MCNAY ART MUSEUM
Purse Portrait – Louis (Linda)

Or what might we see in stuff left on the table after a family meal, if we stopped to examine the aftermath in detail? Breakfast Tacos, a large photograph teeming with color and detail, is one of Marcus' favorite works. A meticulous, staged recreation of a shared breakfast with their father, Charles, the image shows the wake of a hearty barbacoa meal, a jumble of crumpled wrappers, stained plates, messy plastic forks, and half-empty cups. Now that both Chuck and Charles are deceased, Breakfast Tacos stands as a testament to their shared lives.

"Chuck wanted people to see the good in everything," Marcus said, even what most of us would toss out as garbage. After the meal, Chuck perplexed her and Charles by asking, "Can I take this stuff?" Marcus recalled. The image, now in the collection of the Smithsonian American Art Museum, was the result. No doubt Chuck's father never imagined their everyday meal winding up in a museum that represents the nation's history.

While it's true that most art scenes are relatively small, close-knit communities, the art made within them sometimes transcends place and time. Art collectors begin the process of preserving these rich moments of local history, and museums take up the process and render particularly influential artists as indelible in history as they were during their time.

Aste is a firm believer in the power of museums. "I'm a populist by training," he said, speaking of his 20 years at the Brooklyn Museum of Art, a community-focused center of culture. "I believe everyone should have access to the museum, to experience the power of a work of art to change a life."

Even after the McNay exhibition closes, anyone who goes to El Mirador restaurant on South St. Mary's Street can see Chuck's work, in what restaurant owner Christopher Hill affectionately calls the "Broom Room" after a series of photographs of colorful brooms acquired from workers at a job site in Mexico.



SCOTT BALL / RIVARD REPORT

The "Broom Room" at El Mirador restaurant features work by Chuck Ramirez.

Each year, Chuck celebrated his favorite holiday with San Antonio artist and close friend Ethel Shipton, whose birthday coincided with Dia de Muertos. In 2003, Chuck commemorated their celebration with an image titled after the holiday: A cacophony of marigolds, votive candles, cigarette butts, empty wine bottles, shot glasses, fiesta plates and a sage stick tell of a hearty consumption of “mass quantities of each other’s ingenuity and generosity,” as fellow artist Hills Snyder wrote in an essay on the Ruiz-Healy website.

The Day of the Dead is a special occasion “to honor the people in your life you’ve loved and lost,” Shipton said. Now, during the #seasonofchuck, as McDevitt has designated it, at the McNay, Ruiz-Healy, the Linda Pace Foundation, the Tobin Center, El Mirador, and wherever else Chuck remains in his art and social influence, every day is Dia de Muertos.

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