

Way With Words: Reading Between the Lines with Conceptual Artist Ethel Shipton

Posted By Bryan Rindfuss on Thu, Jul 2, 2020 at 8:30 am



Bryan Rindfuss

Trinity professor Norma Elia Cantú, artist Ethel Shipton and gallerist Patricia Ruiz-Healy pose in front of Shipton's work at Ruiz-Healy Art.

Born in Laredo in 1963, Ethel Shipton grew up along the U.S.-Mexico border during a decidedly different era.

By the age of 12, she was hopping on busses to visit relatives in downtown Laredo and walking across the bridge to explore the mercados of Nuevo Laredo — alone. Her late mother Angela Palacios Shipton — who became a single mom in 1970 upon the passing of her husband — occasionally received phone calls alerting her that her young daughter was roaming unattended.

“I knew that if I got to my mother’s office by 5 p.m., I got a ride home,” Shipton recalled with a mischievous smile.

Those early excursions on both sides of the border provided Shipton with some of her first encounters with art and artesanía — and perhaps some of the sharp observational skills that inform her own work. Although she was drawn to art in high school — she remembers sketching plans for a tricked-out El Camino and sculpting a giant No. 2 pencil — Shipton was also athletic and became one

of the first girls in Laredo to play little league baseball.

“I really just wanted the baseball cap,” she confessed, only half joking.

During college at the University of Texas at Austin, art became a more serious endeavor for Shipton, who studied photography and then put her skills into practice as a staff photographer for the Texas House of Representatives, a job that entailed photo ops with anyone from Kevin Costner to Queen Elizabeth II. After she found “Austin didn’t really have an art scene” at the time, she made frequent trips to San Antonio to attend gallery openings. Following a two-year stint in Mexico City, Shipton returned to Austin but felt stagnant.

“I was doing the same job, sleeping in the same bed, and it almost seemed like nothing had really changed,” she said. At the continued urgings of fellow UT grad and Sala Diaz founder Alejandro Diaz, Shipton relocated to San Antonio in 1996.

“He kept inviting me and I finally said yes,” she said. “And I don’t have any regrets.”

Over the last few decades, Shipton has embodied the role of working artist, exhibiting her hard-to-categorize work near and far while holding positions in galleries and museums, including 13 years as the McNay’s head preparator, and wearing multiple hats for the Luminaria Contemporary Arts Festival.



Bryan Rindfuss

Material Girl

Early in her art career, Shipton began experimenting with vinyl car upholstery, using it to transform traditionally masculine objects such as hockey sticks, skateboards, basketball backboards, and — echoing her time as the only girl on her little league team — baseballs and baseball bats.

“[I liked] this whole idea of taking these hard, rough moving things often considered male and softening them, taking the geometry out of them,” she explained.

Arguably the most visible examples of this period are Chances 1 and Chances 2 — a pair of yellow and purple button-tufted basketball backboards on display at the AT&T Center.

“People kept saying, ‘Oh you’re the vinyl girl,’” she said. “And I would say, ‘Well I’m not really the vinyl girl, this is just the material that’s speaking to me

right now. ‘I’m not interested in getting categorized ... I guess the best way I would describe [my work is] that I am a conceptual artist because I move from material to material.’”



Courtesy Photo / Ruiz-Healy Art

Exit Strategy

After leaving her post at the McNay, Shipton began working on what’s possibly her greatest hit to date — a suite of screen prints based on her photographs of road signs.

Deftly fusing personal history and South Texas iconography, the series celebrates unsung locations between San Antonio and Laredo. Devine, Dilley, Pearsall, Cotulla, Encinal: to Shipton these are not mere mile markers but places steeped in memories of ranches, Dairy Queen cones and pre-cell-phone-era car trouble.

Possibly the most autobiographical in the bunch, the stark black-and-white print *Los Dos Laredos* first passes as a soulless sign seen through a car window but then suggests the vast difference one mile might make.

“I was thinking of them as exits, but of course ... an exit is an entrance — which hadn’t really occurred to me until after I made them. I was leaving a 13-year commitment to move into something else, so I was only thinking about the exit.”

In addition to prime placement at the AT&T Center, Shipton’s *Exit Signs* are in the permanent collection of Ruby City and are featured in its inaugural exhibition “*Waking Dream*.”



Courtesy Photo / Ruiz-Healy Art

Inspired by Berlin

In 2017, Shipton spent three months living and working in Berlin in conjunction with Blue Star Contemporary's residency program at Künstlerhaus Bethanien.

"Berlin was kind of the first time in my life that I didn't have to go to work — ever," Shipton explained. "It took me out of my context."

She took the opportunity to explore the city on foot.

"Wherever I wanted to go, I would walk it — anywhere from three to seven to 10 miles a day ... The graffiti and other imagery started to speak to me," Shipton said.

From the street scenes she photographed, Shipton created monochromatic screen prints that run the gamut from bold to quietly poetic. The creative freedom of the residency also inspired her to create a large-scale tape mural on the walls of her studio.

Since her return, Shipton has shown elements and ideas from this body of work at Blue Star and Ruiz-Healy Art, which hosted the 2019 exhibition “Listening to Berlin” and recently released a companion catalog featuring an essay by Trinity University professor Norma Elia Cantú.

In the essay, Cantú describes Shipton as “a woman of vision whose critical/artistic eye looks deep and finds words in images and images in words.”



Change
ingua

Courtesy Photo / Ruiz-Healy Art

New Projects

At the moment, Shipton has work featured in Ruiz-Healy’s “More Than Words: Text-Based Artworks II,” a group show that unites her with accomplished local artists including her husband Nate Cassie and her late friend Katie Pell. Generous and solutions-oriented, Shipton recently **made headlines** with her “For the Taking” boxes, simple wooden structures she stocks with canned food for anyone in need.

When asked about her next chapter, Shipton’s eyes brightened, looking almost as if she didn’t believe what was on her own horizon.

“[Nate and I] are going to take a time out,” she said. “We’re going to go to Vermont and build a cabin ... I think this cabin will do the same thing [as Berlin did for me] — let my mind sit and think and open up.”

Stay on top of San Antonio news and views. Sign up for our **Weekly**

Headlines Newsletter.

Tags: San Antonio, Texas, Ethel Shipton, art, contemporary art, Blue Star Contemporary, Berlin Residency, Künstlerhaus Bethanien, More Than Words: Text-Based Artworks II, Ruiz-Healy Art, Norma Elia Cantú, Los Dos Laredos, McNay Art Muesum, Luminaria Contemporary Arts Festival, Ruby City, Image

***San Antonio Current* works for you, and your support is essential.**

Our small but mighty local team works tirelessly to bring you high-quality, uncensored news and cultural coverage of San Antonio and beyond.

Unlike many newspapers, ours is free – and we'd like to keep it that way, because we believe, **now more than ever**, everyone deserves access to accurate, independent coverage of their community.

Whether it's a one-time acknowledgement of this article or an ongoing pledge, your support helps keep San Antonio's true free press **free**.

Donate