



San Antonio's Luminaria, A Procession of the Arts and Cultural Enlightenment

by Steve Rockwell, March 20, 2012



At midnight on Saturday little black paper counters were striking the sidewalk around the Emily Morgan, and hotel security stopped me from exiting. My impulse was to take in the closing fireworks of Luminaria since it was literally happening over my head. I took a chance on being pummeled and made a run for it. On the street, Roger Velasquez and the Latin Legends had given way to the San Antonio Blue Cats, but now it was the whistle and pop of the night sky above Emily's 13th story. Soon the throng on the steps of the United States Post Office and Court House thinned, and San Antonio's first Luminaria began to dim its lights.

In my eleventh-floor room I soaked up a few more pages of the hotel copy of Walter Isaacson's Einstein biography before turning in. Albert's uncle, it seems, had manufactured electrical equipment, providing the first lighting for Oktoberfest in München, Germany – a much earlier and different Luminaria. At 16 Einstein had famously visualized traveling along a beam of light, but his miracle year had been 1905, where he postulated that light interacted with matter as discrete packets, or quanta of energy, giving us quantum mechanics, relativity, and his signature $E = mc^2$.

If relativity had upended the Newtonian universe, Albert and Isaac shared a fascination with light, Newton to the point of nearly blinding himself by staring into the sun. The latter's experiments in optics were a harvest of revolutionary observations on the spectrum and

refraction of light – insights that made up just some of the many bricks to his contribution of the foundation of the Age of Enlightenment.

While San Antonio's Luminaria alludes to the lanterns of posada processions and point to its Latino heritage, germane in each case is light itself and its radiating spokes to insight and knowledge. Himself a fulfillment of the Enlightenment, German philosopher Immanuel Kant wrote of it as man's emergence from his self-imposed immaturity: his motto – Sapere Aude! [dare to know]. "Have courage to use your own understanding!"

Luminaria as an event is credited to San Antonio Mayor Hardberger himself, who had looked at events such as Nuit Blanche in Paris and those in Madrid, Buenos Aires, Rome, Chicago, and Toronto. When the idea was presented to the city's Office of Cultural Affairs, a conservative estimate to its reception in the arts community was perhaps 80 participants. In fact, more than 400 responded and some 200 individuals, groups and establishments were invited to take part. A reported 100,000 people attended the event.

The swirl of Luminaria events culminated on Alamo Plaza Saturday evening. Our little group of visiting art writers that the city's convention and visitors bureau put together under the benevolent guidance of Evelyn Bailey, tried our best to stick together during our stroll. Yet, somewhere near Peacock Alley, the back of Ed Rubin's black Nashville shirt melted into the crowd, and I found myself on my own.

I had stopped for a minute to talk to San Antonio painter Jesse Trevino about his new triptych *Mexicano Chicano Americano* – an examination of the complexities of identity in a portrait of himself as a young man. Consisting of six separate but similar images, it's the very antithesis of the cool detachment we might associate with a multiple Warhol portrait. Each name defines a specific dimension of his world. As an Americano Trevino fought for his country in Viet Nam at the price of losing his arm. Chicano subtracts the Mexicano while adding the Americano, at the same time negating the political elements altogether. Trevino seems to say that labels politicize and alter perceptions of people and contribute little to our understanding of the whole individual. They serve to filter and distort our impressions, resulting in a masking of uniqueness. In the end it's the heart we should consider.

I eventually re-connected with my group at Alamo Plaza where a crowd had amassed for the debut of an LED light installation by artist Bill FitzGibbons, executive director of the Blue Star Contemporary Art Center. Attention was focused on the Alamo and the San Antonio Symphony and their conductor who was about to introduce a performance of the state song, "Texas, Our Texas." With Mussorgsky's "Pictures at an Exhibition" the Alamo was bathed in cascades of light, that transited from yellows to greens, to blues, violets and reds in alternating rhythms. At times the portal of the Alamo would be isolated by color from its facade in syncopation with the music. Visually, the monument's solidity converted to light energy, augmenting and charging the sound of the orchestra with brilliant strobos. For those that missed the light and concert performance, UTube videos of it are readily available on the internet by 'Googling' Luminaria San Antonio. Curiously, the low resolution image of the UTube video serves to render the Alamo in FitzGibbons' light program even more graphically iconic.

The San Antonio Symphony also presented Aaron Copeland's "Ballet Rodeo" and a melodic treatment of Felix Mendelssohn's "Midsummer Nights Dream." All contributed to an interlacing of color and sound throughout the plaza and surrounding block, the facades of which featured projections of abstract patterns of their own.

Our Luminaria weekend had begun Thursday evening with a dinner at Boudro's on the Riverwalk, much to the envy of passers-by since it was served on one of the river cruisers! Evelyn Bailey collected us at the Emily Morgan we made our way to the river. For myself it was

an occasion to get to know Ann Landi, contributing editor of ARTnews, New York writer and critic Ed Rubin, and Frances Folsom from Boston. Also joining us for the cruise was local artist and co-founder of the Artist Foundation, Bettie Ward. Of course, our ride on the river would not even have taken place were it not for a visionary University of Texas Architecture graduate named Robert Hugman who proposed the idea of Riverwalk to the city in 1929. A third generation of UT architects is currently involved in enhancing and expanding the Riverwalk. In fact, construction on its extension past the San Antonio Museum of Art is already in evidence.

Our studio visit with artist couple Riley Robinson and Joey Fauerso started with breakfast tacos and scones. Their shared studio building is accessed by a foyer that is itself a small gallery with a sampling of the two artists' work.

Joey Fauerso explores the boundaries of the human body – inside and out. It's a journey to the limits of consciousness where travellers forego baggage and clothing altogether. For the past three or four years, she has worked on a series of hand-painted animations that, in her words, represent "different kinds of physical and metaphorical transcendence." Her endeavor is truly multi-media, managing to incorporate painting, dance, performance art, and painting. By videotaping her subjects, using a sequence of images as a basis for her painting, she re-animates the painted sequences and creates a second video using Final Cut Pro, Motion and Soundtrack Pro. Manipulated and edited sounds of clapping and breathing may be added to complement the actions of the figures. Often hundreds of oil and acrylic paintings on paper make up a single video.

Exhibited as a single installation, and depicting essentially same event, one spatial, the other temporal, Fauerso's point may, in fact, be the underlying unity and consequent impossibility of separating the dimensions of time and space. Behind every painted still is movement. The ground of all motion is stillness. I recommend viewing Fauerso's Get Naked and other videos on her website: www.joeyfauerso.com.

As studio director of Artpace in San Antonio, Riley Robinson has the enviable job of working with today's most vital and innovative artists. You might say that his day job is other people's work. In a video sculpture titled *Who are you looking at?* he claims that he doesn't talk about his own work much. Robinson's deference is a clever bit of conjuring. The answer to "Who are you looking at?" is plainly Riley Robinson – and he's looking at you. Humor and wit informs this multi-faceted conceptually-minded sculptor and video artist. He doesn't have to talk about his work because so much biography and self-reference is already built into it.

Testsite 06.4: *Who are you looking at?* is a collaborative show between brother and sister that was presented at testsite in Austin in 2006. The installation included a video of Robinson's eyes (*Big Brother?*) tracking people moving in a room, as well as a recording of Katie Robinson Edwards reading his artist's statement. Having Edwards read and compose her brother's artist's statement only served to emphasize its biographical content. Yet in a subtle way, Robinson's claim is unassailable, since his Artist Statement is not 'about' his work, it is the work itself. I invite you to sample for yourself. Search the internet for: Riley Robinson testsite 06.4

"My name is Riley Robinson. I was born on the island of Okinawa, Japan. When I was born, the islanders thought I was blind because I had green eyes..."

Justin Parr, celebrity pet photographer and artist started FI!ght gallery out of a need for more independent and open-minded artist run space in San Antonio. FI!ght was started in the Silos at the now condemned Blue Star Art Silos. At his HUGE shows (*Mig Kokinda*, *Octopus Project*, *Rock Stacking*, *Painted Cars*, *Mobile Carnivals*, and *Eve of Destruction*), artists would make their 'masterpieces' and destroy them publicly if they didn't sell opening night. With 2,000 people attending, it became more about the party than the art.

In the present location Parr, has completed a second large room referred to variously as the dry goods room, merch room, or Flight store. Hung salon-style, the work of 40 or so artists is either replaced when sold or simply updated each month by Ed Saavedra and Parr. Gallery artists include Beto Gonzales, Aaron Forland, Ben Judson, Franco Mondini-Ruiz, Leslie Raymond, Cruz Ortiz, and many more.

At the studio of Angel Rodriguez-Diaz our group was treated to an exegesis by the artist of the painting Antifaz:... Forget the Alamo...Yellow Rose (page 14). It is Emily Morgan's hand that we see in the painting seductively offering the Alamo as a trinket to... well, it's a self-portrait of the masked (antifaz) artist, who is refusing the gift. It's a reference to the myth that, after the fall of the Alamo, Emily Morgan seduced and distracted the Mexican general, Santa Anna, on the eve of the decisive Battle of San Jacinto against the Texans. The result was the independence of Texas from Mexico and its eventual merger with the United States. Another layer in the Emily Morgan saga is the historically unsubstantiated myth that she was the inspiration for the song "Yellow Rose of Texas."

Rodriguez-Diaz is making a statement about cultural survival. His mask or antifaz signifies protection, since it also means condom in Spanish. In the guise of a wrestler, the artist wishes to avoid the life-threatening absorption that is suggested here as an erotic combat. The antifaz is his shield against loss of identity. His Chupacabra painting has the Latin phrase E pluribus unum inscribed into the top right corner as well as the word Chupacabra carved into the stump of a tree. While E pluribus unum, as the motto of the United States of America, has traditionally meant the creation a single state from many, it has also acquired over time the association of America as the melting pot of diverse cultures. While immigrants to the U.S. might view this as positive and desirable, to indigenous and already-settled peoples, homogenizing and melting may simply signify loss – in a sense, a bleaching of cultural identity. A chupacabra is a cryptid or hidden mythical animal, literally in Spanish a goat sucker. It was first reported in Puerto Rico, the birth place of Rodriguez-Diaz. In the painting the artist is the goat, his face blanched, as he hides at the lifeless stump of a tree over a mound of dried goat bones.

San Antonio artist Rolando Briseno or cultural adjuster as he bills himself, has produced a number of high-profile public art projects such as The Learning Tree, a bronze sculpture at Trinity University. He loves public art because it belongs to everyone. Presently, he is working on a piece for the new airport terminal in San Antonio.

Briseno's Celestial Tablescapes series of giclée prints, have as their central theme the table and its multi-layered symbolic elements. In Celestial Goddess the setting is literally a tableau vivant, or living picture. Food, flowers, man and woman, even remotes and cell phones make up the table setting. Briseno's table is much more than a piece of furniture. It can be many things – from a water table to a collection of stored data. The artist sees the dinner table as a nexus of social activity that ought to be accorded reverence as a kind of altar. On it his Celestial Goddess seems to be offering, not only her body in a sacrificial manner, but the fruits of the earth. The legs of the woman and the arrangement of the limbs of the man's body form a wheel that seems to move in a counter clockwise direction. It's perhaps a yin and a yang of the wheel of life turning from seed time to harvest before a glittering cosmos.

Blue Star Contemporary Art Center is a nonprofit, non-collecting institution dedicated to exhibiting contemporary art. The 137,000-square-foot complex of old warehouses is characterized in the art media as a "galvanizing force" for San Antonio's art community. Founded in 1986 by a group of artists and businessmen, the Blue Star project began in a climate unfriendly to contemporary art: three galleries devoted to modern art had just closed, leaving San Antonio artists without a place to show their work. Blue Star continues to be an incubator for contemporary art in San Antonio.

An exhibition of photographs curated by Bill FitzGibbons of the architecture of Mexican-born Ricardo Legorreta was featured at Blue Star during Luminaria. While architects had ignored the traditional native architecture based on thick wall systems, Legorreta restored the supremacy of solids over voids, the use of color to enclose wall space, and the South American preference for privacy. Legorreta's regional architecture avoided the set design techniques prevalent in many parts of Mexico and Southern California. Legorreta's style is the embodiment of space, light and color.

Showing also at Blue Star and curated by Carol Kino was *The Post Apocalyptic Tattoo: A Ten Year Survey of the Art of D. Dominick Lombardi*. It presented Lombardi's fanciful view of our future through the eyes of a tattoo artist, where mutations in human anatomy are attributed to the cumulative effect of centuries of exposure to poisons and pollutants. Lombardi states that "Over the past six years, a narrative has been building in my work which features physically distorted characters. The idiom selected for these representations is informed by a low art, tattoo/ comix esthetic." Of the apocalypse survivors, two species seem to have evolved, the graffoos and the tattoos. It's latter that seem likeliest to survive – not for their beauty, but for the indelible stamp that they leave in the mind.

The exhibition was a combination of drawings and paintings hung clutter salon-style with the imagined future evolution of man divided into eras and ages of degeneration. It brought to mind by way of contrast, *Soylent Green*, the film about the 1973 Harry Harrison novel *Make Room! Make Room!* Back then it was over-population and world's failure to feed itself. For the past few decades fears have shifted to the environment with a gradual bias to an emphasis on global warming. Of course in the 70's the coming calamity was to be the earth's cooling. In *The Time Machine*, H.G. Wells predicted that the air raid siren would persist for tens of thousands of years, well after literacy had ceased. I was heartened by Lombardi's prediction that in a distant future, clowns may die, but will mercifully continue to amuse us.

At the Joan Grona Gallery San Antonio artist Eric Taylor summoned ghosts of the American frontier with mere wood, sawdust and carpenter's pencils. A large work on paper titled, *Reclaimed Frontier*, depicted a buffalo in sawdust, the color suggesting pemmican. Since most of the materials he uses are salvaged from a wood shop, his *Lost Treasure*, a silhouette of a sailing ship over a grid of wood squares, converted metaphor to something quite literal. *Reminders of Death*, a five by six foot drawing of skulls done with carpenter's pencil on paper, was composed of small hand-drawn pencil rectangles. The source material had been a found image from the internet, and at a glance it appeared to be a digital output. Yet, with pain-staking manual rendering, Taylor was resurrecting craftsmanship from the dustbin of history. Read as a whole, the exhibition conveyed a mourning for the death and loss of simpler, and with the passage of time, seemingly more honest times. The show demonstrated that the pirates, buffalo, cowboys and 'Indians' of old, may have perished but their myths remain.

Unit B is an artist-run exhibition space founded in Chicago in 2002 and opened in San Antonio 2006 under the direction of Kimberly Aubuchon. It is funded and run by exhibiting artists, curators, and a volunteer gallery staff. Unit B features emerging contemporary art, artists, and curators from around the globe. The exhibition *Unfurnished Room* consisted of the work of ten New York artists. Jamie Istenstein's *Eyehole* was installed on a wall with work of other exhibitors, the door knob hardware having been judiciously positioned near a vertical hairline crack, possibly at the joint of the drywall. In any case, it performed its function as an all-purpose metaphor for art, space, and anything that our innate curiosity may yield.

A few months ago René Paul Barilleaux, Chief Curator/Curator of Art after 1945 at the McNay Art Museum posted this message on the McNay curatorial blog, "Progress on the Stieren Center is happening at lightening speed. The interior gallery walls are up and soon to be completed,

dividing the 7500 square foot main exhibition galleries into a series of smaller spaces. Many of the interior details are in place...you can now really get a sense of how the building will feel once complete.” Our hard hat tour group surveyed firsthand the museum’s impressive progress.

At a cost of \$33.1 and set on 23 acres of gardens, in June 08 a modernist glass pavilion designed by architect Jean-Paul Viguier will officially open. This will nearly double the size of the McNay and will be the first museum expansion in the U.S. designed by a French architect. A unique feature of the new facility will be the three sculpture galleries separated by walls that will extend the Center’s architecture into the landscape, the first of its kind in Texas.

Sala Diaz is a small two-room gallery in a duplex on a residential block. Begun by artist Alejandro Diaz and with Hills Snyder as director, it has hosted guest curators such as Tracey Moffatt, Chuck Ramirez, Jennifer Davy, Henry Estrada and Michael Klein. The current exhibition featured Terry Karson, former curator at the Yellowstone Art Museum, who works with discarded packaging. He cuts rectangles from food packaging that contain logos and words, slicing them into thin stripes and rearranging them. With the sanding of the strips, their former function is blurred, essentially turning the collages into abstractions. The idea came from a visit by the artist to Turkey where he saw Arabic script on buildings in various stages of deterioration.

Peter Zubiarte started his Zubiarte Projects store in order to showcase his work in a functional setting without the restricted confinement of a gallery space. His utilitarian pieces such as stools, benches, and tables share a sturdy Shaker simplicity and honesty of materials while managing to be playful.

Zubiarte’s partner artist Katie Pell makes up the other half of Zubiarte Projects. Her work is a celebration of you the viewer, who she makes into the star of her diorama. Here every tree, plant, and animal of the forest join in your exultation. Pell’s work strives to be an oasis of appreciation in a generally dry and dusty world.

For Luminaria the Bettie Ward Studio was a melee of food, music, and banter. Drop-in guests included Patricia Pratchett with whom she co-founded the Artist Foundation of San Antonio, David Rubin director of the San Antonio Museum of Art, and Mayor Hardburger himself. This is where Bettie lives, and each wall is a densely written page of her life, whether it’s a photograph, painting, or a decoration. But Ward’s biography is at its most exuberant and saucy in her embroidery, the threaded drawings. One never doubts that any part of the story is being left out, or that the tale is ever told without an unflinching honesty. As in *The Man Who Loves Nature and Self-Portrait with Sundae, Pistol, Penis and Drumstick; Everything is the Same*, the stitches penetrate like gamma rays. It’s a marvel that the fabric isn’t scorched.

Our vigorous tour with director David Rubin of the San Antonio Museum of Art came to a rest at The Mixing Chamber in the Cowden Gallery. There artist Stuart Allen and the members of the Potter-Belmer Labs – Leslie Raymond and Jason Jay Stevens – collaborated on a giant sound and light installation. Large strips of sailcloth are suspended between the columns in the middle of the gallery, serving as projection screens. It became a very large luminaria – a sensorium actually, connecting us to the seat of our sensations, and with the mingling of color and tone inducing a type of synesthesia.

The former Lone Star Brewery complex became the San Antonio Museum of Art in 1981. It began with a focus on art of the Americas including pre-Columbian, Spanish Colonial and Latin American folk art. With significant gifts from the late Gilbert M. Denman, Jr. and the acquisition of the Stark-Willson Collection, a comprehensive collection of Egyptian, Greek and Roman art was added. Besides their impressive Asian wing, the museum now has one of the largest collections of western antiquities in the southern United States.

Situated along San Antonio's River Walk is the Southwest School of Art & Craft, one of the country's largest community-based art schools. Its exhibition Te Tataitanga/Bind Together by New Zealand artists of both indigenous Maori and European influences, featured paintings, sculptures, jewelry, weaving, photographs and other media. Correspondences and contrasts may be made between New Zealand's bi-cultural traditions and those of San Antonio.

Southwest associate curator Kathy Armstrong and Nigel Borell of New Zealand conceived of the exhibition as a series of snapshots of contemporary New Zealand art. The title Fa'a Fafine of Shigeyuki Kihara's photo above, means "in a manner of a woman." It is a term commonly used by Samoans to describe those gifted with the dual qualities between men and women, gender and sexual qualities very different from the binary oppositions typified in the west.

Curated by Franklin Sirmans, the International Artist-In-Residence program of Artpace featured the work of Regina José Galindo, Rodney McMillian, and Margarita Cabrera.

The Sisyphean tasks of performance-based video artist Kate Gilmore were also featured. One of the challenges that the artist imposed on herself was trying to hammer her leg out of a bucket of quick-drying mortar. Titled My Love is an Anchor, and as in most of Gilmore's tasks, it fit the mold as either futile or dangerous, but always memorable.

In her Artpace studio Mexican-born, Margarita Cabrera had set up an assembly line to construct 2,500 life-size copper butterflies, similar to the working procedures in Mexico's factories or maquiladoras. The top side of the copper was imprinted with a monarch butterfly pattern and its opposite with the impression of an American penny. Cabrera was making evident the disparity between the Mexican workers who assemble mass-produced goods and the American consumer who purchase them. These were subsequently installed in a suburban San Antonio home.