



# Rooted in Rebellion: Ricky Armendariz's "Texas Tree of Life" at the Alamo's Texas Cavaliers Education Center

CHRISTOPHER KARR | AUGUST 2, 2026

There is no other monument in Texas history like the Alamo. It is a defining historical structure in San Antonio and across the Lone Star State. For context, the Battle of the Alamo was a 13-day siege that took place from February 23 to March 6, 1836, during the Texas Revolution. According to the U.S. Census Bureau, an estimated 189 Texian and Tejano soldiers died at the hands of Mexican forces during the battle.

The fall of the Alamo and the deaths of its Texian defenders transformed a disorganized rebellion into a unified cause, led by General Sam Houston. After the Alamo came the Battle of San Jacinto, fought on April 21, 1836, where Texas won its independence from Mexico. This brief, but deadly, battle resulted in approximately 630 Mexican casualties and 730 prisoners. The following day, Antonio López de Santa Anna, president of Mexico and commander of its armed forces, was found hiding and was also imprisoned. The next month, the Treaties of Velasco, signed by Santa Anna and David G. Burnet, established the Republic of Texas as a sovereign nation. Today, Texas is the second-most populous state in the U.S., and San Antonio is the nation's sixth largest city.



*Richard "Ricky" Armendariz, "Texas Tree of Life: A Tribute to the Independent Spirit of San Antonio," 2022-2026, oil on carved birch plywood, 10 x 20 feet. Photo: Ansen Seale/Alamo Trust, Inc. Artwork gift of Rick Liberto*

The Texas Cavaliers Education Center opened its doors on April 30, 2026, after multiple years of construction on the Alamo grounds. The institution is located behind the iconic Alamo Church and is the second of three new buildings to open at the historic site as outlined in the [Alamo Plan](#). Years prior to opening the center, Richard "Ricky" Armendariz created a drawing that captured the legacy of the Alamo and San Antonio at large. This drawing, initially vertical in orientation, was adjusted to create the design for the *Texas Tree of Life: A Tribute to the Independent Spirit of San Antonio*, a horizontal work that is now housed at the [Texas Cavaliers Education Center](#). The artwork was made possible by benefactor Rick Liberto. In an interview, Kate Carey, Vice President of Education & Interpretation at the Alamo, expresses: "We project thousands upon thousands of students to see the center annually. You never know what the hook is that's going to bring students into this narrative. I do hope that the iconography of Ricky's work adds to their interest in Texas historical topics. Maybe students like Legos or Bowie knives, but maybe it is also art. We strive to reach as many students as possible."

*Texas Tree of Life: A Tribute to the Independent Spirit of San Antonio* is Armendariz's largest artwork to date, and is the product of multiple years of labor, from spring 2022 to early 2026. The painting consists of eight individual panels that are connected side-by-side to create the masterpiece. However, while the larger piece is complete, Armendariz's work with education-based programming at the Alamo is ongoing.



*Richard "Ricky" Armendariz painting in his home studio. Image courtesy of the artist*

Armendariz's artistic process is arduous, and he redesigned his home studio to accommodate the *Texas Tree of Life*. In an interview, he states: "I created tables, and prepped five-eighths-inch birch marine-gray plywood. Initially, I painted from back to front using glazes and thin layers of oil paint. I was often standing on top of these panels, as each of the eight panels is five by five feet... It took me years to get the painting done." After the painting comes the carving. Armendariz used a modified router to etch into the surface he meticulously built up. He specifies, "drawing with a router is typical with my process. I cannot draw with a pencil or other drawing implements as they would scratch the surface of the painting."



*Richard "Ricky" Armendariz, "Texas Tree of Life: A Tribute to the Independent Spirit of San Antonio" (in progress detail, featuring milagros). Image courtesy of the artist*

Armendariz's choice to utilize the tree of life motif stems from several personal and conceptual frames of thought. In a [video produced by the Alamo](#), he explains, "The tree of life, the way I interpret it, is a way of expressing your cultural heritage through icons — milagros, as they're called, where the milagros would be hanging, quite literally, from the tree." In our conversation, however, Armendariz clarifies his decision to depart from this traditional arrangement: "I decided to let them float in space due to the amount of iconography. I worked from front to back because I didn't know where all the milagros were going to be in space. I built the tree around the milagros." Rather than treating the tree as a fixed container for its iconography, Armendariz allows the various figures and symbols in the composition to shape the composition itself.





Richard "Ricky" Armendariz, "Texas Tree of Life: A Tribute to the Independent Spirit of San Antonio" (detail, featuring the Alamo), 2022-2026, oil on carved birch plywood, 10 x 20 feet. Photo: Ansen Seale/Alamo Trust, Inc. Artwork gift of Rick Liberto

Set against a sunset over the landscape surrounding the Alamo, the *Texas Tree of Life* is anchored by a large live oak tree — a reference to the tree, transplanted in 1913, that grows beside the Alamo. Different historical figures and structures occupy the composition, beginning at its base, where Armendariz places Native Americans around a wigwam. He draws upon the various groups of Coahuiltecan and Lipan Apache hunter-gatherers who lived in the San Antonio area prior to European settlement and later helped construct Mission San Antonio de Valero, now known as the Alamo. The faceless composite figures engage in a variety of activities: one man holds a bow at full draw, two figures run, others tend to cacti and prepare food, one woman carries a child, and another man rides a horse. The artwork's entire lower register pulls from the Spanish mission era, where ships serve as metaphors for the European colonial settlement of the city.



*Richard "Ricky" Armendariz, "Texas Tree of Life: A Tribute to the Independent Spirit of San Antonio" (detail, featuring James Bowie, the Zavala flag, and General Sam Houston), 2022-2026, oil on carved birch plywood, 10 x 20 feet. Photo: Ansen Seale/Alamo Trust, Inc. Artwork gift of Rick Liberto*

Above the Indigenous figures sits all five of San Antonio's historic missions. From left to right, viewers see Mission Concepción, Mission San José, the Alamo, Mission San Juan Capistrano, and Mission Espada. Unlike the Alamo, the other four Spanish colonial missions continue to serve as active Catholic parishes today. Above the missions are the likenesses of individual historical figures and significant groups that contribute to San Antonio's founding, missions, and the Texas Revolution.

The named figures include: Juana Gertrudis Navarro, James Bowie, Sam Houston, Juan Seguín, Antonio López de Santa Anna, William Barret Travis, Joe (enslaved to Travis), Stephen F. Austin, David "Davy" Crockett, Martín Perfecto de Cos, and Susanna Dickinson. Armendariz's representations of the figures stem from numerous painted and photographic samples of the individuals. His personal sense of humor is also at play, as he depicts Santa Anna in his older guise, trading the general's youthful, charismatic appearance for a decidedly more weathered look. Meanwhile, the groups of figures include Couriers, Alamo Defenders, Mexican Soldiers, Canary Islanders, Franciscan Friars, Native Americans, and European Explorers. Unlike the individually identifiable figures, these groupings take on composite appearances, with their facial and bodily features serving to represent broader historical communities rather than specific individuals.

At the very top of the piece are seven flags that, when viewed from left to right, chronicle the nations and governments that have shaped San Antonio's history: the Crown of Castile, the French Bourbon Royal Banner, the Mexican flag, the Zavala flag, the Texas flag, the National Confederate flag, and lastly, the United States flag. Other motifs of consideration — a rifle, a Declaration of Independence, and a cannon — are enduring tokens of the Texas Revolution. The lists of important figures and symbols is comprehensive, alluding to Armendariz's attention to detail in capturing history.

Throughout the piece, Armendariz makes the work distinctly his own by including local flora and fauna that have become integral to his practice over the past several decades. Three cacti occupy the foreground, while a menagerie of animals pops up throughout the composition, including, but not limited to, several Mexican free-tailed bats, moths, two rabbits, a crow, a bald eagle, a hawk, two monarch butterflies, and a swallowtail butterfly. These animals vary in size. They not only further emphasize the work’s Southwestern setting, but also reflect Armendariz’s broader engagement with the natural world and spirituality. In his work, animals often serve as vessels for spiritual, cultural, and symbolic meaning. The artist draws from Indigenous belief systems to investigate the interconnectedness of the human and spirit worlds, which animals can connect to beyond most humans’ capability, apart from individuals such as folk healers. In the *Texas Tree of Life*, this broader engagement with animals also becomes a way for Armendariz to connect San Antonio’s physical landscape to the spiritual world.

*Texas Tree of Life* is a statement piece. Armendariz establishes a visual legacy of San Antonio through a polyphonic constellation of figures, animals, and symbols set against a mystical landscape and the brilliant expanse of a South Texas sky. Even today, the Alamo, which receives millions of visitors yearly, continues to shape San Antonio in tangible ways. For example, the city maintains a protected view shed around the historic site, limiting the height of structures that might cast shadows upon its view. Armendariz’s tree, then, becomes especially fitting for a city that continues to grow around the symbols that have shaped its history.

Ultimately, *Texas Tree of Life* is not simply a work about San Antonio’s past. It is also a deeply personal milestone for Armendariz, who created an ambitious painting that is as layered as the living history it depicts. Reflecting on the work, he says:

“I want to thank everyone at the Alamo, especially Kate Carey and Alexander Rivard. I also want to thank Patricia Ruiz-Healy, and Rick Liberto, who is a big supporter of Ruiz-Healy Art. And I’d like to thank my wife. She helped this not just be a work of art, but a learning tool that young audiences can learn from. I’d be remiss without recognizing the University of Texas at San Antonio for allowing me to have the time to complete this painting and forthcoming programming. Getting to have a painting at the Alamo is a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity.”

*Texas Tree of Life: A Tribute to the Independent Spirit of San Antonio is on display inside the Texas Cavaliers Education Center at the Alamo in San Antonio, Texas.*

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