

# San Antonio

**ART**

## Jesse Amado on His Life as a Firefighter, a Veteran and one of San Antonio's Most Acclaimed Artists

Amado reflects on the San Antonio art scene of the 1980s and '90s when he got his start and how things look from his perspective today

**BY REBECCA FONTENOT CORD**

Published: [October 30, 2020](#)



Jesse Amado, photo by Joel Salcido

“I’m a storyteller. I’ve got a thousand and one stories.

I even worked for O’Neill Ford, the architect. In high school, I interned with him. I was supposed to be an architect and then I was really sick and bored of being a student. I didn’t want to sit in a classroom anymore. So, I joined the Navy and I was a sailor for four years. And that really changed my life because I was on the East Coast in Newport, Rhode Island, and I was good friends with my Italian friend from Brooklyn, New York. We would go to New York and I was 18- 19-years-old in New York City, this brown boy from South Texas. That’s where everything kind of started.

I have a bachelor’s in English. My first dream, my first ambition was to be a writer. And then it turned out that I had a better grasp of the visual language. I made a decision to become an artist and I took steps to try and achieve that. I tried teaching for a bit—very little bit—and I didn’t care for it much at that time, so I joined the fire department and I worked for the fire department for 25 years because the schedule was great. I had to work 24 hours and then I had 48 hours off, and in those 48 hours I would go to my studio and make art. It worked out beautifully.

As an artist, you kind of have to hustle and you have to do something else because you know it’s feast or famine most of the time. So that’s how I was able to support my art and devote my life to making art.

I saw things (as a fireman) I never would have seen otherwise—the tragedy and mortality. I saw a lot of dead people, saw how abruptly that can happen. If I’m in a room with lots of art people, I look around and I’m the only one who can probably say that I’ve saved lives and property. My whole thing is just so different from so many others who are part of my world, the art world, so it’s always interesting to have that. I feel like I did my community service by doing that. I served the community and was able to make a nice career out of art.

I'm amazed that I'm still alive and trying my best to make relevant art, listening, tuning into the zeitgeist and seeing what's going on out there and trying to make it part of my work, as well. Being an artist is more of a way of life than it is a career. I think of it that way. And I refer to it that way, you know. I'm not making it to get bigger, better, richer and all that. I make it because it's a compulsion almost. I have to make it. So, that's what I do.

I started to make art later in life. I was in my 30s, early 30s, and that was about the time that Blue Star opened. [The San Antonio Museum of Art had planned a contemporary art exhibit featuring local artists and when it was cancelled, Hap Veltman and Bernard Lifshutz, the new owners of what is now the Blue Star Arts Complex offered one of their warehouses to the artists to host the exhibition, ultimately creating what would become Blue Star Contemporary.]

I went to that exhibit and I was totally captivated. I wanted to do that, and so that was my start—seeing that and being inspired by that. Other artists as I got more involved were doing a lot of their own alternative spaces. I had an alternative space called House Space for four years. That was the '80s. There was an emphasis on current contemporary art, places where you could go and show that and there was support for that, mostly from the art community.

All that was going on, so I thought there's nothing wrong with staying in San Antonio and I did. (And that's when I became a fireman).

Then the '90s happen and that's when Sala Diaz opened and most of all, Artpace opened. When Artpace opened, I was one of the first to be selected (for the artist-in-residency program) in that first round. Then myself and (fellow artists) Franco Mondini Ruiz and Chuck Ramirez all moved to South Flores, just south of Alamo there. We started having get togethers, parties, soirees all the time. All the artists and the

international artists from Artpace would come out and hang with us.

I always refer to that era, 1995 to about 2000, as the golden age of contemporary art in San Antonio. It was just amazing. You wouldn't believe the images sometimes of what was going on then. Familiar faces and faces that have come and gone and done well for themselves, etc.

Then I moved to New York in the mid-2000s. I came back in 2014 and it started to kind of rejuvenate again. Now Blue Star I think is doing an amazing job. Mary Heathcott, the director—she's really turned this place around. It's quality work, once again, and I'm really happy about that.

The art community is strong here in San Antonio. We all embrace each other and help each other out. It's a really positive community and there's some really amazing artists. I'm really proud of these younger artists that are taking over now. I've been at it for 30-plus years now, so I've seen a lot of it come and go. What's coming in is pretty impressive in my estimation. It's well done, well crafted. Conceptually strong. It's great.

I couldn't work for a while this year. I never thought I'd live long enough to experience something like COVID-19, but here I am in the midst of it and, you know, it's an existential crisis. I've been isolated for so long as an artist. You know, you go into your studio and you work. And sometimes you don't see anyone for days.

So I was used to that part. I would go out for coffee in the morning somewhere and interact with people and get my fix and then I would go to the studio and stay there. It's just trying to perfect the art of doing practically nothing—just trying to assess and think about what's going on and what it all means. But I'm doing it now, and it's a response to COVID. I like it. I think it's good."

*A shortened version of this appeared in the November issue.*