ARTS & CULTURE

Jesse Amado: Quiet Observer of Changing Times

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Artist Jesse Amado in front of his piece "Thithering" 2016, at S.M.A.R.T. Project Space in San Antonio. Photo by David S. Rubin.

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The latest exhibition by Jesse Amado, a San Antonio-based artist, opens on Saturday, March 12 at SMART Project Space (http://smartsa.org/SMART/Welcome.html), 1906 S. Flores St., in Southtown The Arts District.

When Amado began his career as an artist in the early 1990s, he was a big fan of Minimalism, which he still admires to this day. Attracted to the clean shapes and industrial materials of sculptures by Donald Judd, and the simple geometric structure of paintings by artists such as Brice Marden, Amado began looking for different industrial materials that he could manipulate to form geometric paintings and sculptures.

Using industrial felt, which at the time was available in only black, white, or gray, Amado built the cone-shaped sculpture "To Circumspect "(1991) by layering individual sheets of black felt, folding them over to form the cone, and fastening them with a zipper.

For his wall work "Cry" (1994), he simulated the appearance of a Marden painting using latex as his material. He also made a move that would be sacrilege to a diehard Minimalist: he attached three crystal glass droplets to the surface, which can bring metaphor and emotion into the conversation.

"Cry," 1994, latex and glass on board. Photo courtesy of San Antonio Museum of Art.

As a Baby Boomer who listened to a lot of late '60s music, where philosophical or political messages were often embedded in lyrics by the Beatles, the Doors, the Jefferson Airplane, et. al., Amado was not content to let the form stand alone simply as "art for art's sake." In "To Circumspect," Amado refers in his subtle way to the mechanics of female sexuality, just as he explored male sexuality in a companion felt sculpture that is rod-shaped. In "Cry," the glass embellishments are representations of teardrops, in homage to the artist's father, whom Amado considers to have been his family's "crybaby."

Born in 1951 and raised in San Antonio, Amado has had an unconventional path for an artist. At the age of 17, he joined the Navy and ended up never going to Vietnam, but instead working on the East Coast as a communications operator. Upon leaving the Navy after five years of service, he lived briefly in Brooklyn and visited many of New York City's stellar art institutions.

An avid reader all of his life, Amado next returned to San Antonio but traveled to Austin to attend classes at the University of Texas at Austin, where he earned a BA in English in 1977. Although he first tried his hand at teaching in the San Antonio public school system, he was frustrated by students' general apathy towards literature. So, at the suggestion of a friend who was a fireman, Amado joined the fire department.

With the income he was then making, he was able to take art courses at San Antonio College, where he studied with Mel Casas. In the mid-80s, he enrolled in the art department at the University of Texas at San Antonio, where he earned BFA and MFA degrees in 1987 and 1990. He has been actively exhibiting ever since.

In 1995, Amado earned the distinction of being the first Texas artist selected for a residency at Artpace (http://www.artpace.org/), San Antonio's world-renowned laboratory for contemporary artists. Once again playing off of Minimalism, he chose a simple white cube — a bar of soap — as the starting point for creation of a complex installation, "White Floating", that was intended to get people thinking about the daily ritual of washing and the various connotations of different types cleansing.

As is his tendency, Amado gravitated to soap because of its inherent appeal to the senses through its tactility and fragrance. For the installation, he utilized his medium in a number of inventive formats that included a sculpture made by encasing a sink in a glass tank filled and refilled throughout the exhibition with soap and water that filtered through pipes into a trough on the floor.

Two elegant wall reliefs contained shelves upon which Amado placed used bars of soap that he personally washed with, joining them together like books, with bronze castings of a soap bar imprinted with the installation's title as bookends. In a simple and pristine floor sculpture, soap shavings occupied

the space between two sheets of glass, reminding us of that soap is indeed a precious and necessary material — what would we do without it?

He also paid homage to Joseph Beuys, the pioneering artist who coined the term "social sculpture," meaning that the purpose of sculpture should be to raise consciousness about issues relevant to society. As his tribute to Beuys, Amado filled a case that served as the left side of a diptych with a suit made of latex, a variation on Beuys' iconic "Felt Suit," a limited edition sculpture about felt's function as a provider of protection and warmth.

"To Circumspect," 1991, felt, metal zippers, produced at the Fabric Workshop, Philadelphia

A work that truly would have pleased Beuys, in that it beautifully fulfills his expectations of art, is Amado's 1999 sculpture "Me, We," which consists of two shipping pallets, one made of marble and the other of granite, that rest on the floor as a diptych. While referencing Minimalist art history through a formal affinity with Judd's sculptures and Carl Andre's floor installations of metal tiles, Amado succeeded masterfully here at veiling potent social content within seemingly simple forms.

When we ponder the materials, we should realize that shipping pallets are associated with the working class laborer who toils away from nine to five on a loading dock. So, by enshrining a tool of the workers in marble and granite, Amado quietly honors them.

At the same time, the division between black and white raises important questions about the various disparities, between Caucasians and the traditionally marginalized "others" (blacks, Latinos, women, the LGBTQ community), that have long existed in the workforce, as manifested in income inequality, racism, and classicism.

Although it is not self-evident from the sculpture itself, the work also has a rather interesting back story. The title "Me, We" is actually what Mohammad Ali said when responding to Harvard University students who during his speech to them, asked him to recite a poem. According to Amado, this two-word utterance is listed as the shortest poem ever in the "Guinness Book of Records".

Another area in which Amado has excelled over the years is in the arena of text art. Putting his undergraduate studies in English to good use, Amado's text-based works reveal his expertise at manipulating language, with some examples being downright playful, and others poetically profound.

For a series of digital prints created at San Antonio's Hare & Hound Press in 2001, Amado used a DYMO Labler, a once popular tool for making labels by embossing letters on vinyl tape, to punch out all of the subtitles from one of his favorite movies, Michelangelo Antonioni's "L'Avventura," and lyrics from the music of one of his favorite groups, U2. Inspired by these texts that are laden with themes of love and romance, Amado initially made frottage drawings done by rubbing over the embossed texts.

When he found that the vinyl tape began to coil and tangle, he recognized a sculptural potential in them, which led to making digital prints by photographing the coiled tape resting on glass. In "Love Letter with Song Lyrics," the pile of tape lies prone as a metaphor for the remains of an ended relationship, with visible phrases as reminders of the trials and tribulations of a romance gone bad, and an aura of red light alluding to matters of the heart.

"Love Letter with Song Lyrics," 2001, digital print, printed by Hare & Hound Press. Courtesy photo.

In "Fury of Love," Amado sandwiched the coiled tape between a love letter written by an ex-girlfriend at the beginning of their relationship and a letter he wrote about their involvement together after they had broken up.

Single words and short phrases have also provided impetus for Amado's sculptural wordplay. Seeking to challenge viewers, meeting us only halfway on our road to interpretation, Amado has created a number of works where a word or phrase is deliberately obscured by being only faintly visible or composed of letters that are stacked or clustered so closely together that it becomes impossible to decipher what is being spelled out.

In a 2006 series of wall reliefs made of white sponge stretched over wood, Amado once again references Minimalism — in this case to the white paintings of Robert Ryman — while presenting symbolically suggestive words such as "desire," "beauty," and "death" that appear like raised inscriptions on tombstones, which clouds their meanings in mystery and ultimately leaves interpretations ambiguous and open-ended.

In the recent sculpture, "Will Work for Free and Forever (Let's Provide Yves Klein Blue to Street Beggars)," (2015), Amado painted sculptural letters in one of his favorite colors, the visually seductive "Yves Klein blue" that was invented and popularized by the French artist (Klein) in the 1960s. A gorgeous and luminous hue, the color instantly draws us into the sculpture, yet we must sing for our supper like the laborer, the subject referred to in the phrase represented, as we struggle to decipher what we are seeing, which is ultimately revealed in the title.

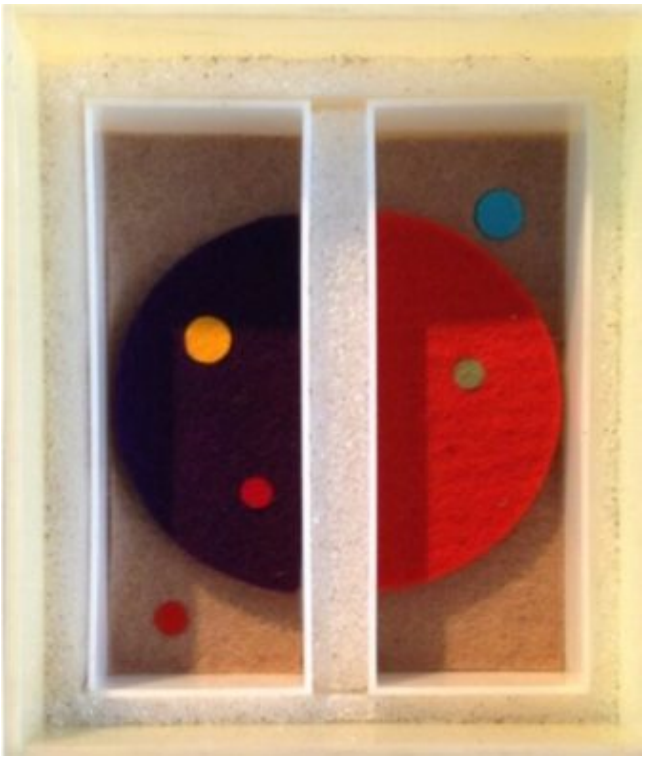
During the past decade, Beuys' influence has become even stronger in Amado's oeuvre, which includes numerous objects that invite us to reflect upon the American political zeitgeist, from the time of the George W. Bush administration to our current election cycle.

In the neon sculpture "Mission Accomplished, I Lied" (2008), the phrase "I LIED," embedded within the larger phrase "MISSION ACCOMPLISHED" flashes on and off repeatedly, which begs us to consider the Bush administration's hawkish agenda as well as their false claims regarding weapons of mass destruction. In "Hangman's Noose" (2008), Amado brings issues of racism to the forefront by placing ropes like those used for lynching atop a mirrored pedestal that reflects the viewer as if to say, "put yourself into the sculpture … are you the perpetrator or the victim of racism? Where do you stand on this issue?"

"Will Work for Free and Forever (Let's Provide Yves Klein Blue to Street Beggars)," 2015, p
mirror. Photo courtesy of Ruiz-Healy Art.

In another recent series, Amado has concentrated on one of the most heated topics of our current election cycle, the pharmaceutical industry. Returning to the material of industrial felt, which now comes in wide array of dazzling colors, the artist created small and large scale wall and floor works that call attention to the prevalence of prescription drug dependency in America. Inspired by the struggles of a friend who was hooked on antidepressants, the series uses Amado's characteristic seductive style to muse about how pills can control people's lives.

In "Time to Refill" (2014), the circles are shown in different colors and sizes, reflecting the actual nature of pills that are available, but also bringing to mind the fact that, in the American system, there are huge variances in what different drug and insurance companies charge for the very same pill.



"Time to Refill," 2014, Plexiglas, foam, virgin wool felt. Photo courtesy of Ruiz-Healy Art.

In "Consequences #4" (2015), the leftover fabric that remained after cutting out circles is used as an effective metaphor for the human unraveling — be it physical, mental, emotional, or economic — that can be the deleterious result of prescription drug dependency.

In "Thithering," Amado's new installation at SMART Project Space, the artist has used felt and found materials to create a chapel-like installation that examines the current state of American politics. For Amado, the term 'thithering' derives from the

phrase "hither, thither." It refers to moving away from something, in this case, from the political system as we have known it for years (hither) to one that is imploding with Donald Trump's legitimization of racism, misogyny, xenophobia (thither).

To represent this idea in the installation, Amado has placed a photo-collage at the entrance with references to Luis Buñuel's film "Terminating Angel," an absurdist indictment of the upper class. The dominant elements in the installation are a chair, placed in the center, and a wall triptych displayed like an altar on the wall opposite the chair.

Using a new material for him, *chicharones* or pork rinds, Amado refers to human flesh. On the chair, the *chicharones* are accompanied by wire coils that represent phallic protrusions, references to the male gaze and the dominance of men in American politics. In the triptych, the *chicharones* are shown with exposed nipples and accompanied by unraveling felt, calling attention to the victimization and abuse of women.

Behind the scenes, watching it all in a corner niche at the rear of the installation is a biomorphic abstraction that refers to the artist himself. Like many artists who throughout history have included their own images in their depictions of historical events, Amado emerges here as the observer, the thoughtful silent witness.

**Top image: Artist Jesse Amado in front of his piece "Thithering" 2016, at SMART Project Space in San Antonio. Photo by David S. Rubin.*

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