



Glasstire

{Texas visual art}

Chuck Ramirez: Life in Motion

by [John Ewing](#) | October 7, 2025



“Still life” sounds like an oxymoron when applied to Chuck Ramirez — never was there a more animated, gregarious, or intellectually curious artist than Chuck. And yet *Seven Days: The Still Lives of Chuck Ramirez*, at the Amon Carter Museum of American Art, bears out essential qualities of this classic art form that Ramirez himself exemplifies: attention to observed detail, the impulse to compose, and a belief that objects hold traces of lives lived.



Installation views of “*Seven Days: The Still Lives of Chuck Ramirez*” at the Amon Carter Museum of American Art, Fort Worth, TX. Photos: John Ewing

Installed in its mezzanine gallery, the Carter’s focus exhibition presents a series of large-scale photographs that Ramirez made in 2003-4, all recently acquired by the museum. *Seven Days* — whether indicating a week of life, or the distillation of memories over time — shows off Ramirez at his cheeky, observant best. The tables of food and telling objects in each image pile up colors, textures, and sensations that are redolent of lives lived, in scenes that have a distinctly Mexican American flavor — with hints of San Antonio, if you know what to look for.

The legend of Chuck Ramirez, a San Antonio native son, has been buffed to a high gloss since his tragic death in 2010, thanks to a much-heralded [retrospective](#) at the McNay Art Museum in 2017 and *Tía Chuck* (2018), a [loving](#)

biographical documentary (and community portrait). Yet the Chuck Ramirez we see traces of in these images is a modest man and gifted artist from a specific moment in time, in his own life and the cultural life of his hometown.

I knew Chuck at the turn of the century, on the cusp of San Antonio's extraordinary development boom. The art haunts then were old warehouses and grassy empty lots, with clear night skies free of condos on the edges of downtown. People, too, were in the early stages of development. Chuck was working for H-E-B (a sponsor of this exhibition) designing labels for grocery products, but you could already see the personal dimension that would propel his career as a fine artist. His clever debut show in 1995, in the back room of Hank Lee's [San Angel Folk Art](#), featured found figurines ("tchotchkes") packed like cuts of meat on Styrofoam trays with shrink-wrap and suggestive grocery stickers ("Take me home, I'm delicious"). That same year Artpace put Chuck's [Eight Christmas Trees](#), bound tightly with strings of lights, in their windows on North Main Avenue.

These early projects were a bridge to a personal style of aestheticized intimacy that Ramirez would finesse and refine in his photographic works. In his hands, perfectly lit objects became stand-ins for emotions, desire, prejudice, memory, relationship, and trauma. Over the next several years, he would mount two stunning shows of raw vulnerability: [Coconut](#) (1997), exploring his Mexican American identity; and [Long-Term Survivor](#) (1999), reflecting on his experience as a gay man living with HIV. I wrote about both for local publications, which Chuck was eager to discuss; of the latter review, only Chuck noticed the John Steinbeck reference.



Chuck Ramirez, "Seven Days: Dia de los Muertos," 2003, inkjet print. Amon Carter Museum of American Art, Fort Worth, TX, P2025.4, © Estate of Chuck Ramirez. Photo courtesy of Ruiz-Healy Art, New York & San Antonio

Standing in *Seven Days*, looking at Chuck's photograph *Dia de los Muertos* (2003), brings all of this back in a flood of memories. Everything in this overflowing image feels just barely rested from motion, and perhaps still in flux.

Mole-smear plates, assorted bottles, utensils, scraps of food, cigarette butts — all show signs of use, touch, of energetic if absentminded engagement. And maybe something more, an inchoate yearning at the sight of a lively affair you did not attend. Frankly, this photograph and others in the series feel like Chuck himself, or an encounter with Chuck — his surfeit of life and information pushing in from outside the frame. But these works also capture the private, introspective artist as he considers, in the solitude of his own mind, exactly what he wants to express.

The importance of social gatherings, particularly meals shared around a table, cannot be overstated — in Chuck's life, or as the quiet power in *Seven Days*. Family, friendship, and connection meant the world to Chuck, a dynamic at once universal and achingly specific. For viewers, both registers are infused in his photography, gracing these images with both *studium* and *punctum*, as Roland Barthes distinguishes in *Camera Lucida* (1980): “The *studium* is that very wide field of unconcerned desire, of various interest, of inconsequential taste . . . a kind of education (knowledge and civility, “politeness”).” By contrast, Barthes identifies a second, rarer element in photography, something unique and deeply personal: “A photograph's *punctum* is that accident which pricks me (but also bruises me, is poignant to me).”

Always canny, Chuck understood that we, as viewers, are looking for both — because he was too. Chuck knew what everyone was up to in the local art community, and was quick to offer praise, gossip, or a little well-earned snipe. He was both yenta and conscience, all shades of a complex character that could sustain the nickname “Tía Chuck.” For years I bummed cigarettes from him, both of us racing through the Blue Star galleries on First Fridays, admittedly for different reasons (he as artist, me as critic). And for a brief moment, before I moved to New York in 2002, we shared lively conversation over tacos with San Antonio artists [Rolando Briseño](#) and [Ángel Rodríguez-Díaz](#), a sort of gay men's supper club. Chuck's *Tex-Mex* (2004) could be an exact record of those shared meals, delicious on many levels.



Chuck Ramirez, "Seven Days: Tex-Mex," 2004, inkjet print. Amon Carter Museum of American Art, P2025.8, © Estate of Chuck Ramirez. Courtesy of Ruiz-Healy Art

As Susan Sontag observes in *On Photography* (1977), "All photographs are *memento mori*. To take a photograph is to participate in another person's (or thing's) mortality, vulnerability, mutability. Precisely by slicing out this moment and freezing it, all photographs testify to time's relentless melt." In art-historical terms, the *memento mori* is a type of still life, often including a human skull or other signifier of mortality. In Chuck's case, I would offer Vincent van Gogh's *Head of a Skeleton with a Burning Cigarette* (1886), an image I think he'd get a kick out of. It looks like a Mexican *calavera*.



Chuck Ramirez, "Seven Days: Breakfast Tacos," 2003, inkjet print. Amon Carter Museum of American Art, P2025.3, © Estate of Chuck Ramirez. Courtesy of Ruiz-Healy Art

A similar art term, *vanitas* — which the Carter discusses in a wall text related to Chuck’s *Dia de los Muertos* — feels to my eye more intimately connected to his *Breakfast Tacos*, a touching work also collected by the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston in 2007 and the Smithsonian American Art Museum in 2013.

Everything in this composition is of a piece, and though reportedly related to Chuck’s father, Charles, it all screams “grandmother”: the wan pastel palette, paper plates with silverware, vintage coffee cups, silk flower arrangement (plus a glimpse of Pothos leaves), straw tortilla basket in the shape of a sombrero, and printed vinyl tablecloth (no doubt with scalloped edge and felted underside). The wadded paper towels, crumpled foil, and open beer cans feel rushed, suggesting an impromptu meal organized at the last minute — just like family.

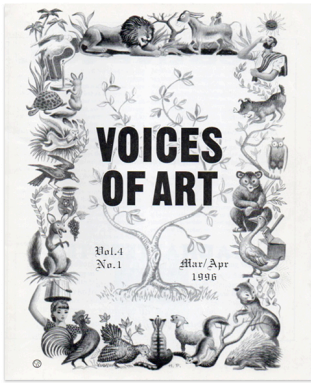
Writer [Sarah Fisch](#) describes Chuck’s relationship with his paternal grandmother, Lydia:

“He made an *ofrenda* to her every year . . . and derived from her not just physical but spiritual DNA. . . . He appeared Anglo, spoke little Spanish, and the Catholicism in which he was raised was of the white suburban variety. Hers was the authentic Mexican American experience, in his eyes. She was a devout Catholic, and he a devout grandson, both a product and chronicler of *abuela*’s kitchen.”



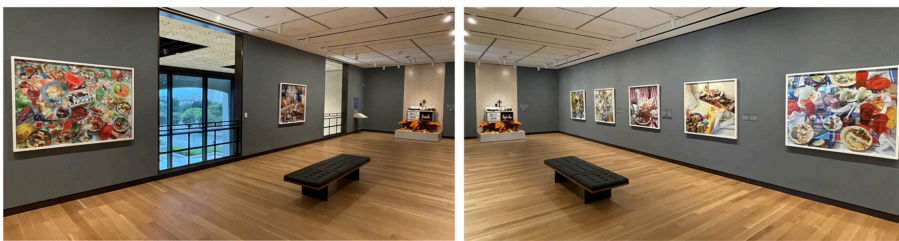
Installation views of “Seven Days: The Still Lives of Chuck Ramirez” at the Amon Carter Museum of American Art. Photos: John Ewing

With notable sensitivity, the Carter exhibition has highlighted the importance of family to Mexican American culture — for both the living and the dead — with a display on *ofrendas*. Visitors are invited to write the names of the deceased on paper flowers to add to a “collective *ofrenda*.” The ancient Aztec ritual, which survives in this popular seasonal tradition, honors loved ones by assembling temporary altars during *Días de Muertos* (November 1 and 2). These memorials are adorned with flowers, photos, and everyday objects of significance to the departed. Here an old stove memorializes Chuck, the skills he learned from his grandmother, and his love of cooking for friends.



Left: Chuck Ramirez, cover illustration for “Voices of Art,” 1996. Right: Infinito Botánica, 1526 South Flores Street, San Antonio, mid-1990s. Screenshot from “Tía Chuck: A Portrait of Chuck Ramirez,” Walley Films, 2018

I see that stove, its bountiful decorations, and have my own vivid memories of Chuck. I’ll never forget the late 1990s art happenings in San Antonio, in the rarified atmosphere of Franco Mondini-Ruiz’s *Infinito Botánica*, an actual store and evolving work of “social sculpture” housed in a 1920s tienda on South Flores Street. These glorious events were often held upstairs in Chuck’s apartment, a ramshackle space with fire-scorched walls that could transform (through candles and imagination) into a heady, sensual open house. I recall one late night in particular — maybe it was that reception for the New York choreographer Elizabeth Streb and her Extreme Action Company after their performance at the Carver Community Cultural Center. Anyway, I remember a long wooden table laden with sweets, saint candles, and cempasúchiles (Aztec marigolds). And Chuck in the kitchen standing by the old-timey stove, bent over an immense pan of pulled pork, sizzling onions, and a whole pineapple slowly disintegrating into al pastor — a lit cigarette always in reach.



Installation views of “Seven Days: The Still Lives of Chuck Ramirez” at the Amon Carter Museum of American Art.
Photos: John Ewing

In the 1980s and ‘90s, large-scale photography — aided by large-format, hi-res cameras and the advent of digital printing — was the artworld’s medium du jour. Chuck Ramirez would have embraced this technology in his commercial design work. And he would have been aware of such contemporary photography from the pages of *Artforum*, with notable practitioners like Andreas Gursky, Thomas Demand, Philip-Lorca diCorcia, Wolfgang Tillmans, Vik Muniz, and Marilyn Minter. Andres Serrano’s *Piss Christ* (1987) must have been a revelation to the young artist. Chuck wanted to be part of all of it. He had a voracious appetite for whatever was happening, in the local art community and the wider artworld (“FOMO,” as we say today).

He wasn't alone. Many were basking in the glow of artworld attentions and pretensions that San Antonio enjoyed at the time. Linda Pace — through her Artpace residency program, personal art collecting, and generous entertaining — was the avatar and gateway. Almost single-handedly, Pace turned San Antonio into a magnet for international artists and curators, creating new spice routes between NYC, LA, and San Antonio. It's important to also mention [Carla Stellweg](#), the influential Blue Star Art Space director/curator and Pace alter ego, whom Chuck (as a Blue Star board member) helped lure to San Antonio.

The city's art ecosystem — a vibrant example of Richard Florida's "[creative class](#)" — was flourishing on multiple fronts in the late 1990s: artist-run spaces like Cactus Bra, Three Walls, The Project Room, and Rose Amarillo; galleries like Finesilver, Artists Gallery (AVIART), and Joan Grona Gallery; community institutions like Guadalupe Cultural Arts, Jump-Start Theater Company, and Esperanza Peace & Justice Center; and art programs with exhibition spaces at the University of Texas at San Antonio (under [Frances Colpitt](#)), San Antonio College (where Chuck studied graphic design in the early 1980s), University of the Incarnate Word, and Southwest School of Art. Not to mention the "Stieren compound," a cluster of historic bungalows owned by attorney [Mike Casey](#) ("Mayor of Southtown"), who rented to artists for cheap. In 1995, one of these old dwellings, a duplex, would become the contemporary art space [Sala Diaz](#) (founded by artist Alejandro Diaz) on one side; years later the residency program [Casa Chuck](#) would open on the other side as a faithful replica of yet another of Chuck's former apartments (painstakingly restored by director Anjali Gupta in 2016 after an electrical fire). Over 30 years, the Stieren compound's outdoor commons — drawn together by strings of lights, fire pits, and a milelong communal table — has hosted more exhibition openings and art parties than anyone can count.

Chuck Ramirez left his imprint on many of these spaces — whether showing art, socializing, contributing graphic design, or just offering support. During this volcanic period, some people left town. We visited them. Other people came to town. We ate them up, absorbing whatever knowledge and chisme could be wrung from these artworld connections. Chuck's still-life photographs capture all of that, the ecstatic networking his tables of food, booze, and cigarettes make abundantly clear.



Left to right: Chuck Ramirez, "Meat Series: Cowboy Steak," 2002, pigment inkjet print; "Candy Tray: Godiva 1," 2002, pigment inkjet print; and "Whatacup," 2002, permanent ink print. © Estate of Chuck Ramirez. Courtesy of Ruiz-Healy

As a prelude to *Seven Days*, Ramirez's *Bean & Cheese*, the humbly (or ironically) titled show that culminated his 2002 Artpace residency, featured cryptic large-scale photographs of empty candy trays, cuts of meat, and his most iconic *memento mori*, a Whataburger cup printed with the poignant instruction: WHEN I AM EMPTY PLEASE DISPOSE OF ME PROPERLY. "A little weird epitaph," Chuck is heard saying in the Walley Films documentary. Of this product-oriented, object-centered strategy, [Nicholas Frank](#) writes:

"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."

And Chuck's work consistently holds this tension between restrained order and acting out, between the fastidiousness of a commercial graphic designer and the wilder, unbridled impulses of an artist (and gay man) straining against conventions. It's the good boy eyeing the bad boy, and vice versa. An anecdote by Chuck's advertising colleague Amelia Haley — from [tributes](#) collated by Hills Snyder for *Glasstire* soon after Ramirez's death — gives color to this contradiction:

"My first encounter with Chuck [in 1988] was clandestine. We met at Liberty Bar where we surreptitiously exchanged fonts. That's right, fonts! ... We made the exchange as though we were doing a drug deal: he passed me his floppy disk under the table, I passed my disk back much the same way. Then we both laughed at how silly we were being, thought maybe we would be found out by the font police. I was immediately under Chuck's spell. That was the start of one of the most meaningful relationships in my entire life."

For artists, what is the purpose of making a still life? For Chuck, I think these photographs are in fact *vanitas* or *memento mori*, stressing "memento." That's why these photographs are not documentary images. They are composed by the artist — in his mind, on the table, in the camera, with digital editing — despite whatever event may have inspired them. Without the distraction of faces and bodily gestures, the scenes and objects in these compositions serve to capture meaning, after the meal or party, when the process of reflection and making sense takes place. That's for the artist to know and viewers to only speculate. But it's a rich and fascinating form of speculation, one that artists have indulged and art lovers have consumed for centuries of still lifes. And after many years and departures, speculation can also form a mythology — in the same way that Joni Mitchell's "Woodstock" is mythology: memories isolated, enhanced, maybe even imagined.



Chuck Ramirez, "Seven Days: Rancher Plate," 2004, inkjet print. Amon Carter Museum of American Art, P2025.7, © Estate of Chuck Ramirez. Courtesy of Ruiz-Healy Art

In *Seven Days*, Chuck's *Rancher Plate* offers another kind of ofrenda. With more than 50 locations in San Antonio alone, Bill Miller Bar-B-Q has been a staple of city life since the 1950s. Animal meat — whether just killed, freshly butchered, or cooked and served on platters — has been an intriguing subject matter for still lifes from [Rembrandt](#) to [Chaim Soutine](#), due in part to the artistic challenge of rendering its color. Even [Claude Monet](#), the impressionist "painter of light," offered his take on the meat still life. Ramirez, in this unapologetic celebration of appetite, displays a mastery of light and texture in his bountiful spread, showing how one's favorite BBQ plate and sides can record a life through personal preferences.



Chuck Ramirez, "Seven Days: Birthday Party," 2003, inkjet print. Amon Carter Museum of American Art, P2025.2, © Estate of Chuck Ramirez. Courtesy of Ruiz-Healy Art

Likewise, Birthday Party is stocked with personal favorites from a turn-of-the-century childhood — including Jello, Goldfish, Big Red, Cheez Doodles, Big League Chew, and Hot Wheels toy cars, all scattered across a Pokémon tablecloth. As with his other tabletop still lifes, the circular forms of plates, bottles, rims of cups and containers, or the round shape of marigolds and oranges impose a gentle rhythm and visual order to an otherwise chaotic scene. This party could be entirely staged, or maybe it was held for one of his nephews, with whom he was close (again, Tía Chuck). Ramirez’s sister, Patricia, has been instrumental in preserving and sharing her brother’s legacy along with [Ruiz-Healy Art](#), which represents the Chuck Ramirez estate. As Patricia recalled in her Glasstire tribute:

“Chuck was a very ‘cool’ uncle. When he would visit, he would spend time with his nephews doing what they wanted to do, whether that was building with LEGOs, drawing, talking about books, or just watching movies. He gave them things that sort of represented our childhood . . . Tinker Toys, *Planet of the Apes* DVD collection, Converse All Stars . . . [and] paints, markers, charcoals, and canvases to inspire their creativity.”



Chuck Ramirez, “Seven Days: Super Bowl at Lloyd’s,” 2004, inkjet print. Amon Carter Museum of American Art, P2025.5, © Estate of Chuck Ramirez. Courtesy of Ruiz-Healy Art

As an ironic counter, what does Chuck’s *Super Bowl at Lloyd’s* say about men, these two in particular? It’s a safe bet the title refers to Lloyd Walsh, a virtuosic oil painter in the Old Master style and Palo Alto College faculty member. Both artists were represented in the 1990s by the solid and tony Finesilver Gallery, under the direction of Gabriela Trench, who platformed many San Antonio standouts. It would surprise me if Chuck, a sensitive aesthete and devoted sci-fi fan, cared anything about watching football — but that’s the joke, or maybe the point. The opportunity to hang out with Walsh, and other artists, would have been the main attraction at this potluck gathering. This is almost certainly the subtext to the picture’s motley

assortment of game snacks: a table loaded with Popeyes chicken and store-bought sushi, caprese salad and potato chips, Carlo Rossi and SKYY vodka. This “peaceable kingdom” of dissimilar items reflects the easygoing camaraderie of the San Antonio art community, which hung together by disregarding categories — gay and straight, academic and self-taught, dandy and stoner, multiethnic and multiracial, Texan or otherwise. (An important exception to this laissez-faire attitude happened in 1996 with the [artists’ petition against UTSA’s *Synthesis and Subversion*](#) exhibition, discussed in *Tía Chuck*.)

Experiencing this show at the Carter, having all the related feels, I find another quote helpful from Nicholas Frank:

“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.”



Chuck Ramirez, “Seven Days: KFC,” 2003, inkjet print. Amon Carter Museum of American Art, P2025.6, © Estate of Chuck Ramirez. Photo courtesy of Ruiz-Healy Art

So then, what does *Seven Days* represent? Is it an apocryphal week in the life of Chuck Ramirez, a beloved artist who died on the night of November 6, 2010, from a bicycle accident? Is it a record of his personal life in all its meaningful domains — including, as in *KFC*, time spent alone in bed with his most intimate companions: Marlboro Lights, art magazines, flip phone, fatty food, and sci-fi movies? Is this image his Rosetta stone, his compass rose — a star map, a diary?

We see traces of Chuck in the series’ exuberance, abundance, and wasted vibe. We all remember those full-tilt San Antonio nights, and the mornings after. We also see a formal sophistication and intellectualized aesthetics that Chuck

was initially nervous to express. But these qualities were something he recognized as his unique voice, and embraced with gusto in his later work. For all of us who knew and miss Chuck Ramirez, these photographs still hold his life.

Seven Days: The Still Lives of Chuck Ramirez is on view through January 4, 2026, at the Amon Carter Museum of American Art in Fort Worth.