

Review: “Chuck Ramirez: Ordinary Wonders” at The Momentary, Bentonville

NICHOLAS FRANK | AUGUST 29, 2026

There is no escaping the power of commerce in Bentonville, Arkansas. A visitor today can only ponder what the place was like when Sam Walton opened his first five-and-dime in a little downtown building, before his Walmart creation took over the retail world. Today, the entire west side of town is sprouting new and dewy right out of the ground, with “Coming Soon” signs emblazoned in the streetside windows of every glistening building, promising soon-to-open retail and restaurant neighbors for the Anthropologie, Swig, Crepes Paulette, Ramo d’Olivo wine bar, and Flyway Brewing Company brewpub already up and running. This exuberant development is, of course, a sprout of Walmart’s national headquarters, a campus already the size of a village and growing, to the point of connecting several formerly small towns — Rogers (where the first Walmart opened in 1962), Springdale (home of Carnitas Los Cuatro Hermanos, recently listed among the top Mexican restaurants in the country by the *New York Times*), Centerton, Lowell, and the disturbingly named Accident — in a continuous micropolis.



A sign honoring the memory of Chuck Ramirez hangs in the entryway of the H-E-B Flores Market in San Antonio, with artworks from his “Brooms” series hanging on the far back wall inside.

But this isn't a business publication, and I'm not here to write about Walmart. Let's cut that whole introduction and start again here: There is no escaping the happy relationship between art and commerce in Bentonville. Alice Walton, daughter of retail magnate Sam Walton, built a massive art collection, then a massive (and expanding) home for it in the Crystal Bridges Museum of American Art. Why "Crystal Bridges?" I recall thinking when I first heard about it in the twenty-tweens. Here we have a mysterious twinning with San Antonio, in that our very own major art collector, Linda Pace, named her museum Ruby City. Both evoke sparkling wonders, utopic agglomerations of fancy, fetish, and wealth.

The hipper little sibling to Crystal Bridges is The Momentary, a music, art, and coffee venue nestled in a converted Kraft Cheese manufacturing plant. The reason for my Bentonville trip was the long-awaited first non-Texas museum retrospective of Chuck Ramirez, a San Antonio artist who died tragically in 2010 at age 48, just as his star was approaching the brightness of Venus.



Chuck Ramirez, works from the "Candy Tray" series

Ramirez famously worked professionally in the advertising arm of Texas' Walmart equivalent, the flourishing H-E-B grocery chain, before embarking on a full-time artistic career. His art carried over seamlessly from his advertising work, which entailed designing labels for H-E-B products in such a way that they would seem the only goods a person might ever consider. Crisp, sheeny lighting and staging techniques became his ideal mechanism for capturing how people build personality out of what they consume and keep; his focus was how we infuse sentimentality into mass-produced objects by giving them the care of our essential context, turning trinkets and tchotchkes into background characters in our unspooling personal narratives.

Ramirez recognized how the shiny gold plastic tray in a box of chocolates lends just enough glamour to the operation of choosing and chewing to transport us to a realm of limitless luxury, if just for a few priceless moments (his *Candy Tray* series). He also saw how discardable that momentary preciousness is, in the piles of refuse we leave behind (the *Trash Bags* series). We often snap pics of us and our friends gathered around dinner tables for celebratory meals. Chuck, as he is universally known in his hometown, focused on the aftermath, the mess of crumbs on plates, empty bottles and wine

glasses, encrusted cutlery, wilting flowers, and cigarette butts in ash trays, left behind as a lost echo of fleeting communal joy (the *Seven Days* series, recently acquired by the Amon Carter Museum of American Art in Fort Worth).

The brilliance of Alejo Benedetti, Curator of Contemporary Art for Crystal Bridges and The Momentary, in organizing the Ramirez retrospective here, was to simultaneously celebrate the culture of commerce while opening further dimensions into the realities that surround it. Commerce affords us opportunities to enrich our lives beyond necessity, if we have access and we're able to navigate the brusque demands of capitalism. Even if we're successful beyond our imagining, we're still subject to vicissitudes visited upon each and every one of us, a spate of poor luck, or heartbreak, or illness. The name of The Momentary itself evokes fleetingness, that just beyond the cusp of now lies a reverberant then, whether we're talking about music or art or life.

Chuck Ramirez: Ordinary Wonders rightly focuses on the artist's elevation of the everyday to the realm of celebration, an easy entry into his sardonic images of raw meats, canned fruit salad, kitschy recipes, flower bouquets, and bashed piñatas. But Benedetti fearlessly gets to the point in the opening room of the show, dubbed "Shelf Life," introducing main themes running through Ramirez's work. Here, Benedetti selected a few images representative of the artist's various abiding concerns: identity, community, our transitory culture, products as mirrors, and that finality awaiting us all: death.



*Chuck Ramirez, works from the "Purse Portraits" and "Quarantine" series.
Photo courtesy of The Momentary*

The flipside of community is privacy, and the flipside of death is survival. In his series *Purse Portraits*, Ramirez selected friends to submit their handbags to the prying lens of his overhead camera. The images are titled with each purse owners' name, and the bags are opened just enough to reveal what these people cart about through their daily lives: cigarettes, keys, ticket stubs, IDs, things that can be loosely described as "personal items." But the bags are only open so far, the private, portable sanctuaries revealing only so much of the personalities carrying them.



Chuck Ramirez, "Long Term Survivor: Cocktail," 1999, pigment inkjet print, 22 × 42 inches, and works from the "Meat Series"

In *Long Term Survivor: Cocktail*, Chuck lays his own personal life right out there for all to see: a seven-day plastic pill case filled with the protease inhibitors and other drugs that formed the medication “cocktail” keeping him alive as a person with HIV. As Benedetti notes, the entire exhibition stands as a testament to this daily routine, a person deciding that after a long professional career he’d make meaning of his life by becoming a dedicated artist. Essentially everything else in the show flowed from that decision, an outpouring of personality and perspective rarely seen even among our most long-lived and prolific artists.

Ironically, only in the “if one thing doesn’t get you another thing will” sense, AIDS didn’t kill Chuck. Reports vary, but one day after a typical night of partying with friends at a bar around the corner from his home in the scratchier environs of San Antonio’s King William neighborhood, something caused Chuck to fly off his bicycle and suffer a fatal wound. After a long vigil that night, surrounded by a throng of the extended family he so enthusiastically nurtured, Chuck died.



Chuck Ramirez, "There's one in every crowd: Peeps," 2006; 2023, pigment inkjet print, 34 × 26 inches, and "Whatacup," 2002, pigment inkjet print on Canson platine paper, 74 × 50 inches

We can't help but read biography back into the lives of heroes. Walking contemplatively through *Ordinary Wonders*, I saw hints, undercurrents, omens, and portents of mortality everywhere. In some works it's entirely deliberate: the soon-to-wilt cut flowers of his *Quarantine* series, made following repeated visits to the hospital after his grandmother suffered a fall. Or in the sardonic, self-immolating *Ground Chuck* and *Chuck Roast* images bracketing his *Meat Series*. Most pointedly, consumer and life cycles are twinned in his iconic *Whatacup* image, showing the back of a Whataburger styrofoam cup with the words "When I am empty please dispose of me properly," a sentiment made touchingly vulnerable in Ramirez's hands. In treasuring trash, he offers a whiff of the consciousness that no matter how much we consume, no matter how many things we surround ourselves with, or loved ones, or how we distinguish ourselves in our works, grand and minor, we, too, will end.

Benedetti gets right to the point in the wall text accompanying the *Trash Bags*, titling that section of the show "What Remains": "Chuck Ramirez threaded mortality throughout his artwork — from disposable fast-food cups to wilting flowers. Perhaps nowhere does that feel more present than in his works focused on trash. In the things we throw away, he found a history of life. Ramirez often wedded cast-off remains with the lingering taste of celebration. In doing so, he positioned the height of jubilation with a rough cut to loss, creating an intense awareness of emotions that feel both jarring and profound."



Chuck Ramirez, "Trash Bags: WalMart," 1998, pigment inkjet print, 62 × 50 inches

The curatorial gesture of dropping this awareness right into the heart of American commerce — where we buy all those things that will soon become trash — is a courageous move that deepens the artist's project, while also risking that we might sense futility in the mad pursuit of worldly goods. Those "coming soon" signs in town can take on a darker tone when we ponder ends rather than beginnings. But museums are made to outlast us, to stand far beyond the lives of their founders, and to carry that ethic through to the objects they collect and care for. Exhibitions are fleeting things, but they create a moment to stop, reflect, and celebrate, like a dinner party arranged by someone with extra insight into all of us. I came away from *Ordinary Wonders* mindful that, in the thoughtful hands of Benedetti and The Momentary, Chuck Ramirez's legacy is properly disposed.

Chuck Ramirez: Ordinary Wonders is on view at *The Momentary* through January 10, 2027. Admission is free.

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