



“CONFESSIONS OF A SINGIN’ VAQUERO”

Inside the artwork of Ricky Armendáriz

by Lisa Chontos

This past January, UTSA professor Ricky Armendáriz displayed his artwork in a solo exhibition at the Blue Star Contemporary Art Center. Curated by Arturo Almeida of UTSA, *Confessions of a Singin’ Vaquero* was Armendáriz’s first solo exhibition. It also was a landmark event for Blue Star, because it was the center’s first show to have both a Hispanic artist and curator, and it was only the third solo exhibition ever presented in the Main Gallery.

Armendáriz is currently seeking new venues for *Singin’ Vaquero* and has been working on this particular series of paintings since 1999. “The original idea was to go back to my roots in painting what I learned in art school—the three major genres of still life, landscape and portraiture,” he explains. Noting that still life and landscapes are not typically seen in contemporary art, he now seeks to blur the lines between what is considered “high art” and “low art.”

After experimenting with still life, he moved on to landscapes. He paints sunrises and sunsets from photos he’s taken, then pairs them with maxims inspired by the “dichos,” or truisms, he heard from his parents and grandparents while he was growing up in El Paso. Although he did not fully appreciate the advice at the time, now he teaches them to his own children, realizing that the short, meaningful phrases are especially suited to a young audience. “If someone’s complaining about eating spaghetti, then we say, ‘Better to have hard bread than no bread at all,’” he says.

His work has evolved naturally over time. Initially, he painted very expressively, but now he paints representationally to keep viewers from being distracted by the way the work was painted. The maxims and landscapes are equally significant, and he explains, “I want people to see the work and say, ‘There’s a sunset and a phrase—how do they relate to each other?’” Recently he has begun dating

his work by adding less traditional elements to the landscapes, such as cars, telephone poles and the silhouette of a gas station. He's considering using automotive paints in the future, an idea partly inspired by his appreciation for the vibrant fiberglass sculpture of Luis Jimenez. He also thinks that at some point he might simply use the phrases as the titles of the works, instead of featuring them across the landscape.

His phrases are written in the style of country music, and his work always has an element of humor, such as this phrase he attributes to his brother, "I'm always thankful to wake up in the desert with my pants on." Not wanting to simply regurgitate the maxims of his family, Armendáriz usually creates the phrases and then has them polished by his brother, a poet.

Carvings also are important in his work. Designed to provoke thought, the carvings are usually either related to the landscape, the text or both. Occasionally, the carving is not related to the work, but instead is used to add another dimension when the painting contains a simpler phrase. "It's always been about paint, carving and plywood," he says. "I became interested in material in art school. I'm trying to represent the Southwest, and in Bonanza, you always see carved wood that looks polyurethaned."

Armendáriz is influenced by the music of Hank Williams and Freddy Fender, among others, and the comedy of George Lopez, John Leguizamo and Paul Rodriguez. Although most of his influences are nonvisual, he also is intrigued by the way artists create art, such as how Kara Walker created powerful racial statements from paper and silhouettes.

After earning his Bachelor of Fine Arts from UTSA in 1995, Armendáriz obtained his Master of Fine Arts from the University of Colorado at Boulder and returned to UTSA to teach. He has just completed his second year of teaching painting at UTSA, and he loves it. "I pinch myself all the time, because I can't believe I get paid for what I do," he says. "I'm blown away by the graduate students here in San Antonio. They are some of the most intelligent, capable and hungry artists I've ever dealt with, and I'm just guiding them. They take great strides to get into the public and broaden the conversation they're having with their own work."

Armendáriz was named Best Up-and-Coming Artist of 2006 by the *San Antonio Current*. In the next few months, his work will be seen at the reopening of Museo de las Americas in Denver, at San Antonio's Centro Cultural Aztlán, and in a group show at Austin's Mexic-Arte. As a member of an artist group named Artnauts, which deals with the breakdown of racial borders, Armendáriz will participate in upcoming group shows in Palestine and Bethlehem. 

WHAT HIS STUDENTS ARE SAYING:

"Ricky Armendáriz was one of the most influential art professors I had in graduate school at UTSA. He invested his time and attention into the lives of his graduate students. I especially found his one-on-one critiques to be invaluable times of insight. As a graduate student, I felt like he treated me as a peer and gave me respect accordingly. In addition, my work is inspired by the thoughtful, sharp nature of his nationally recognized paintings. I truly value my time spent under his instruction and consider it continually useful."

BRIAN JOBE, former student

"I was fortunate to be one of his students. He has not only established himself as an important painter, but he also is an academic leader that encourages his students to be more visible in the art community. In addition to sharing his knowledge of painting and contemporary issues, he is engaged in art publicly, which set an example for his students to follow.

"As my professor, he gave constructive criticism when I needed it during studio visits. He taught me about articulating about my own work through his public speaking. He made me aware of concepts and attitudes in painting that I may have otherwise not noticed, all while wearing his signature western boots."

JULIE SHIPP, former student

"In my last semester in the graduate program in the Department of Art and Art History, I was given the opportunity to work with Professor Ricky Armendáriz. My area of focus is painting and I was developing a body of work for my thesis exhibition.

"Working with him that last semester was integral in producing a successful body of work. His knowledge of cultural issues and how they are addressed in contemporary art was invaluable. As Latino artists, we both incorporate cultural indicators in our work, while using the voice of contemporary art. In addition, Armendáriz's method of instruction instilled a work ethic that raises the standard of execution and professionalism. He also prepared me for the art world outside of academia and influenced some of the strategies I employ in my teaching today."

JERRY CABRERA, former student