



Chuck Ramirez, Seven Days series: Dia de los Muertos, 2004; digital Durst print; mounted on Plexiglas; 48 x 60 inches; edition 2 of 6; courtesy of Ruiz-Healy Art, San Antonio

## Chuck Ramirez In Memoriam

Frances Colpitt

San Antonio artist Chuck Ramirez (1962–2010) fell from the bicycle he loved to ride at night in his Southtown neighborhood, losing his life to this tragic accident a few hours later, on November 7. His death left a dark hole in the heart of the city’s famously familial local art community. With an outsized personality, a wry wit and a fun-loving and generous spirit, Ramirez was everyone’s friend.

Ramirez came to artmaking relatively late, in his early thirties. He had a successful career as a graphic designer, developing store-brand package designs for H.E.B. groceries for fourteen years, while working freelance on art-related projects such as exhibition catalogues and pro bono for Blue Star Art Center, to which he was passionately and tirelessly devoted. Drawing on his experience with selling food products, his first exhibited artworks were shrink-wrapped toys and knickknacks with printed labels, sold (out, as a matter of fact) at San Angel Folk Art Gallery in 1995. In one year, Ramirez made astounding progress, contributing the large-scale photographs in his *Santos* series to *Synthesis and Subversion: A Latino Direction in San Antonio Art* at the UTSA Art Gallery and Satellite Space (an exhibition I organized in 1996). Inkjet photographic prints of the bases of nine statuettes of saints arranged in a 6 ½-x-9-foot grid appropriated from the opening graphics of *The Brady Bunch* TV show were accompanied by life-size photographs of handsome young men posing like *santo* figures. With this work, Ramirez discovered his primary medium, photography, and one of the two subjects he would explore for the remainder of the 1990s, his identity as a Mexican-American raised and residing in an Anglo world. No work made the issue more clear than his *Coconut* exhibition at Sala Diaz in 1997, which, like *Synthesis and Subversion*, caused considerable controversy in San Antonio. Large photographs of single coconuts, whole or split in half to reveal the white meat inside the brown shell, were inspired by the racial slur “coconut,” which Ramirez tastefully skewered in this work. Resembling product photography, the sharp-focus image of the coconut is isolated at the center of a white, shadowless ground, a format he continued to use throughout his career.

*Long-Term Survivor*, at Artpace’s Hudson (Show)Room in 1999, explored another facet of Ramirez’s identity, his status as an HIV+ gay man. Rather than representing and thus objectifying or otherwise demeaning the queer body, Ramirez presented photographs of day-of-the-week pillboxes and empty leather chaps, long popular with a certain segment of the dance-club crowd. On three monitors mounted on a red wall, a video, *Dancing, No Cover*, depicted a simple silver ring (reminiscent of a wedding ring but identified as a cock ring) hypnotically spinning as if on a motorized turntable. Completing the

installation, a red, white and gold “holy” or prayer card offered the viewer a souvenir to take home. The card’s narrative text describes in short phrases a young man’s evening on the town, with an allusion to a sexual experience, and the ingredients and cost (\$13,200 annually) of his lifesaving AIDS cocktail. Spare, stylish and flirtatious, the exhibition acknowledged the significance of sexuality and seduction, even in the era of the epidemic. As Douglas Crimp explained in his analysis of the gay community’s campaign for safe sex, “Having adjusted our sex lives so as to protect ourselves and one another—we are now reclaiming our subjectivities, our communities, our culture . . . and our promiscuous love of sex.”<sup>1</sup> Drolly proclaiming “Spread peace, not AIDS,” Ramirez’s 2006 Artpace-commissioned banner for World AIDS Day features a drawing of a hand, index finger sheathed in a condom, forming the peace sign.

Ramirez’s photographic subjects are often “low” or common objects that are recast in high-culture style. In *Afghans* (2001) from the *Trash Bag* series, black and multicolored crocheted blankets—ironically, individually handcrafted yet generic—are partially concealed by a translucent white trash bag that neutralizes the loud colors and tames the frills. Similarly isolated on a white ground, the disposable plastic inserts from boxes of chocolates, ranging from Godiva’s symmetrical gold trays to the hodgepodge assortment of cavities of a Whitman’s Sampler, are transformed into expressive architectural structures. In 7-x-5-foot photographs, the diptych *Peas and Fruit Cocktail* (2002) depicts an allover field of the inexpensive, mass-produced foods, color-saturated and glistening jewel-like. Ramirez’s compositional formats are either structure- or texture-based. In the *Purse Portraits* (2005), friends’ handbags are depicted as more or less structured containers on a pristine background. Similarly shot from overhead, other subjects are spread edge-to-edge across a plane as a nonhierarchical, varicolored field of texture, exemplified by the splayed still lifes of party remains in the *Seven Days* series (2004). Both formats impose a veneer of good taste on an often pedestrian or déclassé subject matter. Evoking a sense of taste, the imagery of food, drink and candy could have been mouthwatering but Ramirez was more concerned with conveying a sensibility—a style and a lifestyle—than a perceptual sense.

According to Clement Greenberg, a critic who considered himself an arbiter of good taste, “Things that purport to be art do not function, do not exist, as art until they are experienced through taste.”<sup>2</sup> The tastefulness of Ramirez’s style—the ascetic white grounds, the decorative and sensual restraint and high production values—elevates his pictures to the level of art and distinguishes them from advertising (as do other practical distinctions, such as the absence of a product, other than the work itself, to sell). Ramirez’s career trajectory mirrors that of Warhol, Lichtenstein, Rosenquist and Ruscha, who were commercial artists before devoting themselves to “fine” art. Importing commercial imagery and the hard, graphic style of advertising into their paintings in the early ’60s, Pop artists challenged the good taste then represented by avant-garde painting. As Hilton Kramer saw it, in a 1963 roundtable on the new movement of Pop, “Its social effect is simply to reconcile us to a world of commodities, banalities, and vulgarities—which is to say an effect indistinguishable from advertising art.”<sup>3</sup> The new taste for low subject matter quickly developed into the phenomenon of “camp,” which Susan Sontag identified as a “way of seeing the world as an aesthetic phenomenon.”<sup>4</sup> Often identified as a gay sensibility, camp is a taste for artifice and exaggeration, an interest in form at the expense of content. Although Ramirez’s circle in San Antonio included some artists who veered close to a camp sensibility, he rarely did (an exception is the video *Nate Mutation*, 1998, which digitally doubles and alters the body of a buff go-go dancer).

Politically and morally engaged, Ramirez’s work is characterized by restraint in style and subject. In *Whataburger* (2002), the familiar orange-and-white striped Whataburger soda cup is greatly enlarged and isolated in the center of Ramirez’s spotless white field. The cup is turned to reveal the burger chain’s anti-litter message, “When I am empty please dispose of me properly,” a poignant last request.

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1. Douglas Crimp, "How to Have Promiscuity in an Epidemic," *October*, no. 43 (Winter 1987): 252–53, 270.
2. Clement Greenberg, "Avant-Garde Attitudes: New Art in the Sixties," in *The Collected Essays and Criticism: Modernism with a Vengeance, 1957–1969*, ed. John O'Brian (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993), 293.
3. Hilton Kramer, in Peter Selz, "A Pop Symposium," *Arts Magazine* 37 (April 1963): 38–39. The other participants were Dore Ashton, Leo Steinberg, Stanley Kunitz, and Henry Geldzahler, the only critic who saw any lasting value in pop art at the time.
4. Susan Sontag, "Notes on Camp," in *Against Interpretation and Other Essays* (New York: Picador, 2001), 279.