



SAN ANTONIO CURRENT | 11/10/2010

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## Rocket Man

San Antonio gets a little darker

by Sarah Fisch



"Proximité," 2009, digital inkjet, courtesy of David Shelton Gallery.

"He'd probably deny it if you asked him," says Patricia Marcus, sister of the late, great Chuck Ramirez, "But Chuck played the trombone in high school."

Among many of Chuck Ramirez's remarkable qualities was the power to generate constant surprise, up to and including his fatal bicycle accident so close to home on Friday night. Chuck Ramirez was a deeply ingenious and groundbreaking contemporary artist, a finely-tuned designer so original that to call his taste impeccable makes his sensibility seem too staid. He was a good neighbor, a civic-minded native son, a partier par excellence. He dressed nattily, spoke wittily, cooked brilliantly, travelled the world, spread love as devoted friend, beloved son, brother, and uncle ... and, for a brief and shining teenaged moment, played the trombone.

"He took it up because our grandfather, Albert Ramirez, played trombone with Duke Ellington's band," Marcus said. "We used to hear stories about all these glamorous Manhattan parties..."



Now that sounds like the Chuck Ramirez the San Anto art community knows. But it also demonstrates his willingness, even as a high schooler, to not only aspire for greatness, but also to really have a crack at it. Like all of us, Chuck Ramirez synthesizes family history and childhood memory, pleasures of the moment and the aching possibility of forever. Like very few, he managed to engineer this, graphically, over and over.

We're all lucky he moved on from the brass section and into his own world of artmaking; as a photographer, he produced eye-popping and unforgettable images. Stuffed trashbags grotesque and nearly menacing in their lumpen, gleaming blackness, or pastel-colored empty shopping bags filmy and graceful as sea creatures. Cleverly packed suitcases, each evoking narratives dense and colorful as good novels, battered piñatas at once slapstick and melancholy, dying flowers of sad stark lushness, everything shot in detail-exhuming brightness, clinical focus, recalling his bright blue-eyed gaze, sharp as a laser.

"He got the dying flowers idea from the corridors at the hospital where my grandmother was staying," Marcus said. "We'd pass these empty rooms with abandoned flower arrangements, and he'd

Front window of Sala Diaz.



Sidewalk sketch of Chuck Ramirez by Jeremiah Teutsch



Bryan Rindfuss



Photograph from Lost and Found public art project at

always say, "That's not trash, that's somebody's treasure."

Chuck Ramirez got dealt a bad hand, but he played the hell out of it; he was courageously open about his HIV-positive status for years before it became acceptable — or treatable. After recovering from open-heart surgery to correct an enlarged aorta in 2008, he told friends that he was already 15 years older than he ever expected to be. His mortality was no abstraction. For Chuck, death was a motivator, a commentator, a constant, something to make fun of, a background noise to be muffled with food and friends and laughter, but he never kidded himself. He knew time is short. He knew he was lucky.

But he leaves us a legacy he designed himself, and it isn't even done yet. We've yet to see the in-progress design enhancements he was working on for the University Health System, which he meant as a balm and a mood lifter for patients, visitors, and staff in two medical facilities where he himself had been treated. He wanted to do a larger version of last year's Christmas Tree sale installation at Three Walls, and efforts are underway to stage it in his honor. His great friend and landlord Mike Casey has announced he will keep Chuck Ramirez's house intact as a permanent art installation and accommodation for visiting Sala Diaz artists. (See author's note below.)

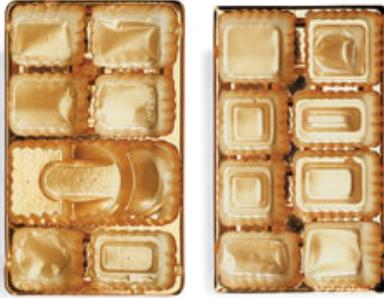
His family, too, carries powerful Chuckitude onwards into the future. His 9-year-old nephew, Christopher, writes and draws. A few weeks ago, Chuck spent a couple of hours with him, going over his work, and expressing to Christopher "how happy and proud he was of him and his creativity," Marcus said. Her other son, 13-year-old Stephen, rang in his Bar Mitzvah this year amid Chuck Ramirez-designed invitations, decorations, and t-shirts, because "Chuck wanted to make it beautiful."

The family is a quiet, private one, Marcus said, but they've been "so deeply touched by this outpouring by the art community — this is the first time we've really seen how larger-than-life he was, how loved, face to face, and we're so grateful, especially to Ethel [Shipton] and Henry [Estrada]," Chuck's close friends and co-coordinators of the memorial events. She describes her older brother as "an ornery, demanding, flamboyant, hilarious kid who always wanted his own way," and loves that he broke free of corporate work (designing for H-E-B) to "live exactly how he wanted to live. It was so brave ... I think I did that vicariously through him, a little bit."

A memorial bike ride has been organized to gather at Sala Diaz tomorrow (Thursday, Nov. 11) at 6 p.m., and participants will ride together to the Blue Star Arts Complex (wear helmets, please). The official memorial service will take place at Blue Star at 6:30 p.m., and will be conducted outside, so that as darkness falls there's space to hold us all together. •

### **Bike procession to Chuck's Memorial Service 6pm**

the San Antonio International Airport, 2008.



"Double Chocolate," 2005, digital inkjet, special 10th anniversary commission by Artpace.

**Sala Diaz**  
**517 Stieren**

**Memorial Service for Chuck Ramirez, 1962-2010**  
**6:30pm**

**The parking lot at Blue Star Arts Complex. Enter from Probandt Street next to Big Tex Granary and across from La Tuna. Valet parking will be available. Bring objects or images for an ofrenda honoring Chuck that is being coordinated by Andy Benavides and Blue Star. Items may be dropped off Thursday, Friday, and Saturday. The ofrenda will be on display through the next week for "Arts and Eats" Nov 17.**

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