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ART

Open and Unpretentious, The Blue Star Art Center Shines in Texas

Claire Breukel November 1, 2011



Blue Star Contemporary Art Center, San Antonio (All photos by the author)

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Blue Star Contemporary Art Center, San Antonio (All photos by the author)

SAN ANTONIO, TEXAS — A Blue Star is, aside from the obvious, also the name of a 1984 [Indian military operation](#), a symbol found on [service flags](#) that denote a US service member fighting in a war and they are part of a system of highway markers honoring veterans, known as the [Blue Star Memorial Highway](#). In addition to these, there is a [Bluestar Entertainment](#) record label, a 1955 song with that name, an album titled “Blue Star” by the band [Levinhurst](#) and, finally, there is the Blue Star Contemporary Arts Center in San Antonio, Texas, named after the main street that once housed the Blue Star Grain Company.



Blue Star Art center entrance tribute to Chuck Ramirez.

The contemporary art center has been in existence since 1986 and it began with monthly art events that have turned into a four-roomed exhibition space and a monthly contemporary art walk ([CAM](#)) that collaborates with the local [McNay Museum](#) and most other San Antonio art spaces. With the legacy of being the longest standing contemporary art center in San Antonio comes a strong connection with its local arts community. The space has helped revitalize its surrounding neighborhoods, King William and South Town, and as a result its street corners have chic bars and restaurants though they maintain the eclectic “Old West meets Spanish colonial” look-and-feel typical of San Antonio. At the

advice of art collector and Blue Star board member Mike Casey I drive over to check it out.

The Art Center is in an unassuming complex. It is clear it has grown organically by the mismatched buildings that lend the center a sense of charm and sincerity. The entrance to the gallery space is lined with banners and a large wall hanging with the word “Chuck” woven into the center of a giant red heart.



Some of the objects in "Minimally Baroque"

The gallery’s current program is three exhibitions by four mid-career male artists. The main exhibition is a room of over-sized photographs depicting garbage bags, flower arrangements, coconuts and brooms. These are close up studies of mundane everyday objects. To the side of the room are museum cabinets filled with curiosities such a note pads, magazines, dated exhibition invitations and even a can of beans.

It becomes clear that these are remnants from an artist’s studio. Reading on I learn that 11 months prior artist Chuck Ramirez, a San Antonio local, was killed in a bicycle accident. The exhibition, *Minimally Baroque*, is a tribute to the artist and his practice in the hopes that it will inspire “curators and scholars to further investigate his oeuvre.”

What this oeuvre is exactly is not evident at first from the large-scale photographs alone — but it's clear the artist has had a big impact on the community. It seems Ramirez was HIV positive, and open about his status, which became a latent theme in his work.



Chuck Ramirez (Photo courtesy Blue Star Art Center)

When the show was at DePauw University earlier this year, the college website provided this context for *Deeply Superficial*:

“While earlier work investigated the complexity of Latino identity and visibility, queer politics and the AIDS crisis (Ramirez is an HIV+ gay male), in his more recent work, Ramirez resurrects waste — photographing such things as filled garbage bags, dying flowers, and battered, empty piñatas — reflecting on the fleeting nature of human existence while imposing the will to survive.”

An [article](#) in the San Antonio Current blog describes his work this way:

“Chuck Ramirez synthesizes family history and childhood memory, pleasures of the moment and the aching possibility of forever.”

The paradox of the exhibition title *Minimally Baroque* becomes more meaningful as a larger analogy for an artist whose work dealt with life and survival and who passed away in an instantaneous and unceremonious bicycle accident. It is sad and a bit ironic.



*Carlos Betancourt, "Of Kenya and Candies" (2010), wallpaper mural
(Photo by Author)*

I found another twist of irony in another of the exhibitions, this one by a friend of mine, artist [Carlos Betancourt](#).

A Miami-based artist, Betancourt makes work that is known for his brand of psychedelic and colorful collage of symbols and imagery associated with Miami Art Deco style and the color and iconography associated with his hometown of San Juan, Puerto Rico.

At Blue Star Art Center, his work has taken a new direction and his exhibition, [Archaic Substance](#), features a large black and white wall wrap — inspired by his recent trip to Kenya — that depicts zebra's in profile against the backdrop of silhouetted human figures, outlines of neon lights and an array of opulent jewels and accessories. The effect is a cultural kaleidoscope that brings together all the elements of Betancourt's cultural universe (Miami kitsch, Kenyan wildlife, Puerto Rican nature) to create a montage of curious cultural complexities that lends the work an element of refreshing flamboyant humor.



A detail of Betancourt's "Of Kenya and Candies"

Perhaps unintentionally these two exhibitions are layered, in two

different ways, with camp and its associated sense of irony and humor. It is refreshing to find this kind of unpretentious and open dialogue in an art space. It's wonderful to see that the Art Center can provide a welcoming space to celebrate Ramirez's life and art, while also allow an artist like Betancourt to explore new currents in his work. Without falling into any semblance of provincialism, these exhibitions are able to be sentimental and honest and I felt like I stepped into — and have been allowed to share — the currents of an artistic dialogue that is important for this community.

Chuck Ramirez's Minimally Baroque and Carlos Betancourt's Archaic Substance are on view at the [Blue Star Contemporary Art Center](#) (116 Blue Star, San Antonio, Texas) until November 6