

ARTS SPACE

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Contemporary
Art Month in
sweat city



Chuck Ramirez collection at "San Antonio Collects," Blue Star Art Space

BY JOHN EWING

For San Antonio artists, July is the time to sweat — not just from the swelter of studios and warehouse galleries, but from the breakneck hustle and bustle of Contemporary Art Month (CAM). During its opening "First Friday" weekend, CAM hosted over 15 separate exhibits and events, turning a leisurely stroll through Southtown into a mad dash. By month's end, more than 300 artists had shown their work in over 75 venues across the city, from museums to hotel rooms.

This year, CAM's many permutations were linked by confidence in the art, the community, and the support systems that sustain artmaking over the long haul. But confidence doesn't always announce itself with flash and noise. It can be cool, quiet, and off the beaten path. Confidence shares the stage; it also takes risks. These qualities may not register in the first pass, but the careful viewer finds deep rewards.

The Southwest School of Art & Craft, for example, is one of the coolest places in town this summer. Its exhibition "Abstract Craft" offers a contemplative stroll through a quiet garden of exquisite shapes, materials, and textures. Like a scrimshawed ice-cube, this selection of local and national artists by director Paula Owen gives immediate refreshment. Elena Berriolo's fabric-covered wooden works and Mary Barringer's squat stoneware suggest the human body and its

postures. Mark Hansen's tall lozenges and Tom Lacagnina's grove of undulated wooden cones express what Hansen calls "essential forms" found in nature. As abstractions, these works hover between the objective, physical world and the subjective realm of human senses. As craft, they demonstrate an age-old affinity between natural materials and the imaginative, human hand.

Blue Star Art Space's "San Antonio Collects" is an art garden of a different variety. Culled from the collections of local patrons, the exhibition focuses on the big picture rather than individuals. It follows the lead of local collectors who confidently place San Antonio artists within the wider context of international contemporary art. The array of work by current international stars is dazzling: Cindy Sherman, Anish Kapoor, and Jonathan Borofsky, to name a few. Historical perspective is created with older works by James Vanderzee, René Magritte, and Joseph Beuys. Among these celebrated names, the works of 28 local artists fit seamlessly into a rich survey of contemporary art. The exhibition curators, Wendy Weil Atwell and Riley Robinson, have cleverly combined a satisfying art experience with a dose of education. They identify private collections as trade routes that carry ideas and history into and out of the community.

From large institutions to small galleries, many artists demonstrate a wide range of interests and techniques in painting, which continues to play an important role in San Antonio art cir-

cles. Larry Graeber at Rattlesnake and Star Gallery and Charles Field at the Center for Spirituality and the Arts confront representational subjects in different ways, but both do so with interesting complications of brushwork and color. Trish Lewandowsky at Foster/Freeman Gallery, Arthur Polendo at San Antonio College, and Eduardo Rodriguez at Joan Grona Gallery offer three radically different approaches to the surface, volumes, and implied spaces of abstract painting. At Finesilver Gallery, Lloyd Walsh is in a class by himself. His beautiful, disturbing depictions of mermaids and cigarette-smoking animals are exhibited in an inspired counterpoint with the obsessively frivolous architectural drawings of classic TV shows by L.A. artist Mark Bennett.

One of the ultimate tests of artistic confidence is the retrospective exhibition. Measuring durability, retrospectives gauge the development and cohesion of an artist's oeuvre over time, offering a bird's-eye view scaled to the power of the individual. This season, San Antonio honors César A. Martínez and David Zamora Casas; together, they artists cover a wide spectrum of contemporary painting and also manage to express the complex zeitgeist of San Antonio. At the McNay, Martínez's paintings are grouped in thematic and stylistic series. The incisive, no-frills compression of the "Serape" paintings finds its perfect, oracular guise in the stoics of his "Bato" series. At the Carver Center, the additive fervor of David Zamora Casas' lush dreamscapes evokes the South Texas

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crucible of race, sexuality, and history. Both artists have found stylistic analogs for intangible facets of culture.

Sculpture and installations complete the CAM snapshot of contemporary art. At the San Antonio Art League Museum, Anne Wallace's wooden orbs and sound environment mourn the ravages of Texas woodlands. At One9Zero6 Gallery, George Schroeder's forged-metal sculpture metamorphoses familiar tool shapes into tall, thin objects with bird-like grace. At Cactus Bra, Leigh Anne Lester's ingenious installation *form . . . er* transforms Japanese toothpicks into a wall-sized tree with shadows that shift dramatically under flashing spotlights.

Every act of artmaking involves some measure of risk, and risk-taking itself is characteristic of artistic confidence. Andréa Caillouet took a job at a local skating rink in order to create *Rollercade*, her mesmerizing and elliptical video installation at the UTSA Satellite Space. Ana de Portela pulled artists and musicians out to the nether reaches of Austin Highway for "Embracing Grandeur," a casual happening staged in rooms at the Seven Oaks Hotel. At Rose Amarillo, "Disenchantment" produced the unimaginable: artist Jesse Amado singing the Beatles' "Love, Love Me Do." And at ArtPace, "Some Other Narratives" brought together the controversial work of Kara Walker, Glenn Ligon, Pat Ward Williams, and Felix Gonzalez-Torres, who challenge depictions of race in a broad history of media.

Large and small, the diverse offerings of CAM '99 show an art community with a strong, steady pulse into 2000. Confidence, San Antonio style. ■