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‘Suitcase Portraits’ by Chuck Ramirez Welcome Travelers to SAT

WENDY WEIL ATWELL on 14 September, 2015 at 15:45



Chuck Ramirez, Suitcase Portraits, 2008. Photo of photograph by Scott Ball.

It's hard to imagine San Antonio's front door as the shadowy lower level of the San Antonio International Airport (SAT), teeming with cigarette and exhaust fumes, but that's what greets almost everyone who arrives by plane. Now, when people step outside the baggage claim area and disperse in various directions, eleven "Suitcase Portraits" by **Chuck Ramirez (1962-2010)** will light their way. The 5-by-6-foot light boxes are spaced on the railings across the road that fronts lower level baggage claims for terminals A and B.

In each image, an opened suitcase is photographed against a white background, exposing its contents for all to see. What's inside reads like a personality study. The portraits' playful nicknames, given to them by the artist and friends, read like prompts for a short story, sparking the imagination: "Granny Goes to Vegas," "Buddha," and "Dancing Shoes." Health obsessions, OCD orderliness, a fixation for cosmetics—the visual narratives reflect the wide variety of travelers juxtaposed together. As any row on an airplane suggests, the random process of air travel creates a bizarre permutation of seatmates.



Chuck Ramirez's artwork seen from the entranceway to Terminal A. Photo by Scott Ball.

Ramirez's opened suitcases pique the inherent voyeurism in each of us and the effect is fun and fascinating – like taking an inventory of the strange life sitting next to you.

“Chuck came up with the theme of each suitcase and reached out to friends and collectors to secure the items in each of the suitcases,” said one of his longtime friends, Libby Tilley, who helped provide the contents for “Fashionista,” along with two other women. In that sense, the images are “not considered a singular portrait,” explained Tilley. When she sees them, it makes her think about “consumerism and how that shapes our identity.”

For the suitcase filled with toys, Ramirez turned to his nephews.

“The majority of items in that suitcase, as well as the suitcase itself, are from our home,” said his sister, Patricia Marcus, who was present at the re-dedication ceremony with their father, Charles Ramirez. “My sons, Stephen and Christopher, picked all their favorite toys for Uncle Chuck to use and were so excited to be part of one of his projects. It was one of our great memories with him sifting through their toys for the right ones to put on the suitcase.”



Charles Ramirez (right) talks with guests. Photo by Scott Ball.

The “Suitcase Portraits” were originally installed at the airport’s long term parking garage in 2008, but over time, due to sun exposure, they had become faded and ghostlike. Their relocation and restoration is a collaboration between **Public Art San Antonio** (PASA), a division of the City’s **Department for Culture and Creative Development**, and the City’s **Aviation Department**.

The airport is currently building a seven-story garage across from baggage claim that will feature car rental facilities and the construction “gave us an opportunity to rethink and re-envision and relocate the artwork where it is today,” said Aviation Director Frank Miller.

“How fitting to have his work located at the front door of San Antonio,” said DCCD Director Felix Padrón at the unveiling. “Chuck was and still is a native son of San Antonio, a creative force who championed the arts like no one before or after him. ... He was a critical influencer who played a major role in shaping the arts community that we know today. Chuck was not shy about sharing his gifts and talents with others to make sure that artistic progress kept moving forward in San Antonio.”



Department of Culture and Creative Development Director Felix Padrón speaks at the re-dedication of Chuck Ramirez’s photographs. Photo by Scott Ball.

San Antonio lost Ramirez in a tragic bicycle accident in 2010, but his art continues to be celebrated and collected. Ramirez did a similar series of "Purse Portraits," exposing the intriguing and normally hidden property of their owners. His "Seven Days" series presents tablescapes of plundered feasts. Ramirez also dealt with political issues, such as racial slurs, with his "Coconut Series." A 1999 exhibit at ArtPace's Hudson Showroom dealt with issues around his identity as a gay man living with HIV.

His photographic subjects include a wide array of low (versus "high") art. The framing of his lens gives poetic resonance to trash bags, the bottoms of saint statues, brooms, and broken piñatas.

His art is featured in national and international collections including that of the Smithsonian Museum, The European Museum of Photography in Paris, and El Museo de Barrio, New York's leading Latino cultural institution. Patricia Ruiz-Healy, of the local art gallery Ruiz-Healy Art, is the exclusive representative of his estate. Ruiz-Healy served as a consultant for the restoration of Ramirez' work at the airport.

René Paul Barilleaux, the Chief Curator at the McNay Art Museum, is working on a survey of Ramirez's work for the summer of 2017. "Tia Chuck," a documentary film by Mark and Angela Walley, is also currently under production.

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WENDY WEIL ATWELL

Wendy Weil Atwell is a writer living in San Antonio, Texas. She received her MA in Art History and Criticism from the University of Texas at San Antonio in 2002. She has been actively writing reviews of art since then for various visual arts publications, both online and in print, including Art Lies, Glasstire, and ...might be good. Atwell is the author of The River Spectacular published in 2010.

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