

ARTS & CULTURE

Art is the drug for S.A.'s Jesse Amado

By Elda Silva | May 5, 2015 | Updated: May 5, 2015 3:51pm

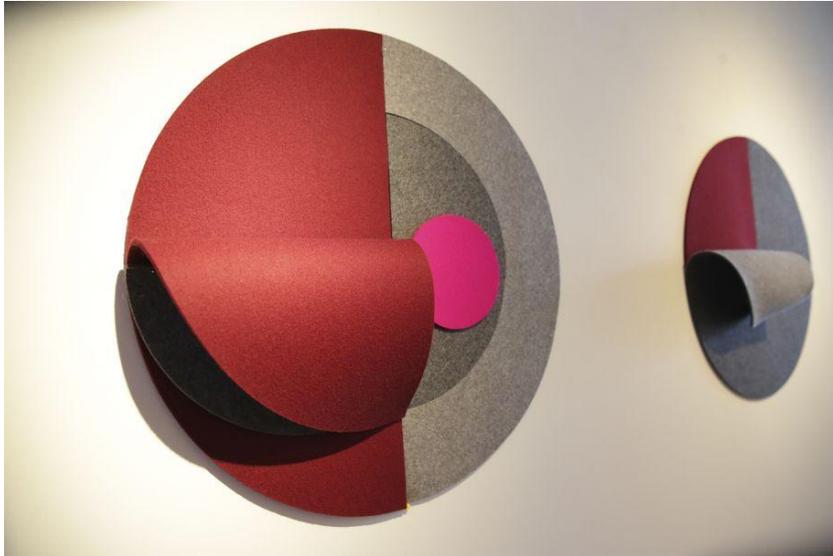


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Jesse Amado shows his artwork inspired by personal experience with illness and prescription drugs on April 30, 2015.

Artist Jesse Amado went to see his dentist with what he thought was a toothache. It turned out to be Stage 4 oral cavity cancer.

At the time, he was working on “Days,” an installation composed of thousands of suspended glass teardrops commemorating the life of Linda Pace. The influential arts patron and artist had died more than two years before from a different form of cancer.

“So that was ironic as hell,” said Amado, a slim figure who speaks in a cool, detached tone. That was five years ago. With his cancer in remission, Amado, a conceptual artist inclined toward sensual minimalism, has emerged from a self-imposed sabbatical with a new body of work. Currently on display at Ruiz-Healy Art, “30 Day Rx” features pill-shaped felt wool cutouts in a range of lush colors and artful arrangements of the textile remnants. The works were sparked in part by Amado’s experience with illness and prescription drugs.

“One of the things that’s going on here with me is that I get to see the output of that five-year period after going through that, and then coming out on the other side,” said Amado, who worked for the San Antonio Fire Department until 2002. Installed in orderly columns and rows, the circular cutouts, or “tablets” as Amado refers to them, both satisfy the unconscious craving for symmetry and challenge the mind to detect a pattern in the shift and play of colors.

Gallerist Patricia Ruiz-Healy sees the work as a powerful combination of what Duchamp referred to as “retinal pleasure” and conceptual heft.

“Anybody can love this kind of work because of the colors,” she said. “Then it’s so perfect because of all the conceptual work behind it — illness, pharmaceuticals, what medicines can do on the positive and also on the negative side.”

The majority of the circular cutouts are flat, but some take on dimension, sprouting round or cylindrical nodules. Others have partly detached layers that jut out, lolling heavily like tongues. While Amado knows firsthand the benefits of medication in treating disease, he also is skeptical of over-reliance on pharmaceuticals, in particular antidepressants.

“My modest proposal is that instead of pharmaceuticals, antidepressants, Prozac Nation, one can look at my work and feel pretty good,” Amado said. “It’s an alternative to pharmaceuticals, because they exist — those alternatives — and sometimes they work pretty good.”

A San Antonio native, Amado, who is in his early ’60s, grew up on Mission Street on the South Side, “just on the other side of King William.” In high school, he planned to become an architect and interned with O’Neil Ford, but after a rocky senior year, he enlisted in the Navy instead. After four years away, Amado returned to Texas and earned a bachelor’s degree in English from the University of Texas at Austin, followed by a bachelor’s degree and a master’s degree in fine arts from UTSA.

Until recently, he divided his time between San Antonio and New York. He would spend three months at a time in New York, taking long walks and soaking up the culture, then return to his studio here.

“I would conceptualize, have my flâneur experiences in New York, and then come back here and execute work, spending two months just doing that,” he said.

Last year, however, he moved back to San Antonio full time.

“I’m back,” he said, pausing a moment before adding, “where the heart is.”

Amado began working on the cutouts about a year and a half ago after taking a three-year break from making art to focus on his health. During that time, he gave up his studio.

“Twenty-five plus years, I had a studio and I would go to it 10-12 hours and that was it,” he said. “Now I’m co-mingling, cohabiting with the work.”

As Amado worked on the cutouts in his Government Hill home, swaths of leftover fabric started piling up on the floor. He put a nail in a wall and began hanging them up. Carefully layered and intertwined, the pieces became what Amado calls “consequences.”

Earlier this year, Amado exhibited other works from the series in “Confections and Fictions,” an exhibit at the Southwest School of Art.

Visible pins stuck in some of the works are a quiet nod to Matisse, whose paper cutouts were “very influential” to this body of work, Amado said. Matisse, who who was bedridden when he created what are referred to as his “late works,” would have an assistant tack the pieces on a wall.

Asked if he thinks of these pieces as his own “late works,” Amado laughed. “I don’t know. Maybe, maybe, maybe,” he said. “I’ve seen it so much working for the fire department — just mortality. There’s a lot of mortality behind these, wanting to somehow survive so I can get this done.”

“30 Day Rx” continues through June 6 at Ruiz-Healy Art, 201-A E. Olmos Drive, 210-804-2219, www.ruizhealyart.com.

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