

## San Antonio and its Artists: Polestars of American Art and Labor

The Texan art ecosystem is on the scale of an independent country. The five largest cities of Houston, San Antonio, Dallas, Fort Worth and Austin(-ish) have distinctive, gently-competitive art scenes; world-class institutions and collections; and a robust commercial gallery sector centered in Houston and Dallas—including the latter’s increasingly well-regarded art fair. There’s a constellation of art incubators statewide, from the El Paso Museum of Art to the Galveston Artist Residency. But it’s the lupine enigma of San Antonio, on the sunbaked brink of South Texas, with its disposition of tenacity and nonchalance, that cradles one of the most radical art scenes in America.

The McNay Art Museum, founded by Marion Koogler McNay, and filled with its namesake’s collection of European and American art from the 19th and 20th centuries was the first museum of modern art in Texas. Its focus on American art after 1970 continues apace with exhibitions and acquisitions of local artists’ work. Texas-based Letitia Huckaby’s recently purchased *Koinonia* (2021) occupies the atrium. The large-scale, wall-mounted installation comprises floral wallpaper, decorative elements, and motifs that reference Black community, domestic labor, racial injustice, and generational inheritance. Delicate portraits—ghosts of racially motivated killings—hanging in large oblong frames evince a quiet, contemplative timbre. The piece is both sepulcher and harbinger; memorial and warning. The McNay has also just acquired three photographic portraits by Anthony Francis, that reveal exquisitely layered social commentary by the deft presentation of his subjects’ clothing, gaze, and positioning. There are observations so nuanced that they only whisper their intentions—not every viewer will be listening, but for those who are, the pictures will make a gentle, persistent impact. Six paintings featuring conchas—Mexican sweet bread rolls—by Eva Marengo Sanchez, are also now in the McNay’s collection, their cracked, ribbed texture enhanced by warm orange-pink hues, evocative of the light of this region.

The relatively new San Antonio Museum of Art (opened in 1981) occupies what was the Lone Star Brewery complex, and is currently celebrating with “40 Years, 40 Stories: Treasures and New Discoveries from SAMA's Collection”. Believing that “artists are the lifeblood of a thriving city” the museum’s holdings were recently expanded with acquisitions from nine San Antonio artists. Among them are Joe Harjo, Jenelle Esparza, Jennifer Ling Datchuk and Chris Sauter. Harjo is a member of the Muscogee Creek Nation of Oklahoma, working across various media, interlacing tribal lore and culture; white suppression, fetishization, and homogenizing of native people; and the provenance and politics of Americanness as it pertains to race. SAMA bought *The Only Chosen Way: Faith* (2019) a wall-mounted work in the form of a cross comprised of 24 wooden, triangular flag cases. The glass-fronted displays hold Pendleton beach towels, with tribal

designs which are folded to the specification of an American flag when it is given to family members of fallen military personnel. Beginning in the late-1800s Pendleton established trade agreements with several tribes (the Umatilla, Cayuse, Nez Perce, Walla Walla, Hopi, Zuni, and Navajo nations) to make blankets and shawls in native designs, but this—unsurprisingly—expanded into clothing, accessories, home furnishings and for Harjo reached an absurd, even humorous nadir with beach towels, which he saw in a Vermont store in 2018. This untrammelled commercial grab diminished any respectful cultural relationship between the tribes and Pendleton, devolving into parody and perpetuating base appropriation.

Harjo's *Indian Performance Prints* is a series of red ink footprints of the artist—barefoot and shoed—while he was engaged in mundane activities. Titles include *Indian Checking Facebook*, *Indian Taking a Shower*, *Indian Watching Porn*, and *Indian Holding a Weapon: COVID-19 Vaccine*. It's an effective and wry piercing of the ludicrous stereotyped misperceptions, by racist constituencies, of what they *think* Native Americans might be doing, when in fact they are participating in shared quotidian experience like everyone else.

Jenelle Esparza was born in Corpus Christie and lives in San Antonio. Her work has an archaeological bent, bound to the South Texan landscape where she investigates personal and manufacturing histories, with a focus on the region's cotton fields where her family has generational ties. Esparza utilizes natural and mass-produced found objects—sunken logs, rocks, rusted farming implements—textiles, drawing, and installation; but also labor practices associated with the materials, and husbandry traditions. She learned to weave, has worked with cast-bronze, and has waded deep into cotton fields in Banquete, Texas, to photograph—yes, but also to momentarily arrest the flow of life and connect to her heritage through the gossamer whispers of her botanical inspiration. By these modes her body becomes an instrument of echo, action and production; a conduit for the toiling wraiths of back-breaking grind whose stories she keeps alive. Her studio, with its loom and books, reflects these compulsions with an atmosphere of both intellectual searching and the thrum of physical industry.

Jennifer Ling Datchuk is of Chinese descent through her mother—if not enough for some when she visits China; and is American, through her father—but not enough for various constituencies in this country. She was born in Ohio, raised in Brooklyn, and now lives in San Antonio. Her practice draws on the prejudices, presumptions, and dichotomies of being a first generation Chinese American woman, or “a third culture kid”, not least the dehumanizing question often posed to her, “What are you?” Patriarchal dictates and commercial exploitation of non-white femininity; and the impact of idealized beauty hierarchies between East and West are also features of the artist's work. She utilizes hair,

text, porcelain, installations and fabrics in her sculptures and bodily interventions, infusing them with understated wit. Her ideas on these complicated issues are percolated into a searing aesthetic simplicity, exemplified in *Pluck* (2014) a video wherein the artist removes her eyebrows one by one, as she repeats “he loves me, he loves me not.” It is a profound comment on identity, invisibility, perceptions of foreignness, and the pervasiveness of male judgement on feminine worth.

Chris Sauter’s studio is a former church, which is a fitting environment for his investigations into the mysteries and oracular possibilities that have bedeviled and obsessed scientists and ecclesiastics for centuries. Biology, astronomy, ritual and doctrine, are principle subjects for his commentary on our attempts to understand selfhood and universality, the terrestrial and the stellar. *Signal* is a beautifully pitched example. Rows of prayer candles suffuse a warm glow of spiritual calm, but they are actually blinking out part of a message transmitting data about mankind sent toward the Messier 13 star system almost fifty years ago by the recently collapsed Arecibo Radio Telescope in Puerto Rico. The work’s tonal subtlety, proceed from a rare calibre of incisive, uncluttered conceptualism of which Sauter is a master.

Artpace, founded by collector and philanthropist Linda Pace (1945-2007), is one of the country’s most sought after and generously-funded curatorial and artistic residencies. Each year there are three residential cycles, when an invited curator selects a Texan, a national, and an international artist for two month stays that culminate in solo exhibitions. That focus strikes a rare geographic equity that has elevated the careers of state artists, while fostering global exchange. The first round of artists in 1995 were Annette Messenger (France), Felix Gonzalez-Torres (New York), and San Antonio artist Jesse Amado. Naufus Ramirez-Figueroa (Guatemala) Dan Herschlein (New York) and Shana Hoehn (Texarkana) comprise the current trio. A soaring vinyl-text register of past recipients fills a wall two stories high, and makes for an electrifying—and emotional—read through a quarter century of Artpace luminaries.

Pace’s support of artists has made her a titanic figure in San Antonio, and this is most keenly felt at Ruby City, the stunning art center that is home to the Linda Pace Foundation which houses, exhibits and loans her collection. Here, famous stalwarts are placed in dialog with San Antonio artists. Ruby City’s Director, Elyse A. Gonzales notes:

*“we’re in an enviable position in that we are deeply embedded in our local/ regional community but also a presence in the larger national and international art worlds. That’s a very exciting aspect of our collection”*

This axis is exemplified in the current exhibition “Waking Dreams” which displays works by Christian Marclay, Joyce. J. Scott, and Marina Abramović among others, alongside Ana Fernandez, Ethel Shipton, Cruz Ortiz and Chuck Ramirez.

San Antonio is home to many more contemporary art and arts organizations, often founded by artists, for artists. They include Blue Star Contemporary, a complex of four galleries—San Antonio staple Flight Gallery is there—artist studios, off-site community spaces, and an international residency that sends four San Antonio area artists to Künstlerhaus Bethanien, in Berlin for three month stints each year; the Guadalupe Cultural Arts Center, a supporter and amplifier of Chicano, Chicana and Latinx art for almost forty years; and Sala Diaz, with its Casa Chuck Residency program, founded by Alejandro Diaz in 1995. Its archives were recently acquired by the University of Texas San Antonio.

El Instituto Cultural de México en San Antonio, is the Mexican Government's cultural initiative. Recently it hosted “Plastic Humanity” an installation and performance by Nain Leon. He creates digital vignettes, NFTs, photographs, and video, to elucidate themes such as environmental catastrophe, the visual sewage and nuclear-egotism of social media, and the irony of computer living that has simultaneously connected and isolated us. At the Mexican Cultural Institute Leon has constructed a static wave made of single-use water bottles, suspended in stasis just before breaking onto a beach which is littered with garbage. Two deckchairs below the deluge are occupied by white-masked performers who sunbathe, and walk around obsessively checking their phones, taking gelfies (glamor-selfies) and oblivious to the destruction wrought around them. The work’s efficacy is felt when kicking through the incongruous mix of plastic and sand, with the discomfiting knowledge that this is a drop in the ocean of the damage that we’re doing.

Presa House Gallery, was founded by cultural entrepreneurs Rigoberto Luna, and Jenelle Esparza. Currently celebrating its fifth year, it has become an extraordinary success as an agitator and elevator of Latinx art, partly due to an expansive network the gallery has forged with art scenes and artists throughout San Antonio’s immediate sphere of influence (and nationally) which extends as far south as the Rio Grande Valley and Mexico, across Texas, and the Southwest. A recent exhibition, “Benjamin Muñoz: Rattled Bones”, presented spellbinding monochrome woodcuts featuring towering cornucopias of text and objects relating to the artist’s role as parent, and his Mexican heritage. A newspaper dispenser, a surveillance camera, business signage, skeletal features and calaveras, florals, brand name consumerist products, idioms and delineated background landscapes are the strata of Muñoz’ visual lexicon.

The current show “South of the Checkpoint/North of the River” includes three border artists engaged with the fractures, nature, romance and tensions of the borderlands; Rigoberto A. González, born in Reynosa Tamaulipas, Mexico, and based in Edinburg, TX; Gina Gwen Palacios, born in Tuxtla, Mexico, and based in Brownsville; and Donald Jerry Lyles Jr., who was born in and lives in Edinburg. All three artists teach at the University of Texas Rio Grande Valley.

Annual and mobile initiatives include the Luminaria Contemporary Arts Festival, this year’s Texas Biennial which several San Antonio venues are hosting, and Contemporary Art Month, which takes place each March—a citywide celebration of the city’s artists.

José Villalobos is increasingly prominent in San Antonio and nationally, and is among the most valorous and arresting artists of his generation. He was raised in El Paso on the US-Mexico border in a conservative, Evangelical Christian home, and was subject to the homophobic mores of society generally, and Norteño culture specifically. For example, the flamboyant stage attire that revered Norteño musicians would wear on television or stage was accepted, while someone wearing the same clothing on the street would likely elicit homophobic abuse and degradation. Meeting, rejecting and reconciling aspects of such sociological and religious schisms underpins Villalobos’ practice which incorporates installation, performance and sculptural objects.

The artist intercepts the oppressive connotations of Western and Mexican acute-masculinity—drag in and of itself—and remilitarizes them in the aesthetics of sovereign-queerdom; bejewelled silver saddles, and cowboy hats adorned with tassels and sequins. Text is also employed to skewer the violence in vernacular slurs, exemplified in Villalobos’ 2019 exhibition “Joto Fronterizo / Border Faggot,” and in *De la Misma Piel*, with its belts and buckles carved with “sodomita”, “maricón” or “jotito”. With transcendent and poetic grandeur, there are heraldic, ceramic wings from his series *Fragmentos y Suturas*, fired and stained to look like stitched leather—the reascension of a gay Icarus on the far western edge of Texas.

Heyd Fontenot, an artist and the current director of Sala Diaz, is a recent transplant to San Antonio. His work is largely concerned with the moralizing hypocrisy of organized religion, and how it’s used to vilify queer people. His recent multi-media installation, *The Temptation of Saint Reborlaro*—titled after charlatan televangelist, Oral Roberts, spelled backward—is intended to unnerve religious aggressors while offering succor to those traumatized by doctrinal persecution. Sometimes mankind’s depravities are so severe that they can corrupt the very atmosphere of a place, and Roberts’ “City of Faith” Hospital and Oral Roberts University complex, just outside Tulsa, Oklahoma is just such an unnatural vortex. The very air around this pantheon to Defcon 1 egotism reeks of the

wickedness, avarice, lies and fraud that built it. The influence that such demonic extremism has had on the suicides, killings and abuse of gay people in America and globally, cannot be understated. Happily, Roberts died in 2009, returning to sit for eternity by the right-side of his beloved maker, in Hell. Although the acrid stench of his presence remains. Today, his university is one of the most LGBTQ+-phobic universities in America. The website states that:

*“At ORU, we pledge not to engage in or attempt to engage in any illicit, or unscriptural sexual acts, which includes any homosexual activity...”*

Fontenot is a nimble enough thinker to clothe his enraged mockery of Roberts’ legacy in whimsy—bunting, cute animals, song, costumes, playful nude drawings of Renaissance opulence à la Botticelli—lest this most genial of artists seem unwelcoming. But his commitment to countering biblically-sanctioned murder of queer people, in the deeply red and religious states where it is at its ugliest, is deadly serious.

The gendered demands placed on Gabi Magaly during her Mexican American upbringing are the font of her artistic practice, which she describes unflinchingly:

*“my childhood was saturated with the machismo and marianismo culture. Hypermasculinity oozes brutality, control, and bad cologne. Placated and tongue-biting women don’t speak up, act up, and always have rice and tortillas on the table at precisely six o’clock. Daughters are raised to submit to men, are being taught to fetishize purity and holiness. We are expected to feed stomachs, ego, and a taste for violence.”*

But this was not for Magaly. Her subverting of her pre-destiny, and the emancipation she has gained are hard-won yet fragile—as recent anti-women laws in Texas, and the actions of the state’s maniacal governor confirm. Art is the vehicle that she rams into the patriarchal edifice that would have consumed her. While her father evinced the traditions of female compliance—deference, domesticity, child-bearing—her mother cautioned her to attain autonomy and self-fulfillment. Magaly is a cultural mutineer, unrepentant and tenacious in her determination to break bonds not just for herself, but for other women. Yet her emotional intelligence allows her to incorporate inevitable moments of reflection, exhaustion and doubt.

That acknowledgment of vulnerability strengthens the work, and provides further relatability to those who have experienced what she is voicing. She utilizes photography, homely items of feminine labor, embroidery, text and installation. Whether pastel-pretty greetings cards with alternative messaging—“Por favor hija, no seas pendeja” (please

daughter, don't be dumb); a prayer to Saint Monica that Magaly has amended, switching a woman's hope for strength to bear her husband's infidelity, for a promise to divorce him; intimate photographs taken with her partner during or after scorching arguments; or a delicate, floral doily embroidered with a clitoris; Magaly torpedoed the wholesomeness, and female submission demanded by generational and familial rites, returns the viewer's gaze with interest, and delivers the patriarchy's shrunken balls back to it on a silver platter.

Joey Fauerso is known for her large-scale, black and white works that both highlight and dissolve distinctions between abstraction and figuration, organic and geometric, nature and manufacture. The female form and its politicization—again, acutely felt in this state—are a constant presence. Fauerso combines sculpture, drawing and performance elements, not only collapsing their definitions—sometimes literally—but so intrinsically that they become moot—it's just how she makes her work. Her practice is one of almost simultaneous constructing and disassembling, a flux noted by Fauerso when she writes that: “*I read somewhere that a spider sometimes eats her web to replenish her supply of silk.*”

In Thomas Harris' book “Red Dragon” the serial killer, Francis Dolarhyde consumes William Blake's watercolor, *The Great Red Dragon and the Woman Clothed with the Sun*. This is too dark a reference to apply specifically to Fauerso's interests or oeuvre, but that sense of constant transformation, of becoming and vanishing, and of rebirth are intrinsic to her process.

There is also keen and delightful wit. A video piece titled *The Clearing*, is set in a bucolic woodland glade, rendered in watery greens and browns. Flights of birds sail overhead, and a flautist—perhaps the artist—Pied Piper-like, serenades us. It is souped-up Thomas Kinkadee, if his work were animated. That is, until a young, naked man dances onscreen, gazes around in wonderment, spinning, toppling, and falling, before getting up and sauntering off into the trees. You won't see that in one of those twee Jacquie Lawson video Ecards that well-meaning relatives oblige you to spend interminable minutes watching.

Fernando Andrade was born in Acuña Coahuila, and moved to the United States when he was seven. Now based in San Antonio, his consummate drawings of gnarled sticks from his series *Palos y Piedras* (sticks and stones) and *God Bless America*, recall the childhood war games he'd play with his friends and cousins growing up in Mexico, using rocks as grenades and sticks as guns. The drawings carry subtly embossed text advertisements from firearms magazines. Today youngsters where Andrade was raised use real guns, given to them by cartels to carry out murders, for which the courts will

treat them more leniently if they are caught. This allows them to be released earlier, to kill again. Andrade draws a single wooden “gun” on the page, focusing the viewer’s attention on the sinuous, natural lines, and similarity to real weaponry. The works ruminate on the consequences of abducted innocence, and the language and ammunitions of pretend and actual violence. Andrade’s accomplished draughtsmanship and restrained compositions underscore how completely youthful purity can be stolen. Interestingly, for all the rudimentariness of Andrade’s stick guns, they have the futuristic cool of science fiction weapons that could have been designed by H. R. Giger, reminding us that innocence and childhood are always at risk of being superseded by the politics, conflict, cynicism and greed of adulthood.

San Antonio may not spring to mind as a conductor of contemporary art, and it does lack a collector base that would support more commercial galleries—although Ruiz-Healy Art, focusing on Latinx, Latin American and Texan artists (and with a space on New York’s Upper East Side) is a very impressive exception. San Antonio’s scene is rangy, and if it lopes around the periphery of the American contemporary art world, often unnoticed, and perhaps even licking its lips at the kills of its brasher neighbors like Dallas and Houston—it remains unhurried to join the fray. It can live with the hunger because there is a placeness here that imbues a sense of self-possession.

San Antonio’s artists *are* its scene, and the synthesis between them and civic and art institutions is a pillar of its momentum. Many artists work in, or have shown in city museums. They are involved in the substantial practice of collaboration and artist-run spaces which underpin organizational sensibilities. While there are hierarchies in any network, there is a conviviality among curators, artists, directors, writers, board members, dealers, and teachers, which plays out informally during fire-pit conversations at exhibition openings, off-peak gallery visits, or mid-week installs. There’s an unpretentious down-homeliness, yet it is the seventh largest city in America and has attained international kudos through lean and agile cultural exchange programs like Artpace. There is a stable cadre of local artists, but there are always incoming voices, so that everyone knows *almost* everyone.

There is something else that secures San Antonio’s authenticity. Location can ignite, or deaden art’s effect. When art that is about a place—the stories, myths, traumas, politics and hopes of particular landscapes, and when it is seen, mulled and discussed there, where the seams of human experience have settled, art reaches its fullest realization.

Seeing these artists’ work, in the landscapes that informed it, under the cultural storms that affect it, and traveling through the terrain beneath the skies and vistas from which it



still grows brings fuller understanding of its origins and social urgency. It is not something that an audience can experience taking the L train from Brooklyn to Chelsea, sorry, the Lower East Side, no wait, SoHo, to see the work, strong as it is, but transplanted from the soil that nourished it, into a bland white cube. In a liberal bastion like New York where so much has been achieved, so many battles won, every form of art is accepted. Audiences are so well-versed and accepting that there is no friction, no dissent, barely engagement at all perhaps, and no disagreement with the art's message. As vital as it is for regional artists to be included in the greatest American museums, it is also incumbent on audiences who really want to know the roots of an artist's reasoning, to come and see it in situ.

When Jenelle Esparza explores the cotton fields of her ancestry; Gabi Magaly returns to her grandmother's home in San Luis Potosi, Mexico, after an absence of fourteen years; José Villalobos assails the prejudices of his upbringing; when Heyd Fontenot shoves the murderous antics of religious criminals back in congregants' faces; when Fernando Andrade reaches into his past, to draw the machinery of future violence across the border; or when Ruben Luna constructs his emotionally charged, portable cases of artifacts and ritual objects of familial love and connection, in celebration and archiving of blood and genealogical bonds; they are doing so fully immersed in what has been lived, what is fading, or yet needs to be challenged. These artists and their peers in South Texas, across the state and in other Republican held territories are at the forefront of artistic activism in America.

They have accessed the equation that makes their work radical, and urgent. They are insisting on speaking about difficult subjects in states where swathes of the population may not want to hear them, and are often politically and religiously averse to progress inclusivity for fear of losing power. This is what ignites these artists' endeavors beyond art-making, and moves it into political and cultural ammunition—motives for change where it most needs to happen, where confrontation with hostile audiences is necessary. The region is perhaps the most politically fraught and mistreated in America, having been used as a cultural hammer by craven lawmakers on both sides of the ideological spectrum. This friction makes art made here into kindling.

In a constant sociological seiche, these landscapes have been Mexico, Texas and the United States whatever today's borders might be, with America often playing the fumbling, prickly third member of an uncommon threesome, prone to furtive spurts of dissatisfying intervention.

There was never a single frontier (as Hollywood's ridiculous prejudices would have us believe) but many frontiers—there still are. These are the crucibles where art has the most

work to do, to engage or enrage audiences. San Antonio and South Texas are a center of contemporary art production, made vital by the stresses and legacies of the region's roiling sociological faultiness. It is the artists working here, who are keeping their balance and focus among these buckling seismic uncertainties, and progressing despite them, that are among the most significant critical voices in American art.