

"It's what's inside that counts, right?"

Chuck Ramirez's **Coconut** at Sala Diaz

by John Ewing

Hairy-headed and coarse, the big, round images in the small room have a sharp-edged accuracy that is utterly convincing.

"That's a coconut – I know one when I see one," a visitor to Sala Diaz says with certainty. The remark is in keeping with the cheeky spirit of Chuck Ramirez's recent exhibition of photographic, silk-screened and multi-media works. With refreshing directness, Ramirez's clear, strong voice comments on the status of Latino artists in San Antonio. He also explores that perennial controversy, the relationship between art and cultural identity.

With just a few, succinct pieces and no waste, "Coconut" does a remarkable job presenting the political and personal sides of art making. Ramirez's work is quicker and sleeker than we're accustomed to

seeing in San Antonio. Much of that is an efficient processing of ire.

"I don't want to get into stuff about individuals," says Ramirez, "but this show is a response to a work that's been used to describe a certain type of Latino artist the community perceives to be assimilated into the white culture – 'Coconuts' are brown on the outside, but really white on the inside."

This label has splintered San Antonio artists into factions; those promoting a traditional Chicano vocabulary and others who freely appropriate from international trends in contemporary art. The divisive judgement made by the former group of the latter is that these artists abandon their cultural heritage with the "Uncle Tom" art they create.

As Ramirez describes it, the situation came to a head last year with the University of Texas at San Antonio exhibition, "Synthesis and Subversion." Curated by Francis Colpitt, the exhibition included works by Ramirez, Jesse Amado, Alejandro Diaz, Franco Mondini Ruiz, Ana de Portela and David Padilla Cabrera.

"Fran was aware that a number of artists in San Antonio were not practicing the conventional means of Chicano Art," recounts Ramirez. "They're doing things on their own and discovering their heritage through their work as they deal with current artistic issues. But the criticism is that their work has nothing

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Cover: "Coconut" by Chuck Ramirez

to do with their heritage – just Americans doing American art.”

“Synthesis and Subversion” was informally boycotted. A letter signed by numerous Latino artists was sent to UTSA “expressing disdain for the university and Francis Colpitt.” ArtPace sponsored and publicized a forum to look at the issues and areas of disagreement, but Ramirez says no one “from the letter writing brigade” turned out for the discussion. Despite this, Ramirez is quick to acknowledge the other side.

“There may be some validity to a particular part of the criticism that states that UTSA is lacking in the promotion of Latino art in terms of art faculty. It’s been a middle-aged, white man’s world over there. Perhaps they feel slighted by the fact that an Anglo curator produced it, someone who had never curated a show of Latino art before. The larger picture is this: here’s a university in a city with a 60% Latino population and we’re still butting heads over these issues, trying to get a piece of the pie.”

“Coconut” takes this context as a starting point and spins out quick, bright riffs on the notions of assimilation and appropriation. In the first gallery, the three photographic prints which make up “Coconut 1, 2 & 3” tease the individual out of collective society. Against a white field, each large image is of a single coconut in progressive stages of “peeling.” The textures, placement and hyper-clinical simplicity of the images resemble medical case studies of the human skull. The images have an up-front, graphic power, but the parallel reference is disturbing and insidious.

“This is it!” says an exasperated Ramirez. “This is the coconut object everyone is talking about. I wanted everybody to have to examine it at an almost scientific level. There’s the skin and the inner mean which is the heart of the matter, the crux of the problem.”

“Segovia Watermelon slices,” reconvenes the collective. A large grid of silkscreen prints repeats the green, white and red format of the famous coconut candy... and the Mexican national flag. With this

series, Ramirez returns the object, and the individual, to an integrated cultural context. The familiar, beloved candy is made of the same stuff as slang, and wears the national flag, too. It’s simplified sociology in a graphic form, but it helps to collapse distinctions between “us” and “other.” Derogatory epithets (coconut, queer, etc.) have a curious history of being appropriated in a positive sense and then turning homeward.

The diptych “JoyJoy” borrows from the Almond Joy packaging and is Ramirez’s “fun piece.” A model of integrated self-acceptance, Ramirez says the piece expresses, “I’m a coconut and I’m happy about it.”

“Kiosko de Coco” masterfully distills various facets of the complex “coconut” issue into a simple produce stand typical of any Westside neighborhood market. But instead of fresh mango and pineapple this stands holds neat, sealed cans of supermarket coconut. One brand is Baker’s sweetened “Angelflake.” Distributed by Kraft Foods of White Plains, NY, the tall, slender can is royal blue and shows a silhouetted female form in olden dress. The other brand is Conchita canned coconut in heavy syrup. Its red can is bigger, more squat, and the image is a raw coconut cracked open to expose the meat.

There are more red cans than blue cans, a 60-40 ratio reflecting the racial demographics of San Antonio. And the effect of the two marketing styles is unmistakable. One is raw, natural, a basic and integrated staple. The other is a rarified, processed entity bearing no intrinsic relation to anything and releasing no visual clues to the product’s natural origin. Having set up coconuts as substitutes for people, Ramirez uses product processing as an apt metaphor for the process of acculturation. The Baker’s packaging appropriates an aspect of the exotic “other” without identifying the “other.”

If assimilation warrants name-calling, it’s this type of appropriation which refuses to give proper due to the source. In the arts, assimilation and appropriation are two sides of the same exchange,

but there are hard-to-define standards (taste, genuineness, skill, etc.) which govern the merging of cultural forms.

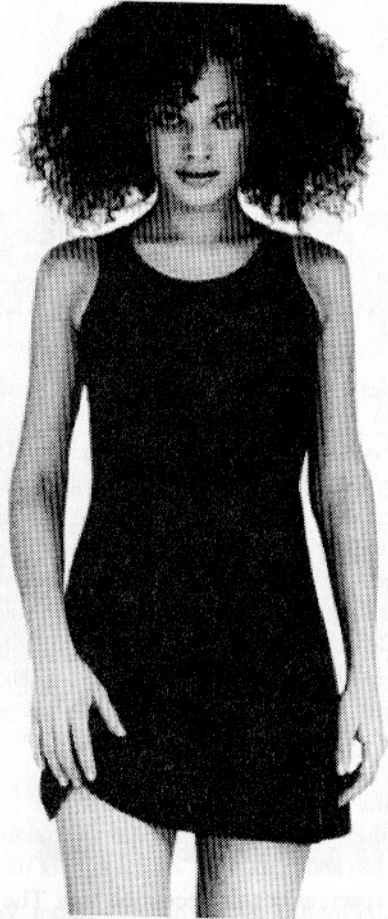
Without a doubt, it's a detriment to all artists to rigidly define and categorize. To illustrate the negativity of such efforts, ask yourself these absurd questions. Does "Strange Fruit" make Billie Holiday more authentically African-American than Ella Fitzgerald? Because she was African-American, should Ella have performed only "Porgy and Bess" and not the rest of the popular "Gershwin Songbook?"

What hateful, stupid insults such distinctions are to artists of this stature and the gifts they bestow on American culture. Indeed, would we have anything to claim as "culture" had the Gershwin brothers not been free to experiment in the music halls of Tin Pan Alley? The echoes of pogrom repression and devastation were not so distant then.

Novelist Felice Picano claims, "A gay man who writes without including sex in his work is a traitor." As a writer, I'm bothered by how little creative room this rigid expectation leaves me. To be informed of my obligations to gay culture annoys me as a gay man and a writer. In both cases, it's my obligation and privilege to define those parts of me, and any others, for myself. Only then am I truly free to imagine to the fullest extent of my ability. Idealistic? Naive? Maybe so, but it's the strategy we're still too squeamish to try.

"I think of assimilation as something they do on Star Trek with the Borg," Ramirez quips, summarizing his feelings on the topic. "As the world gets smaller and tighter with information, we're going to have to learn how to keep our traditions and still make it all work. I see us all behaving like humans in relation to something else versus a bunch of countries on a single planet. We'll better understand our heritage because we've all been reduced into this clump of humans, as opposed to Russians and Chinese and Mexicans. I think that would be a benefit to the planet... but I don't know how we got onto that shit. That's beer talk, man!"

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