

Of cocktails and cockrings

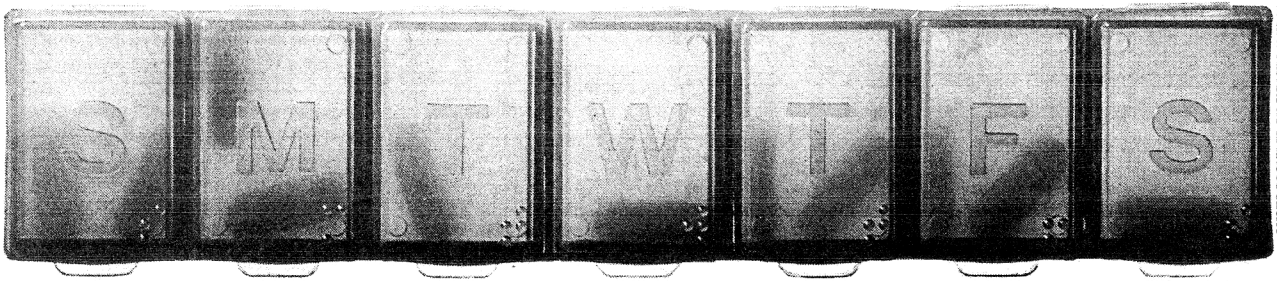


PHOTO PROVIDED BY CHUCK RAMIREZ

Cocktail, 40" x 26", digital durst print

Chuck Ramirez at ArtPace

BY JOHN EWING

Is there such a thing as a "gay sensibility?" Cultural critics have a field day with that question, ferreting through art and media for hidden indices of a specific point of view. But defining a cultural sensibility (gay, feminist, African-American, Chicano, or otherwise) is like building a house on shifting sand. Just when it starts to take shape, the culture changes, re-framing the paradigm or washing it away.

Whether one is inside or outside the "house" also determines cultural point of view. Take Matthew Bourne's recent Broadway staging of Tchaikovsky's *Swan Lake*. To some ballet purists, the beefy

Swan and all-male corps de ballet were radical, if not blasphemous, revisions. To gay fans of the homosexual composer, the new production unveiled a more authentic *Swan Lake*, startlingly obvious and long overdue.

Here at home, the work of San Antonio artist Chuck Ramirez offers another opportunity to define "gay sensibility" within a shifting landscape of multiple, cultural perspectives.

"Long-Term Survivor," a photography-based installation (shown recently at ArtPace's Hudson (Show)Room, addresses viewers inside and outside the gay experience. For example, the piece *Chaps* is composed of two digital ink-jet prints on paper; a photograph of a single, black leather chap is doubled and reversed. Deceptively simple, the mirrored pair suggests many things, including a lingering

pop-psyche attitude that stigmatizes homosexuality as pathological narcissism. Objects with a function, chaps conceal and protect, suggesting both the closet and the condom as additional symbols of the gay experience.

From cowboys to the gay leather scene, chaps also convey an evolving, although convoluted, "masculine sensibility." Like other pieces in the exhibit, Ramirez uses the images and the title to create a play on words, begging the question, "where are the chaps?" Despite a widening social tolerance of homosexuality, gay "invisibility" still persists. As articles of clothing, the chaps are stand-ins for human forms, making the lack or absence of the body a strong and disquieting "presence."

This model of interpretation applies to other portions of the exhibit. *Dancing, No Cover* presents three separate video images of a revolving,

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RE:VIEW

Chuck Ramirez,
"Long-Term Survivor"
WHERE: Hudson (Show)Room, ArtPace,
445 N. Main
WHEN: through April 10
INFO: 212-4900

Cocktail/cockring

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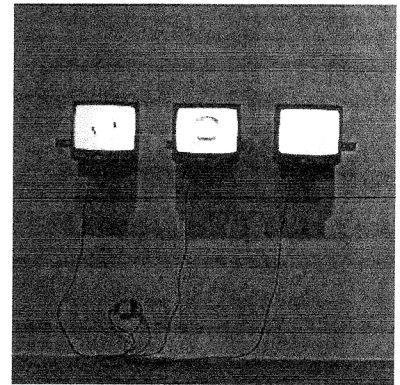
metal ring. As an art motif, the circle has symbolized many things, from the womb to the creation of the world. The metal ring as an object also suggests, to some viewers, a wedding ring or a cockring. Both are instruments of commitment. The first enforces state-sanctioned marriage vows, and the second artificially perpetuates a state of arousal. Like the title, these graceful, asynchronous videos invite multiple readings but privilege none.

In a similar vein, *Cocktail* is loaded with social references and is the most evocative piece in the exhibit. Monumental photographs of a plastic, day-of-the-week pillbox are repeated four times along a wall, the series beginning and ending mid-week. The opaque cavities are cocoons that harbor larvae-like capsules. In the context of AIDS, new combination "cocktail" therapies are changing the day-to-day experience of the epidemic as well as societal attitudes about the disease. Not quite a decade ago, art addressing the AIDS crisis was more often than not a memorial to the dead and dying (e.g. Felix Gonzalez-Torres' billboard of a slept-in but empty bed). Ramirez's *Cocktail* indicates a cultural change. This series of sturdy, architecture-like forms housing health-sustaining

medications has no beginning or end. Regardless of the medical uncertainty about protease inhibitors, *Cocktail* represents a spirit of confidence new to the cultural landscape. Even the punning title suggests something leisurely, a divertissement.

If we hazard an extrapolation from the work of one artist, it could be said that a "gay sensibility" contains a penchant for puns and a deft handling of visual symbolism. As a paradigm, this is not conclusive or convincing, for puns and symbols have characterized art making for centuries. If finding a specific point of view is the goal, one would fare better in the court of public opinion. For better or worse, the response to art often replaces a discussion of art. Just recall the federal charges of obscenity leveled against Cincinnati's Contemporary Arts Center for its Robert Mapplethorpe retrospective. Few critics will discuss Mapplethorpe's art without mentioning the controversy.

Depending on the perspective, one viewer will look at "Long-Term Survivor" and see the gay experience inscribed within stereotypes of deviance and disease. Another viewer will see graceful images of hope and personal endurance. Still others will identify with remnants of the closet and its cultural traditions of concealment. Lastly, there will be those who see nothing but photographs, all enigmatic and none particularly gay. Like beauty, meaning is also in the eye of the beholder. ■



Dancing, No Cover,
by Chuck Ramirez