

Chuck Ramirez: All This and Heaven Too

McNay Art Museum's latest exhibit showcases career of San Antonio artist

BY KATHLEEN PETTY



DIA DE LOS MUERTOS, 2003 SEVEN DAYS SERIES COPYRIGHT ESTATE OF CHUCK RAMIREZ, COURTESY OF RUIZ-HEALY ART, SAN ANTONIO, TEXAS

For San Antonio artist Chuck Ramirez, the beauty of the world was often found in simple objects. Whether colorful plastic grocery bags, the interior of a handbag or a bouquet of flowers left behind at the hospital, Ramirez used his art to comment on pop culture and consumerism while also pointing out the elegance of the everyday. A survey of his career, which spanned from 1995 to 2010 when he died following a cycling accident in Southtown, goes on display in *Chuck Ramirez: All This and Heaven Too*, opening Thursday, Sept. 14 at the McNay Art Museum.

“It was important to translate the emotional quality of his work,” says René Paul Barilleaux, head of curatorial affairs, who organized the exhibition with the help of Hilary Schroeder, the Semmes Foundation intern in museum studies.

Barilleaux says many in San Antonio know of Ramirez’s photography-based art works, which included portraits of objects on white backgrounds. Less well known is that he also created video installations, glass pieces and even artfully designed Christmas trees. Before launching his art career with an exhibition in 1995, Ramirez worked as a graphic designer, first for Frost Bros. and later H-E-B.

The McNay exhibition is broken into what Barilleaux describes as four chapters. In the first, guests will see nine Christmas trees that Ramirez created for Linda Pace’s personal residence after she saw a similar display he made for the window gallery at Artpace San Antonio. “They are very joyful,” Barilleaux says, adding that the exhibition closes on a darker, more introspective tone.

The first chapter also includes a series of photos that depict details in the kitchen at Ramirez’s grandmother’s home. Schroeder says Ramirez was close with his grandmother and that she provided him a connection to the Latin American heritage of his father’s family.

In the second chapter, visitors will see several of the object-based photos that Ramirez is best known for. On one wall, Ramirez captures what bouquets of flowers look like after they’re left behind at the hospital. On first glance, they’re beautiful and vibrant. But on closer inspection, says Schroeder, it’s apparent that the petals are starting to turn and that the decorative greenery is beginning to wilt. “He reminds us of our own mortality and effervescence,” she says.

The second section also includes two pieces of glass that were created for a University Health System chapel—the last pieces that Ramirez worked on before his death.

The third chapter is a complete recreation of *Bean and Cheese*, the artist-in-residence exhibition that Ramirez created while participating in the residency program at Artpace in 2002. Barilleaux says they measured Artpace’s gallery and built walls in the exhibition hall to replicate that space. Art in this section is displayed without titles or explanation in the same manner it was presented at Artpace 15 years ago.

Throughout the exhibition, Barilleaux says they present vignettes of Ramirez’s catalogue of work, hoping to show a glimpse of every side of his art. In the fourth section, however, they decided to display all 45 shopping bag portraits that were included in what became Ramirez’s last-ever photo series. “Seeing them all together, you come to appreciate the very subtle beauty of what was once trash,” Schroeder says.

The fourth and final area of the exhibition also includes a 1998 print series inspired by rubber wrestler toys and a video installation that was created for Artpace. The two works are examples of how Ramirez was impacted by his HIV diagnosis, Schroeder says, and give a glimpse of how he was struggling to balance the disease with his desire to still live life to the fullest. “Life is always happening. We’re always headed toward our own mortality,” Schroeder says. “But it’s beautiful.”

In conjunction with the McNay exhibition, which is on display through Jan. 14, 2018, Ruiz-Healy Art is presenting *Chuck in Context*, an exhibit that focuses on his text-based works. It will be open for viewing Sept. 14-Oct. 14.

Fact File

Chuck Ramirez: All This and Heaven Too

Sept. 14-Jan. 14

McNay Art Museum, 6000 N. New Braunfels Ave., mcnayart.org

Four Events to Attend

Sept. 14: Second Thursday

Sept. 21: Evening for Educators: Things that Surround Us

Oct. 26: Exhibition talk and Get Reel film series

Nov. 5: Free Family Day: Dia de Chuck