

ARTSLANT

The Slant

Art Destination: Why San Antonio Deserves More Attention

by Claudia Arozqueta

This past September, I did a curatorial residency at Casa Chuck in San Antonio, Texas. This was not my first time there (years before I curated an exhibition for the [Contemporary Art Month](#)) but, as it always happens when you are installing a show, I barely poked my nose out of the gallery. Happily, during this second visit I had the time to experience the best of San Antonio's arts community. San Antonio has a diverse, vibrant, and welcoming art scene that gets together in ever-fluxing arts initiatives and established spaces. In this city—the seventh largest in the United States—the scene is unpretentious, very relaxed, and largely community-based.



View of Sala Diaz, Casa Chuck backyard by Thomas Cummins, 2011

One of the iconic places where the arts community has gathered for years is the home of the late artist Chuck Ramirez (1962-2010), a central figure in San Antonio's art scene. His house is an artwork in itself. Curios and artwork, hung salon-style, surround you with humor and vibrant swaths of colors—a baroque installation in which Mexican folk art melds with Texas heritage, mirroring San Antonio's contemporary culture. Thanks to the support of arts patron and former landlord Mike Casey and Ramirez' estate, this home continues to function as a site of social connectivity, hosting frequent community gatherings and out-of-town guests, as well as an annual international residency program for arts writers and curators like myself. [Sala Diaz](#), the adjacent nonprofit grassroots gallery, helms [Casa Chuck](#). Founded in 1995 by artist Alejandro Diaz, the esteemed yet unpretentious artist-run space has cultivated an experimental exhibition program over the last twenty years, promoting both emerging and established national and

international artists. Located in the Southtown Arts District, Sala Diaz is a compulsory stop to view art, meet local creatives and gain an understanding of what is happening in the overall scene—all while drinking a cold Lone Star.



Installation view of Alejandro Diaz's "It Takes a Village" at SPACE, 2015

Not too far from Sala Diaz is [SPACE](#), a warehouse-style gallery, which exhibits the extensive collection of the late philanthropist and artist Linda Pace (1945-2007). When I visited, Alejandro Diaz' exhibition *It Takes a Village* was on view. It is an eclectic show permeated with humor, with works engaging Mexican folk art, activism, social critique and references to art history. *Muebles* (2015), for instance, is a conspicuous critique on the commodification of labor and ethnic stereotypes through a series of cast-resin furniture created in the shape of migrant workers' bodies, which clearly reference and mimic Allen Jones' female-shaped sculptures.



Installation view of Cruz Ortiz's Snake Hawk Press Pop-up at Artpace, 2015

Linda Pace Foundation also supports the operation of Artpace, a pivotal contemporary arts organization, in the city in operation since 1995, with an active residency and exhibition program. Each year nine artists—one international, one national, and one Texas-based—are invited to live, work and produce a new project on site. The list of past participants include international recognized artists such as Felix Gonzalez-Torres and Maurizio Cattelan, as well as established San Antonio artists like Franco Mondini-Ruiz and Dario Robleto. Current residents are Cally Spooner, Marie Lorenz, and Larry Bamburg.



Installation view of Joey Fauerso's Drawing Battles (2015) in Narrative Axis at Blue Star Contemporary, 2015

But it is the [Blue Star Complex](#), a group of repurposed industrial warehouses in nearby Southtown that serves as the main platform for local artists to exhibit their work. The [Blue Star Contemporary Museum](#), founded in 1986 as the first nonprofit venue dedicated exclusively to contemporary art in San Antonio functions as a hub, with an active and open exhibition program that fosters community ties and nurtures the development of innovative local art. Surrounding this venue are studios and artist-run spaces, which attract diverse audiences and give character to the compound. [Hello Studio](#) is a small artist-run space focused on promoting emerging artists from San Antonio and Austin. Fl!ght is a multidisciplinary gallery run by artists Justin Parr and Ed Saavedra, supporting national and international artists, musicians, etc. Currently on show is San Antonio-based Stuart Allen's *Distortions*, which features two series of graceful watercolor-like photographs exploring the abstract effects of daylight transduced through soap bubbles and pieces of glass.



Installation view of Stuart Allen's Distortions at Fl!ght, 2015

A few miles away is the South Flores district, another vital corner dedicated to the promotion and display of San Antonio's creative community through exhibiting spaces like [R Space](#), which focuses primarily on young Latino artists, and nearby [Gravelmouth](#), which displays a discernable bias towards street culture. As with most artist-run initiatives in the city, art is for sale but with little or no commission depending on the gallery or organization, but the vibrancy of San Antonio's art is not measured in dollar amounts. Contrary to the profit-driven art world that exploits trends and drives art production, in this grassroots scene, market forces don't play a big role; ergo, few commercial galleries can be found.



Installation view of Jessie Amado's *30 Day Rx* at Ruiz-Healy Art, 2015

One of the foremost is [Ruiz-Healy Art](#), founded in 2004 by Mexican-born art historian Patricia Ruiz-Healy, representing established Texas and Latin American artists working in a variety of media, such as Chuck Ramirez, Jesse Amado, and Graciela Iturbide.



Installation view of Lisa Qualls's *A Collection of Silence* at French & Michigan, 2015

Lawrence Markey, a gallery that started in the early 1990s in New York and moved to San Antonio in 2005, exhibits the work of mostly Minimal and Abstract mid-career and historical artists from the 1960s and 70s, such as Jo Baer and Fred Sandback. French & Michigan is a relatively new gallery and workshop dedicated to strengthening collaborative ties between art, design and architecture. The gallery presents a program of four exhibitions per year, publishing gracefully designed catalogues for each show, which promote the work of regional artists.

Big not-for-profits, artist-run-spaces and small commercial galleries, plus a healthy amount of public art projects in the works, all help art thrive in this city. With a solid exhibition circuit and diverse production and practices, what would be a real boon for San Antonio artists would be for their work to transcend geographic boundaries and engender much needed critical dialogue. But this would require understanding, in order not to jeopardize the best of San Antonio art scene: its supportive community and non-market-driven production.

—Claudia Arozqueta