



The reaction to artist's death was illuminating

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For all of last week, San Antonio's contemporary art family — a close web of several thousand people — mourned the loss of artist and supernova Chuck Ramirez in passionate, artful ways that reveal as much about the community as they do about Chuck.

Five hours after Chuck died from injuries suffered when he flew over the handlebars of his bicycle, hundreds gathered at the compound on Stieren Street in Southtown where Chuck lived. People just came. Food — lots of it — appeared. A bonfire was lit; the community was ignited.

In every city, contemporary artists play important roles: They reflect daily life in ways that show us what is overlooked; they move us emotionally; they inspire change. But on the night he died, I began to see why Chuck made such a singular impact in San Antonio. It's because the local art scene isn't insular, but rather community-based and open-minded.

Chuck was at the center of the web. He had the tender ability to bring people together through his art, strong opinions, a deep sense of caring and risk-taking. His small house was the living room to a million people.

Far from the stereotype of artists as eccentrics confined to studios, Chuck was everywhere at once in San Antonio, and everything he did was for keeps.

He was on the board of Blue Star Contemporary Art Center. Luminaria might not have happened without him. He raised money for the Artist Foundation of San Antonio. His public works are at the McNay, the San Antonio Museum of Art and San Antonio International Airport.

In the wake of his death, a flurry of change occurred in the community. An altar appeared at the corner of St. Mary's and Stieren, the site of Chuck's accident. Because he wasn't wearing protective gear, a wear-bike-helmets movement immediately swept through Southtown. Within three days, his art friends, with little money, transformed Blue Star into the site of a memorial that was fit for a rock star. More than 1,000 came.

Walking through Blue Star's gallery, I saw Chuck's work in new ways. Previously, I'd seen the beautiful photographs with their stark white backgrounds as information-loaded portraiture. The table filled with dirty dishes, evidence of a joyful, rowdy feast. The inside of individual women's purses, revealing all they carried. The broken piñata, its graces strewn.

Kathryn Kanjo, former director of Artpace, told me she thinks of all of Chuck's work as *amemento mori* — a

Latin phrase that means “Remember your mortality.” I think she's right. In San Antonio, we are surrounded by these reminders — obvious ones such as skulls during Day of the Dead, and the less-obvious ones such as Chuck's artful use of dying flowers.

Perhaps because he'd cheated death twice — living with HIV for years and surviving open-heart surgery — Chuck not only remembered his mortality but transcended it.

After all, a work by Picasso is always a Picasso. And a work by Chuck Ramirez will always be a Chuck Ramirez.

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