

Fort-able art: cultural flux in Goliad

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BY JOHN EWING

Deep in the heart of mesquite-thick ranch land, Goliad is a town of 2,000, just southeast of San Antonio. Despite its quaint square and folksy demeanor, the town claims a tumultuous place in history, now celebrating its 250th anniversary with a year-long slate of events. As the third-oldest Spanish settlement in Texas, Goliad encompasses Mission Espíritu Santo and the fortification Presidio la Bahía. Constructed in 1749, the hotly contested fort witnessed territorial conflicts large and small, from petty skirmishes over cattle to the 1836 "Palm Sunday Massacre" of 342 Texas revolutionaries by Santa Anna's troops. While Mexico, Europe, and the United States made war

on a grand scale, the local convergence of Native-American, Tejano, Anglo, and African-American settlers formed a rich cultural mix that is still in flux today.

"Goliad: A Cultural Convergence" is an exhibition of contemporary art housed in the barracks and grassy quadrangle at Presidio la Bahía. True to its name and location, the exhibition has its own tale of conflict and ultimately successful convergence. Organized by Michael Manjarris, a sculptor from Bayside, Texas, the exhibition was originally proposed to the Beeville Art Museum. Invited to exhibit, Manjarris responded with a plan for a Cinco de Mayo celebration focusing on the area's multicultural heritage. According to Manjarris, the museum objected to the proposal and rescheduled the exhibit for the Fourth of

July. Disheartened, Manjarris pulled the project and began an anxious search for a new site.

It was over coffee at a Bayside cafe that a friend suggested Presidio la Bahía as a possible site. The Goliad rancher reminded Manjarris that General Ignacio Zaragoza, a hero in the struggle for Mexican independence, was born near the fort and is honored across South Texas on Cinco de Mayo for defeating the French at Puebla in 1862. Encouraged, Manjarris approached Lydia Lopez Friedmann at the Goliad County Office of Economic Development and Newton Warzecha, director of Presidio la Bahía for the Archdiocese of Victoria. Both supported the concept enthusiastically, and plans were again underway for a Cinco de Mayo opening and celebration. At the

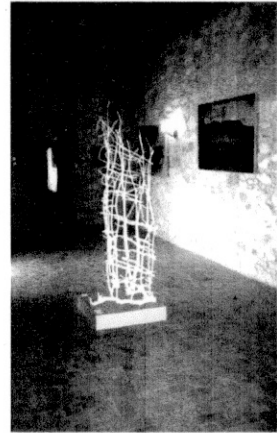
grand event, which included a street dance and festival, a local resident was overheard saying, "this is the first time in this community the whole town has danced together."

The art exhibit is symbolic of other "firsts." Stepping through heavy, wooden doors into the stonewalled quadrangle, viewers are vividly greeted by a "convergence" of cultural forms. In an area that once bivouacked soldiers, three large sculptures now inhabit the wide, grassy field dotted by maguey cactus. Made of cedar posts and steel, James Surls' *Walking Hatchet* is spiky and dynamic, seemingly at the ready to stride off across the South Texas landscape. Steve Lesser's *Tchoupi-toulas* is a squat, bronze, steel behemoth that echoes the pragmatism of the imposing, stone structures. In the courtyard

entrance to Our Lady of Loreto Chapel, Jesus Moroles' austere *Texas Shield* is comprised of two crescent-shaped hunks of Texas granite whose joint resembles the logs of a frontier cabin. In this setting, the piece reminds viewers that frontier homesteads were very often the spoils of war.

Inside the fort's barracks, visitors pass through an eclectic mix of styles and media, from photography and painting to wooden and cast-bronze sculpture. Of the 26 artists represented, Leticia Huerta, David Zamora Casas, Anne Wallace, Rolando Briseño, and Angel Rodríguez-Díaz hail from San Antonio. Originally, all of the artists were invited to participate with a larger space in mind. The result is too much of a good thing.

Cramped by the gallery-style presentation, the potential for a real dialogue between contemporary art and the 18th century structure is undercut. Manjarris' *Cojuetepeque*, for example, loses



the full effect it might have had as the sole object in the stone room. Inscribed in a block of limestone atop a metal stand, the title refers to the hometown of a Salvadoran boy, an undocumented immigrant who was recently found dead under a South Texas windmill. Outside the fort, Art Shirer's 140-piece *Remembrance* provides an ironic commentary on this difficult and complex part of the world. Next to the title plaque is another one in red that warns, "CAUTION: WATCH FOR SNAKES."

Some visitors will be as daunted by the exhibition as they are by the rough terrain. If art bridges the gap between experience and reflection, then South Texas is still wide open and uncharted, like a view from the Spanish fort. ■

"Goliad: A Cultural Convergence" runs through October 31. For more information and directions, call Presidio la Bahía at (361) 645-3752.

