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The public is the missing piece in spring artist-in-residence installations at Artpace in San Antonio

Deborah Martin

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Artist Milagros de la Torre had been looking forward to watching people interact with “Recollection #1,” an array of convex mirrors hung on the wall with constellations etched into the surface.

De la Torre, who is based in New York, created the piece during her spring Artpace residency.

“I was looking forward to making photos of people with their reflections and those dots and lines (in the mirrors),” she said. “You need the public for that.”

The COVID-19 pandemic has delayed that for the time being.

Though de la Torre hopes it eventually will be possible for the public to see the work as she intended, for now the only way to view it at all — as well as the work created by her fellow Artpace residents Daniel Ramos and Carlos Castro Arias — is online.

Images from the exhibits, which were curated by Monica Espinel, can be seen at artpace.org.

Arias’ installation — “I came to set the world on fire, and I wish it were already kindled — Luke 12:49” — includes several visually striking works that are captured well in the online gallery. But the entire gallery also has an immersive quality that is difficult to replicate in an online presentation.

“I think it doesn’t really work (online) because you have to be there, you have to feel the heat of the pieces,” said Arias, 44. “It’s a very warm and uncomfortable atmosphere because of the sound and the smell, so that is something you can only experience if you actually are there.”

The installation deals with religion, which he explores in works that involve sound and fire. Two pieces include actual flames. For “The Witness,” fire flares from the head of a figure hunched over a cell phone, watching video of a church burning; across the gallery stands “Body,” a miniature church filled with candles that send flares through the top of it.

To Arias, the fire represents enlightenment and purification, though it’s open to interpretation, he said.

The artist, who was raised Catholic in Colombia, has long been fascinated by religion, and when he got the Artpace residency and learned about the vast number of churches in the state, he thought this would be a good place to continue exploring the subject. As part of his research, he visited dozens of churches, including Joel Osteen's congregation in Houston, which gave him a sound element for the installation.

"It is an incredible coincidence," Arias said. "I wanted to use fire (in the exhibit), and then I go there, and it's all about fire, and he's talking about fire and how God helps us or stays with us in difficult times through the fire."

Ramos' exhibit, "The Land of Illustrious Men," fills a downstairs gallery with photos of his family, as well as objects with personal significance, including a cabinet that belonged to his grandmother filled with photos, ceramic figures, certificates and baby shoes.

The title of the piece — "I Do Not Have the Luxury to Trace My Family's History Back More Than 2 Generations" — sums up much of the exhibit, which explores that family history, including the impact of his parents' decision to leave Mexico for a rough neighborhood in Chicago.

Ramos first delved into the topic in a book, and said that, in a way, the exhibit is a little like stepping into a pop-up version.

"There's an image of my mother, my father, my uncle, they're leaning on a van, and there it is," he said of the vehicle in the gallery. "So that van belonged to my father, belongs to my family, and that's the van we would drive from Chicago to Monterrey, Mexico, for the past 25 years."

As he worked on the book, he thought a lot about what it meant to grow up in two countries — his parents sent him to spend summers in Mexico to get him away from gang violence and other dangers — and not feel like he belonged in either.

"The most important thing I got out of it is that now I finally feel comfortable here," said Ramos, who now lives in Sandy Oaks, Texas. "I don't think about those things anymore, about my heritage or my identity."

"I think the issue I wanted to raise questions about is class — how do you go from working class to become a middle-class person. In this case, I'm using art. For me to be an artist was something I had to learn a lot on my own. My parents don't know anything about it, and I had to grow a thick skin because my parents weren't very happy with me pursuing a career as an artist."

Ramos, 42, is primarily a photographer, but he took advantage of the residency and the luxury of having more space than he has in his home studio to go big. For the first time, he incorporated his photography into assemblages, including "Ropero Al Viento" ("Wardrobe in the Wind"), for which he suspended a wardrobe from the ceiling. A pile of silverware is on the floor beneath, as if it had fallen from it, and dozens of keys that belonged to his grandmother hang overhead.

Like de la Torre, he's hoping people will eventually be able to see the work in person. And he's interested to see how they respond to it and to the exhibits by his fellow resident artists then.

"It's going to be very interesting if, hopefully, we all come back, what this work is going to mean to us after we've experienced what's to come," he said.

"Systems and Constellations," de la Torre's exhibition, also was shaped in part by personal experience. It has to do with faces, and is informed by her research into the history of facial measurements and facial recognition technology as well as by her diagnosis with facial blindness.

"After 25 years of working, I realized that most of my projects have been directed to objects, and faces were somehow lacking," said de la Torre, 64. "That's when Artpace came in, and I started analyzing all these systems and hoping to translate them into works that would hopefully engage with the public as well."

In addition to the piece with the mirrors, the exhibition includes "Intervals," a video that deals with all the ways that facial measurements have been used for centuries, including the practice of using those traits as indicators of the potential for criminal behavior, as well as the dizzying array of technologies that have arisen in the past few decades.

It also includes “Erased, Deleted, Omitted,” a haunting three-dimensional depiction of a face with all of its features — nose, mouth, eyes — pixilated.

As she was finishing the exhibit, de la Torre also was monitoring the spread of the pandemic, and she ended up leaving a little earlier than she had planned because she worried that domestic travel might be halted.

“That was so painful and so surreal,” she said. “In a matter of hours, you had to leave just in case they would close the city. We didn’t know what was happening — everything was developing so rapidly.”

Before the pandemic, she had planned to follow her Artpace residency with putting the finishing touches on works selected for exhibits in Buenos Aires and Rhode Island, but those shows have been paused for now. For the time being, she is keeping a diary and working on some responses to the current situation for a website.

“I’m just trying to get involved and continue working normally,” she said.

And she’s looking forward to returning to San Antonio and to Artpace.

“Hopefully, it’s going to get to open during the summer,” she said. “It would be so great to come back to San Antonio.”

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Deborah Martin is an arts writer who came to work for the San Antonio Express-News in 1999. She writes primarily about theater – she sees around 100 shows annually -- and helps oversee the paper’s coverage of the fine performing arts. Her first newspaper job was with the El Paso Herald-Post, where she worked as a general assignment reporter before becoming arts and entertainment editor. After the Herald-Post closed, she spent just over a year covering the arts for the Corpus Christi Caller-Times before coming to the Express-News. She has a degree in journalism from UT El Paso, and was a fellow in the NEA Arts Journalism Institute in Theater and Musical Theater at the University of Southern California in 2007.

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