

Chuck Ramirez's Visual Interpretations of Latino Culture



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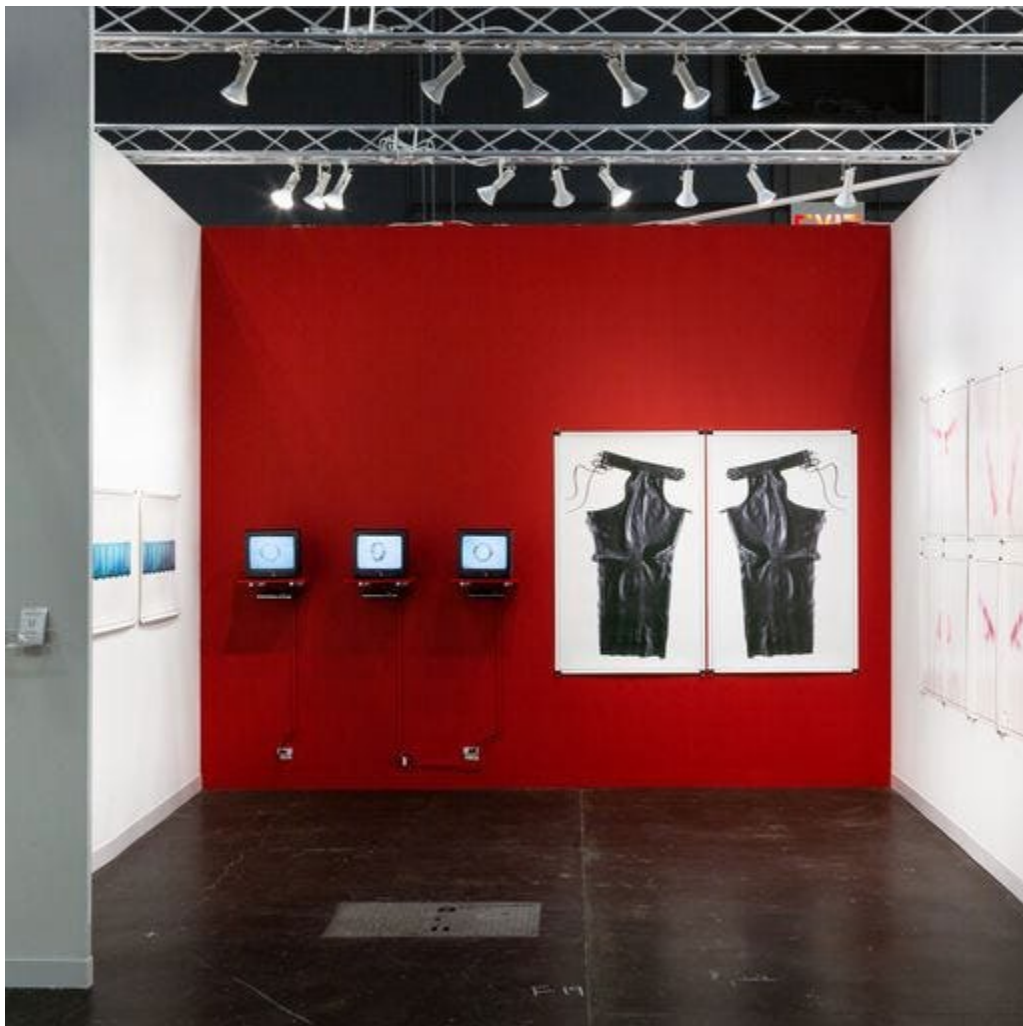
The Armory Show, an International Fair of New Art in New York City, is one of the most prestigious art shows in America, so it was a joyous moment to see the inclusion of Chuck Ramirez of San Antonio, Texas in their September 2022 show. I have followed the Armory Show [from afar] for several decades and do not recall ever seeing the participation of Chicano or Mexican American artists in the past. If that is truly the case, let's celebrate this occasion and hope there will be more U.S. Latinos invited to the fair in the near future.



Chuck Ramirez. Photo by Greg Harrison. Courtesy of Ruiz-Healy Art. San Antonio & New York City.

Chuck Ramirez's inclusion in the famed Armory Show of New Art was overdue. In 2005 Ramirez became one of the few U.S. born Latinos from my part of Texas to sell at the famed art auction house Christie's in New York City. Over the past decade Ramirez's work has been purchased by the Smithsonian and the Whitney Museum of American Art, and numerous major museums have exhibited his large format photographs. The McNay Art Museum's exhibition of Ramirez in 2017 was the largest ever at that prestigious museum for any single artist. One isn't always privy to the behind-the-scenes work involved in the selection process of major exhibits, but I recently learned of the instrumental role of two Latinas, Patricia Ruiz-Healy and Carla Acevedo-Yates, in placing Ramirez in the New York fair.

Hype Art, an online magazine, noted that for the first time in the fair's 28-year history, "the Armory show featured a curatorial theme by placing special emphasis on the work of Latin American artists." Latin American curator Carla Acevedo-Yates organized the show under the title *Landscape Undone*. The magazine noted that the exhibit showcased artists that investigate the "intersectionality of the natural and built environment as a personal yet public territory loaded with the legacies of racism and colonialism."



Chuck Ramirez, "Chaps." The Armory Show. Photo by Daniel Terna. Courtesy of Ruiz-Healy Art. San Antonio & New York City.

Acevedo-Yates, currently Curator at the Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago, invited Ruiz-Healy to present her ideas for the Focus section of the Armory Show which featured issues surrounding the environment and personal and political climate as they interact with race, gender, and power. Ruiz-Healy had a bold idea—a solo show that would replicate Chuck Ramirez’s 1999 San Antonio Artpace show “Long Term Survivor.” The idea and subsequent booth exhibit proved highly successful, a tribute to great art and individuals who are able to recognize talent.

The path to artistic success is not always linear and may consist of twists and turns, delayed recognition, and few financial returns. Chuck Ramirez took the long route to creative fulfillment. Although he studied art in high school and community college, he described himself as a self-taught artist. San Antonio College prepared him for a commercial art career, and he found work at the HEB family-owned grocery corporation as a brand designer in the mid 1980s. When HEB began to market their own brands, ranging from food to school supplies, Ramirez helped to design the brands on the cans and packages sold primarily at HEB stores. Ramirez devoted fourteen years to the grocery business, a time that gave him additional training and skills in fine art photography.



Chuck Ramirez, “Chaps.” The Armory Show. Courtesy of Ruiz-Healy Art. San Antonio & New York City

Ramirez left the commercial art world in the mid- 1990s seeking to develop his own art, ever mindful that failure was not an option. He earned little money in his first few years as an independent artist, but benefitted by his strong friendships with several talented Latino artists, notably Franco Mondini-Ruiz and Jesse Amado. Ramirez lived above Mondini-Ruiz's famous shop, *Infinito Botanica* in Southtown, and later rented a house from the well-known art aficionado, Mike Casey. The Casey compound on South Alamo Street was perfect for Ramirez who enjoyed hosting large art parties. Ramirez's associations with nearby Blue Star and Artpace were important and gave him artistic connections that built confidence to try his own brand of photographic art. The encouragement of Linda Pace, a prominent San Antonio supporter of art, was instrumental in his search to undertake something radically different from the work of traditional photographers.

Ramirez's inclusion in a 1996 exhibition, *Synthesis and Subversion*, curated by UTSA art professor Frances Coplitt, momentarily lifted his spirits. Chicanos in the city, however, criticized Coplitt for her selection of the five artists in the show, artists that included Ramirez, Franco Mondini-Ruiz, and Jesse Amado whom artist activists perceived to be middle-class Latinos. Ramirez, whose mother was Anglo, did not seem to fit what Chicanos thought a Chicano artist should be. Ramirez's interest was in tradition, food, music, and culture, and he preferred to leave political art to others. Should those interests deprive him of a Latino voice? Ramirez thought not.



Chuck Ramirez, Dia de Los Muertos. Courtesy of Ruiz-Healy Art. San Antonio & New York City.

A major breakthrough for Ramirez came when he was selected by the prominent art curator Jerome Sans to be an International Artist-in-Residence at Artpace in 2002. Ramirez's residency exhibition in Artpace's Hudson Showroom, "Bean and Cheese," according to art curator Eddie Hayes, offered "an entree into exploring other processes and overarching themes in Ramirez's work, such as his sophisticated sense and use of humor, as well as the uncanny and unexpected injections of social critique and emotions into his clinical, point-blank portraiture."

Ramirez's tragic death from a bicycle accident in 2010 left a large void in San Antonio's art community. Art critic Elizabeth Ferrer surmised: "Whether he was photographing the insides of purses, worn-out market brooms that he collected in Mexico, or empty chocolate containers, he was presenting stories that demanded attention and completion...He made them big and bold and then left them for us to take these stories full circle."

Through the efforts of Smithsonian Museum art curator E. Carmen Ramos and art gallery owner Patricia Ruiz-Healy, the Smithsonian acquired Ramirez's "Breakfast Tacos" in 2012. Writing as editor of *Our American: The Latino Presence in American Art*, Ramos explained that Ramirez's *Breakfast Tacos* "belongs to a series that explores how food, and the rituals surrounding it, can signify place, history, and personal identity." Texas is famous for celebrating its Mexican food, and breakfast tacos are at the top of the list. On a frequent basis the popular Texas magazines *Texas Monthly* or *Texas Highways* give tacos ample attention.



Chuck Ramirez, "Breakfast Tacos." Courtesy of Ruiz-Healy Art. San Antonio & New York City.

Ramirez's photograph "Breakfast Tacos" was unique in that he featured the left-overs of a meal, the aftermath of a taco plate next to spilled hot sauce and the discarded aluminum foil that had kept the tacos warm. It was not a pretty picture and was not meant to be. Ramirez believed that ritual consumption was as important as appearance. Ramirez was fascinated by the leftovers of a sumptuous meal, one that included left-over coffee, tea, beer, and ashtrays filled with spent cigarettes.

Ramirez left a large body of work in his estate which is handled by Ruiz-Healy Art, and we can expect many future inclusions of his art in major shows. Like Andy Warhol, one of Ramirez's heroes, Chuck Ramirez left us too soon. But his art lives on. We can be certain that his persona will appear in one of the many San Antonio altars prepared for the upcoming Day of The Dead celebrations at the end of this October. The altars remind us of those we loved and admired who remain with us in spirit and memory.