

FOOD FETISH

MARCH 28 - APRIL 3, 2002 · SAN ANTONIO CURRENT

BY JOHN EWING
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Chuck Ramirez makes photographs. Big, glossy, colorful photographs, like the ones now on exhibit at ArtPace and Finesilver Gallery. The San Antonio artist considers himself a maker of objects, however, not a photographer.

"Bean & Cheese," the result of Ramirez' two-month residency at ArtPace, relies heavily on his expertise as a commercial artist working in the grocery business. The processing, packaging, and symbolism of food is a rich source for metaphor, and Ramirez taps it in diverse ways. A suite of enormous prints presents succulent cuts of beef (t-bone, rib eye, chuck roast) with lengua, sausage, and a chicken thrown in for good measure. Life-size against white backgrounds, the phalanx of meat is a sobering litany of consumption, made sordid and bizarre by the sheer beauty of the images. Elsewhere, shiny green peas and fruit cocktail fill the frame of two huge photographs. This pair of opposites is a fun, easy stand-in for human societies, their sameness and diversity.

An installation in the middle of the gallery is a real conceptual stunner. Ramirez has taken the lists of ingredients from Pop Tarts, Hamburger Helper, and other processed foods, printed them on fine

paper, and placed them under glass on a skirted banquet table. As trash that comes along with the food we buy, we take the lists for granted when combined with the product, package, and images. Separated, they are cryptic factoids that fail to cohere. Noting their frank commonalities and the mechanical language of processing, the lists become foreign and frightening. The banquet table is a fitting stage for these "anti-portraits," things we know down to the minutest detail yet cannot identify. Among other things, the experience of reading the lists is like perusing personal ads online, the ones without photos.

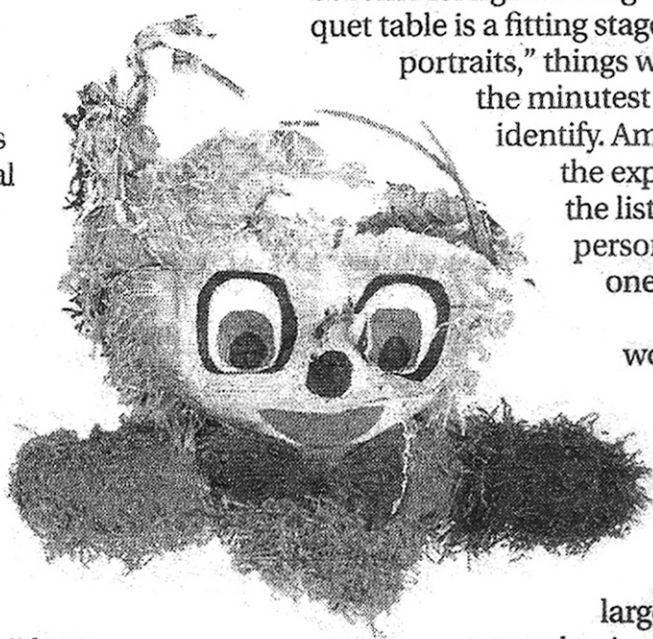
The last three works are the most intimate and unsettling in the exhibition and, again, display Ramirez' deep infatuation with large, beautiful photographs. A pair of empty, chocolate candy trays is a presence and an absence. Their shiny, gold-foil cavities are trace reminders of all that comes and goes in the passing of time. Ramirez hopes they speak of "desire and the ever-elusive search for fulfillment." They do, though through the sad filter of commercial consumption. These are joined by another memento mori, an anthropomorphized

Whataburger cup enlarged to human scale to accentuate its printed epitaph: "When I am empty, please dispose of me properly."

In February, Ramirez and San Antonio

artist Jesse Amado represented Sala Diaz at ARCO, the international art fair in Madrid. Ramirez' photographs of spent piñatas, named for close friends, were highlights of the show and sparked a purchase by the European Museum of Photography in Paris. Now on display at Finesilver Gallery, the piñata images also play up the "presence/absence" duality that is at the root of Ramirez' photographic art. In various states of disintegration, these colorful images of ravaged objects are both whimsical and disturbing. It's easy to project the cruel inconsistency of human relations onto their smiling cartoon faces and torn bodies.

Fetishism was a common theme around San Antonio the night ArtPace residents Ramirez, Candice Breitz, and Surasi Kusolwong spoke with curator Jérôme Sans in a public "artists dialogue." While Guillermo Gomez-Peña constructed his *Museum of Fetishized Identity* at Jump-Start Theater, Breitz and Sans hashed out the difference between memory and nostalgia, the later defined by Breitz as a "fetishized past that stagnates." Her pop-culture dioramas and Kusolwong's art gallery marketplace both trade in culturally loaded objects. But the true fetishist among them was the quietest, perhaps because his images are so potent on their own. Ramirez' strength as an artist is in finding the telling object, then making it speak. ●



BEAN & CHEESE

Through May 12

ArtPace

445 N. Main

212-4900

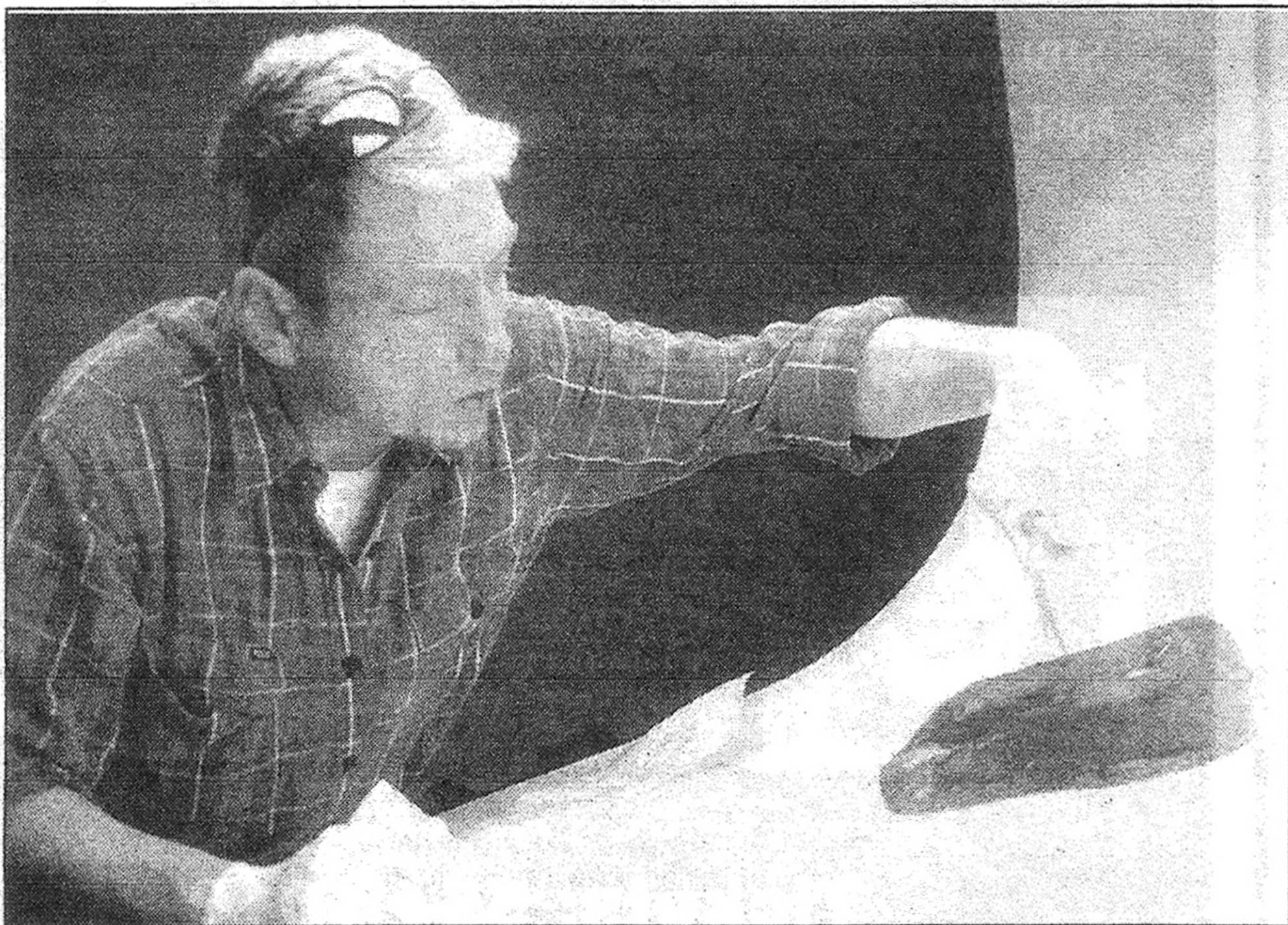
NEW WORKS

Through April 6

Finesilver Gallery

816 Camaron

354-3333



Above: Artist Chuck Ramirez works with raw meat for his "Bean & Cheese" exhibit at ArtPace.

Top: Cakky, 2002, digital durst print, 60 x 48 inches.