

Making his mark in his own way

Grandson of Diego Rivera meditates on the form, color of his still life paintings.

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Updated May 27, 2011 10:47 a.m.



Pedro Diego Alvarado, grandson of famed muralist Diego Rivera, is exhibiting paintings, many of them still lifes of fruit, at Ruiz-Healy Art. BOB OWEN / EXPRESS-NEWS

It's hard to ignore the elephant in the room, even with Pedro Diego Alvarado's luminous still lifes of fruit asserting themselves from the walls of Ruiz-Healy Art.

Luckily, the artist doesn't seem to mind talking about his famous grandfather, iconic Mexican painter Diego Rivera.

"I'm a great admirer of his," he says with quiet laugh.

Alvarado was recently in San Antonio for an exhibit of his work at the secluded Olmos Park gallery, his first in the United States.

The 55-year-old artist, who lives in Mexico City, began working on the paintings for the show about a year ago at the request of gallerist Patricia Ruiz-Healy, a longtime friend.

"Since it's a show for the United States, I wanted to repeat themes that were of interest to me," Alvarado says.

Most of the works in the show are still lifes of fruit — chirimoyas, mandarins, limes, star fruit, cactus pears — nestled in crinkled tissue paper the way they are displayed in Mexican markets, piled high in a basket ("Jitomates en canasta"), or painted against a dramatic black background ("Sandia"). In "Carambolos," the green-tinged skin of the star fruit gives off a waxy sheen as if the ridged ovals were lit from within.

"I think it's a very good way to meditate about form, shape," Alvarado says of still lifes. "It's a pretext to work with color, light, form. They could be abstract paintings."

In paintings of desert plants — tightly framed like photographs — he fixes his intent gaze on the long arms of a blue candle cactus and the spear-like leaves of the maguey. Close up, the scalloped, leaves of a maguey reveal small, jagged scars. Even closer, subtle hints of color emerge, seeping through the gray-green skin. There are touches of yellow, red, blue and purple.

“If you know that they are there, you perceive it,” Alvarado says. “If you don't, you don't.”

In other works, he explores the Mexican landscape, including rural vistas in paintings such as “Milpas secas con magueys,” in which the fingers of dried corn stalks wave in the stark Mexican light, while nearby, the tentacle-like arms of magueys reach toward a cloudy sky. Because of the subject matter, these works, more than any others in the exhibit, call to mind the work of some of the giants of Mexican art, including, of course, Rivera.

Tall and hazel-eyed, Alvarado cuts an unassuming figure dressed entirely in denim with a red bandana tied around his neck. Born in 1956, he grew up in Mexico City. His mother, Ruth, was the younger of Rivera's two daughters with second wife, Guadalupe Marín. Alvarado was only a year old when his grandfather died, so he doesn't have a memory of Rivera, but he did get to know him through a sort of osmosis.

“I lived in his studio, which is now a museum,” he says. “We used to play in his studio with his preferred things, and that gave me a profound knowledge of him, just being there surrounded by what he liked to be surrounded by.”

There were pre-Hispanic artifacts about, as well as folk art Judas figures, Rivera's paintbrushes and “all his clothes and his enormous shoes.”

Early on, Alvarado recognized that he was “a visual person” and enrolled at the Academia de San Carlos. Instead of painting, however, he pursued photography. Then his maternal grandmother brought home a catalog of drawings by Henri Cartier-Bresson after visiting the famed French photographer in Paris.

His grandmother deemed the drawings “dreadful,” but Alvarado was “completely overwhelmed.” Later, he had the opportunity to meet relatives of Cartier-Bresson, who were visiting Mexico City. Eventually he traveled to Paris, where he met the famed lensman himself.

“I had planned to go for two months and stayed two years,” Alvarado says.

Cartier-Bresson, who had returned to painting, became his mentor, and Alvarado enrolled at the Académie des Beaux-Arts. During this period, Alvarado says he did not think about his grandfather, because, in spite of Rivera's cubist period in France, “he's not present” there.

When Alvarado returned to Mexico, however, “I was in front of the pyramid which is Rivera's work,” he says. “And then I questioned myself, can I continue to paint being related to this incredible painter?”

Ultimately, he made peace with his family legacy.

“I said, ‘I'm living in a very different moment. I'm honest to myself, so I can be a painter,’” he says.

Alvarado's career began in earnest in 1984 with a show at the storied Galería de Arte Mexicano in Mexico City.

“I made a series of still lifes — pumpkins with corn,” he says. “I was fascinated by it. And I thought, ‘Well, I’ll keep on doing still lifes until I do something else.’ But the thing is I’ve been doing it for 20 years.”

He laughs. “It’s an unending project.”

The exhibit is at Ruiz-Healy Art through July 15. The gallery is open by appointment only. Call 210- 804-2219 or go to www.ruizhealyart.com.

May 21, 2011 | Updated May 27, 2011 10:47 a.m.



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ARTS WRITER | SAN ANTONIO EXPRESS-NEWS



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