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ARTS

Ramirez retrospective includes stunning, if not the artist's best, works

By **Scott Andrews**

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Of the four shows at Blue Star Contemporary Art Center that mark Fotoseptiembre this year, no doubt the most anticipated is "Minimally Baroque," a retrospective of the strangely affecting photography of Chuck Ramirez, the much beloved local artist who died last November in a bicycle accident. Beginning in the mid-1990s, Ramirez took the skills that he used to design catalogues and product labels to transform objects from beyond the periphery of consumer desire — worn-out dust brooms, wilting flower arrangements — into chic, radiant images. Ramirez was a master of rasquachismo, art that elevates the simple, often cast-off remnants of everyday life to high art status. He faithfully depicted the undervalued bits of the local, but the art that resulted is far from vernacular.

The works selected by curator Victor Zamudio-Taylor for the Blue Star retrospective leave out some of Ramirez' most well-known pieces, such as his iconic photograph of a heart-shaped chocolate box liner, but instead offer a rare view of Ramirez' method of working in sequences, presenting several almost-complete collections of his most minimalist series.

The earliest work in the exhibition is Ramirez' 1996 Santos, arraying photographs of the seldom-seen bottoms of saint statuettes in a grid that the artist modeled after the opening sequence of the early 1970s television sitcom The Brady Bunch. The octagonal or oblong bases of each wood or clay figure give little evidence of their identity, but are accompanied with text that names the TV characters in Spanish. Another early work, 1997's Coconut series, also contains political comment. The three large digital prints show a sequence illustrating the insult, "brown on the outside but white on the inside." These two works serve as introduction to the larger series. Though he was HIV-positive and Latino, Ramirez' work does not choose sides in the culture wars, embracing instead an acute understanding of change, drifting identity, and the perilously transient nature of life.

In each photograph he depicts one object on a shadowless white background. Seen in multiple, both the formal and emotional qualities of the works are accentuated. 2007's Broom series lines the long back wall with images of much-used brooms found abandoned on the west coast of Mexico. Seen from afar, their broken tops of blue, yellow, and tawny hues seem so many blooms tossed by the wind.

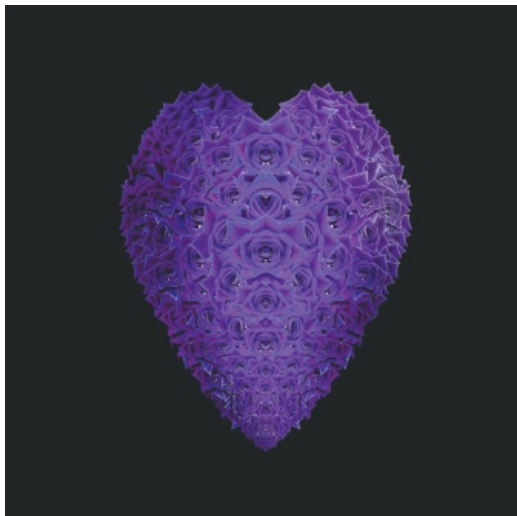
The Quarantine series of 2000 demands a closer view. The photos depict wilting flower arrangements, the cheap easily obtained sorts seen in passing the doorways of empty hospital rooms. The wilting blooms hint at a final removal, instead of regained health.

The 1998 Trash Bag series show brimming plastic garbage bags; some are black, their contents a



PHOTOS COURTESY BLUE STAR CONTEMPORARY ART

Chuck Ramirez, Trash Bag Series: Vegan



Carlos Betancourt, Of Kenya and Candies.



Debra Sugerman, Un Frenchie

mystery, they read instead as solid sculptural forms, while others are clear plastic, their titles, like Vegan, give clues to the vaguely revealed contents.

Constrained by the relatively small exhibition space, many important works by Ramirez are not included in the show. Noticeably missing are works like the frankly named Piñata series, and Seven Days, photographs that abandon the white

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FOTOSEPTIEMBRE: *River of No Return* by Laura McPhee

Series of monumental-sized photographs of the land and people of rural Idaho. This body of work explores a community's ideas about land use and human interchange with the natural world. Over a two-year period, McPhee used a 55-year-old Deardorff eight-by-ten viewfinder camera through Idaho's Sawtooth Valley, capturing images of the land and its inhabitants with breathtaking clarity and definition. Each photograph in the exhibit is a mammoth 6-by-8 feet, and each was produced using traditional wet process development and printing. McPhee's reliance on 19th and 20th century techniques in the age of digital photography echoes other concerns of hers, such as development vs preservation, and individual needs vs community needs. Located in Russell Hill Rogers Galleries, Navarro Campus.

Art in the Garden: "Texas Uprising - Selections from the Texas Sculpture Group"

New York-based Lilly Wei curates outdoor sculptures by Texas Sculptors Group members Roger Colombik, Stephen Daly, Kurt Dyrhaug, Lee Littlefield, Bert Long, Peter Mangan, Damian Priour, George Tobolowsky, and Hank Waddell.

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Serving soup, salads, fowl, veal, seafood, steak and chop.

Martha My Dear Knocked Lil' Wayne right off the #1 spot on iTunes. LIL WAYNE FANS CAN SUCK IT!!!!

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Marylou hmmm...

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Paul Harris This book sounds intriguing. As a tourist who was stuck in the dank Superdome I can't wait to check it out. Paul Harris Author, "Diary From the Dome, Reflections on Fear and Privilege During..."

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hidingblooms Take Two is over exaggerating. I worked for the company in the past, in multiple stores in the city. First of all, temps are there for one reason and that is to work "rush" a 3-4 week period, and...

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Sonja42 You and millions of other LEGAL CITIZENS are for any program that puts a STOP to any ILLEGAL coming into our country LEGALLY INCLUDING THE FEDERAL

background formula to present the remains of half-eaten dinners filling the photo wall to wall with color. Also missing are overtly sexual works, like Gap Santos, the companion piece to Santos, that displays young gay men photographed with the erotic abandon of arrow-impaled St. Sebastian. Fortunately, a catalogue edited by Anjali Gupta, former editor of the magazine Art Lies, accompanies the exhibition, containing images of many missing photographs, and stories by local artists and critics who knew Ramirez.

Regardless of the lapses, the show reveals an attitude of wit and rebellion. It takes great mastery of the art of drag to recast the homely garbage bag, bending it into a high art trophy.

Also on view at Blue Star are works by Rodolfo Chapereno, who was born in Mexico City and now lives in San Antonio. His early portraiture has been supplanted by abstract works, explorations in light that result in striations of color that he places on rondels and rectangular backings. His sources for these lushly minimal works are impossible to guess. A round, green photograph is a close-up of palm leaves. A similar red rondel was made with the aid of a twisted red T-shirt. Also on view is a video of flowing poly-chromed ribbons. It runs from dominant reds to greens and golds that scintillate seemingly forever, though the loop is only one minute long. The mechanics of his production are complex, bending light within the body of the camera, but the results rely on pure visual strengths and, yes, beauty.

Touching on Ramirez' focus on transience are photographs by SA artist Debra Sugerman, who photographed the rooms and abandoned contents of a house on Guenther Street across the river from Blue Star that had been shut-up for 35 years. A doll is seen head-down on the floor, empty stairways and parts of furniture are depicted in hazy light that evokes those decades of absence. The photographs are well apportioned and carefully constructed. But they are the stuff of nostalgia. These are someone else's memories, though that person has been gone for many years.

The most well-known artist in the group is Carlos Betancourt. Born in Puerto Rico, he moved to Miami Beach in 1981. His work has appeared in many collections in the U.S. and abroad, including the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York and the Miami Art Museum as well as appearing in art shows like ARCO and Art Basel. Known for his rambunctious tableau portraits that sometimes include dozens of subjects, his exhibit at Blue Star displays jewel-like composite images of flowers, and, being shown for the first time, a black and white 40-foot-long mural depicting animals and human figures massed in a procession, where zebras parse the foreground in dignity, while the middle ground and near distance are filled with tumult. •

Chuck Ramirez "Minimally Baroque"
Rodolfo Choperna "Recent Works"
Carlos Bentancourt "Archaic Substance"
Debra Sugerman "Looking Back; The Minutia Series continues"
 Free
 Tue-Sat 12pm-6pm, Thur 12pm-8pm
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