

Features

Chuck Ramirez, the Heartfelt Photographer of Trash and Banal Throwaways

“Metaphorical Portraits” at Ruiz-Healy Art commemorates the artist a decade after his death.



by Lauren Moya Ford

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Chuck Ramirez, "Seven Days - Birthday Party" (2003), pigment inkjet print 48 x 60 in, edition of six (all images courtesy Ruiz-Healy Art)

Broken piñatas, busted brooms, and bulging trash bags: these are some of the humble subjects of Chuck Ramirez's unexpectedly heartfelt photographs. Ramirez

— who died 10 years ago in a freak cycling accident near his San Antonio home — captured these banal throwaways in brightly lit, crisply detailed, large-scale portraits set against pristine white backdrops. The artist said that “ceaseless, compulsive consumption is so ingrained in American culture that we forget it is even there.” But Ramirez never forgot: his photographs put things — and the people who own them — at the heart of his work. [*Chuck Ramirez: Metaphorical Portraits*](#) at Ruiz-Healy Art commemorates the artist a decade after his death.



Chuck Ramirez, “Vegan” (1998), pigment inkjet print, 60 x 48 inches, edition of 10

Charles Anthony Ramirez was born in 1962 in San Antonio, Texas. The son of a Mexican American father and an Anglo mother who later divorced, Ramirez would always grapple with his heritage. “Santos” (1996), one of his earliest photo series, is a tongue-in-cheek take on Mexican American identity that quite literally approaches his subject from an unexpected angle. The photographs show the bruised undersides of small statues of Catholic saints commonly found in Mexican American households. At first glance, the pieces look like cut stones, but on closer inspection, “Made in Italy” and “*Hecho en México*” stickers appear. The bases are arranged and named after *The Brady Bunch*, the sappy emblem of mainstream Americana from Ramirez’s youth. “I was raised as a white boy, with television, not art. I never learned Spanish and though I was brought up Catholic, I wasn’t raised with the mysticism of Latino religious culture,” the artist explained.



Installation view of *Chuck Ramirez: Metaphorical Portraits* at Ruiz-Healy Art

After a successful career in graphic design, Ramirez began making art in his early 30s. At the time, he was living above his friend and fellow artist Franco Mondini-Ruiz's Infinito Botánica, a hybrid art space and store filled with Mexican trinkets and treasures. "Like many young aesthetes in the Southwest, [Ramirez] eventually discovered a fascination with all things Mexican and mysterious, baroque and broken," Mondini-Ruiz later wrote. In the mid-1990s, the two artists, along with Jesse Amado, Alejandro Díaz, and others, formed a new generation of San Antonio artists who came of age just after the Chicano civil rights movement peaked in the 1960s and early 1970s. Chicano-era figurative painters like Santa Barraza, Mel Casas, Carmen Lomas Garza, and César Martínez had worked hard to break into the art world and to forge a coherent visual identity. But Ramirez and his group wanted to make art on their own terms, and embraced international contemporary art currents over Chicano tropes. Their stance — which fed on and poked fun at their Mexican roots — caused considerable controversy in South Texas art circles.

Ramirez's most meaningful link to his heritage was his beloved paternal grandmother, Lydia Ramirez. She taught him to cook traditional Mexican dishes and inspired the artist's generous sense of hospitality and warm, kitschy interior decorating. Affectionately nicknamed "[Tía Chuck](#)," Ramirez was the buoyant center of his city's vibrant art scene and "a consummate host and avid collector of friends," writes photographer Bryan Rindfuss. In this sense, "[Seven Days](#)" (2003-2004) is one of Ramirez's most autobiographical works. Inspired by the splendid Dutch *vanitas* paintings he had seen on a trip to Europe, these festive photographs meticulously re-stage Dionysian feasts with friends, and are an *I Spy*-style glimpse into 21st-century South Texas life. In "Día de los Muertos" (2003), all elements — from the scraps of chicken *mole* to the half-smoked Newport cigarettes to the marigold petals scattered across the oilcloth tabletop — form an exquisite harmony of colors and textures. "Although absent of people," Rindfuss writes, "the scattered clues left behind evidence something joyous and satisfying: a life lived to its fullest and shared generously."



Chuck Ramirez, "Seven Days – Dia de los Muertos" (2003), pigment inkjet print 48 x 60 inches, edition of six

In 2008, Ramirez survived heart surgery for an aortic aneurysm. But this wasn't the first time the artist was forced to contemplate his own mortality. "I started to live after I found out that I was HIV positive," Ramirez said. He created "Long-Term Survivor" (1999) shortly after his diagnosis. The project — which included photographs of leather chaps, a plastic pill box, and a video of a rotating silver cock ring — bravely and unapologetically examined sexual desire and the will to live in the age of AIDS. Ramirez said that much of his work revolved around his queer identity, and his health struggles infused his photographs with a quiet sensitivity to the impermanence of life. As writer Sarah Fisch said, "His mortality was no abstraction. For Chuck, death was a motivator, a commentator, a constant."

Death is at the center of Ramirez's "Quarantine" (2000), photographs of the wilting bouquets of roses, carnations, and baby's breath that he found while visiting his grandmother at the hospital in her final months. Together the flowers form a sort of generic type, but each drooping bow and crinkled petal also embodies the sender's unique sentiments, and the receiver's unique life. The artist's sister, Trish Marcus, remembered him passing the abandoned arrangements in empty hospital rooms, saying, "That's not trash, that's somebody's treasure." According to artist Ethel Shipton, "The idea of time and the fact that we all end up being discarded were always somewhere permeating ([Ramirez's] thoughts as he looked at the world.)" Twenty years later, the "Quarantine" photographs carry a poignant edge: because of COVID-19, most hospitalized patients can receive flowers, but tragically, not friends or family members.



Installation view of "Quarantine" series in *Chuck Ramirez: Metaphorical Portraits* at Ruiz-Healy Art

Ramirez self-identified as a conceptual artist since his first exhibition in 1995. But unlike other conceptual photographers, his work is “filled with a deep and palpable humanity,” writes McNay Museum curator René Paul Barilleaux. His work is soulful but irreverent, coherent but quirky. As Mondini-Ruiz put it, Ramirez’s “was a different flavor of conceptual art. It was influenced by *cariño*, by affection and sentimentality that existed in our heritage.”



Installation view of *Chuck Ramirez: Metaphorical Portraits* at Ruiz-Healy Art.

Chuck Ramirez: Metaphorical Portraits continues at Ruiz-Healy Art (201-A E Olmos Dr, San Antonio, Texas) through January 9, 2021.