DINING WITH ROLANDO BRISEÑO

A 50-YEAR RETROSPECTIVE


DINING WITH
ROLANDO
BRISEÑO
A 50 YEAR RETROSPECTIVE

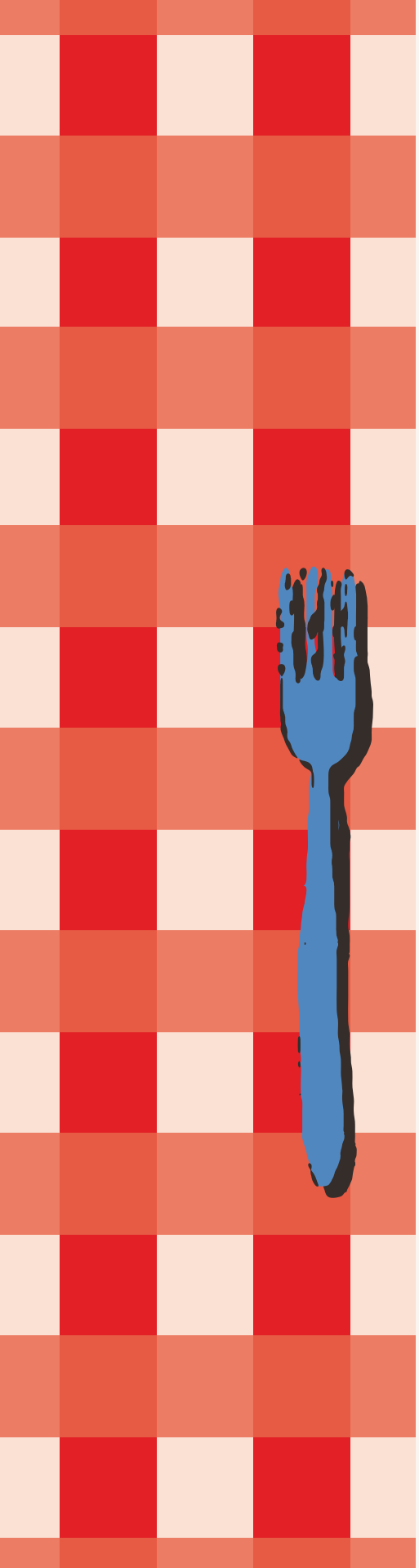
This publication accompanies the exhibition **Dining with Rolando Briseño: A 50-year Retrospective**, curated by Ruben C. Cordova, PhD and presented by the City of San Antonio Department of Arts & Culture at Centro de Artes, San Antonio, Texas, September 5, 2024 – February 9, 2025.

Exhibition Photography
Francisco H. Cortés

Catalogue Design & Layout
Coral Díaz

CENTRO DE ARTES

101 S. Santa Rosa
San Antonio, Texas 78207
SA.gov/Arts
#CentroDeArtesSA | @GetCreativeSA



CONTENTS

Top (left):
Alamo Piñata Participatory Performance, October 17, 2024.

Top & Bottom (right):
Visitors attend the opening reception on September 5, 2024.

Bottom (left):
Artist Talk with Rolando Briseño, November 14, 2024.

FOREWORD

The City of San Antonio's Department of Arts & Culture was proud to host the first retrospective dedicated to Chicano artist, activist, cultural adjustor, and culinary historian Rolando Briseño. *Dining with Rolando Briseño* features more than 75 works of art that span the past 50 years. From his well-known and loved Tablescape paintings, to drawings and paintings from his early years as an artist, there is so much to discover about this beloved San Antonio artist.

This retrospective captures the breadth and beauty of Rolando Briseño's work, which seamlessly blends art, culture, social causes, and food traditions. As a San Antonio-born Mexican American, Rolando Briseño's story aligns with that of many Americans: growing up amidst conflict and racism, but also amidst a culture of love, art, and traditions.

Particularly, Briseño's fascination with culinary practices and traditions are reflected greatly throughout the exhibition. So much of culture and life revolve around food—what we eat, how it is prepared, who is at the table, and what is discussed around that table. Briseño's work serves as a visual testament to what has been lived, fought for, and celebrated by Mexican Americans over the past 70-plus years and invites us to reflect on this history as we look toward creating a better future.

KRYSTAL JONES
Executive Director
City of San Antonio Department of Arts & Culture

Dear Art Patron,

Thank you for your continued support of the Centro de Artes gallery and the San Antonio arts community. It is with great pride that the Centro de Artes Committee presents this wonderful retrospective of local artist Rolando Briseño. We are especially delighted by the interesting and thought-provoking way in which he examines our daily rituals and customs. An activity that may be overlooked by most of us is dissected and analyzed by Briseño in a playful and colorful way. Take note of the details and movement. What resonates with you? Was it the pop culture elements or the food itself?

Please enjoy this carefully curated exhibition by Ruben C. Cordova, PhD who has contributed many thoughtful examinations of our art and culture through a Latinx lens. For this, we are grateful that our stories are being told by us and for us. It is my hope that his work serves to inspire the next generation to become art curators and feel encouraged to pursue this career. We are all storytellers, and we all have stories to tell.

Gracias,

YADHIRA LOZANO
Chair, Centro de Artes Committee
San Antonio Arts Commission
City Council District 3 Representative

Artist Statement

ROLANDO BRISEÑO

My work has always been about the ways we relate to one another, from boxers trading blows to sharing meals around a table.

I have transformed the traditional genre of still life into what I call Tablescapes, dynamic neo-futuristic tabletops, teeming with cultural and quantum activity. The energy of my Tablescapes reveal this place in every home, the table as the hearth, a secular ceremonial center for family gatherings—the locus and nucleus of community. We reach across the table, we talk across the table, we share food. Out of these exchanges, histories emerge, for better or worse.

As my work evolved, I incorporated quantum mechanics to these scenes: protons in motion, vibrating quarks, the patterns of the stars, and the cosmos in outer space. These expressions are all present in both the smallest and the largest contexts in our relations with each other. By placing such forms on the table, a symbol of stability, family, and celebration, I imply the possibility for the survival of human values amid the tumult of the contemporary world.

Taken as a whole, my work represents a reconciliation of nature and culture that include these micro and macro natural elements. Tables and food take their place as manifestations of culture, symbolizing the cosmic forces all around us.

Thankfully my creative practice has expanded by living in different places. I moved first to Mexico City to attend UNAM and then to New York City to attend Cooper Union where I met all kinds of people. These new voices exposed me to different ideas and cultures and studying art history at the University of Texas at Austin expanded my knowledge of world culture through art. In 1977, I returned to New York City in pursuit of my MFA at Columbia University. I had the good fortune of being part of a gallery in Rome where I learned to speak Italian. That taught me a new way to look at life.

I met my future husband, Ángel Rodríguez-Díaz in the NYC art world. He was a contemporary identity portrait painter of Puerto Rican descent. Ángel exposed me to yet another culture and a fresh look at a genre I knew little about. In 1994-95 we moved to San Antonio where we lived together for 34 years until his untimely death in 2023.

Rolando Briseño in his Brooklyn studio, ca. 1981. Photo courtesy the artist.

Rolando Briseño at Centro de Artes Gallery, San Antonio, TX, November 14, 2024. Photo by Francisco H. Cortés.

DINING WITH ROLANDO BRISEÑO
A 50-YEAR RETROSPECTIVE

Ruben C. Cordova, PhD | Exhibition Curator

As far back as Rolando Briseño (b. 1952) can remember, he has been thinking about food. He grew up in a traditional Mexican American household in San Antonio, where meals were always taken with the family at the dinner table. Briseño experienced more formal and elaborate dining while staying with relatives in Mexico City, where five course lunches were served every day on separate plates with considerable pageantry.

Briseño was shocked to discover that—for many of his fellow students in the U.S.—the table was not the locus of meals. Instead, they normally dined in front of the TV. This experience inspired his "Tablescape" series of paintings, in which Briseño explored—and sometimes anticipated—the interpenetration of dining with electronic media, including television, computers, and cell phones. His Tablescapes are dynamic tableaus rather than static "still lifes." Briseño also became a historian of foods native to the Americas. He studied the human engineering that made these foods possible, as well as the development of traditional recipes and dining traditions, which had a transformative effect on world cultures and politics.

EDUCATION

Briseño attended art classes at the Witte Museum during grade school (1958-66), and subsequently took private art classes (1966-70), because his high school did not include an art curriculum. Briseño studied at the Universidad Nacional Autonoma de Mexico (UNAM) in Mexico City (1970) and Cooper Union (1970-71) in New York City. At the University of Texas at Austin (1972-76), he received a BA in Art History and a BFA in painting. As part of a UT exchange program, he studied a semester in Peru with Fernando de Szyszlo. Briseño identified as a Chicano, and he joined the influential San Antonio-based Con Safo art group during its final period (1975-76). Mel Casas, the former Con Safo president, was the most influential group member at that time, as well as a highly visible Chicano public intellectual. Inspired by Casas, Briseño followed him in utilizing the term "cultural adjustor" on his business card, and Briseño also became an important public intellectual and activist in San Antonio.

Briseño invented his Tablescapes at Columbia University in New York, where he received his MFA (1979) in sculpture. During his 1986 residency at Yaddo, Briseño made paintings that used living grass as brushes. They inspired his dynamic brushstrokes that evoke movement.

ARTISTIC PHILOSOPHY

Briseño is "fascinated that everything is made out of microscopic elements that are in constant movement, just like the heavenly bodies of the universe."[*1] He includes the mirroring structures of the microcosm and macrocosm in his artworks, where one can find references to molecules, elements, quarks, planets, and stars. His Tablescapes reconcile nature and culture: the tables themselves, the

place settings, along with other manufactured objects, symbolize culture, whereas his foodstuffs reference nature.

Briseño became a public artist in New York. This important means of economic support freed him from reliance on the vagaries of the art market. Additionally, Briseño also wanted his work to be available to the general public, rather than the limited—often exclusive—public that frequents art galleries and museums. Public artworks are part of the urban fabric, and Briseño endeavored to endow his public commissions with social meaning.

PERSONAL LIFE, RETURN TO SAN ANTONIO

After Columbia, Briseño settled in New York because he loved the city's teeming energy, as well as the manifold opportunities it provided to artists. His work was exhibited widely in the U.S. and also in Italy. Briseño suffered a devastating fire that destroyed his home, studio, and 50 paintings in late 1985.[2] Some works on paper that survived the fire are in this retrospective. John Wessel, of Wessel O'Connor, his gallery in Rome, encouraged Briseño to move to Italy, where he lived and worked for a year. Briseño was primarily in Rome, but he also stayed and exhibited in Naples and Turin, and he also worked in Sicily. After time in Madrid and San Antonio, Briseño resettled in New York, in 1987, where, in 1990, he met his life partner Ángel Rodríguez-Díaz (1955-2023) in 1990.[3] They were married in New York in 2013, and they moved to San Antonio in 1994-95.

AWARDS AND RESIDENCIES

2007: National Association of Latino Art and Culture

1995: Joan Mitchell Foundation

1994: New York State Council on the Arts

1987 and 1989: Pollock-Krasner Foundation

1987: Residency, Bellagio Study Center, Rockefeller Foundation, Lago de Como, Italy

1985: Residency, Yaddo, Saratoga Springs

1985: Awards in the Visual Arts 3 Fellowship

1985: National Endowments for the Arts

1984: New York State Creative Artists Public Service Fellowship

MUSEUM AND PUBLIC COLLECTIONS

Briseño's work is in many museums, including: American University Museum (Washington D.C., transferred from the Corcoran Museum), the Brooklyn Museum, the Museo del Barrio (New York), the Blanton Museum of Art (Austin), Housatonic Museum (Bridgeport, CT), the Museum of South Texas (Corpus Christi), San Antonio Museum of Art, McNay Art Museum, El Museo de Arte Moderno (Sagrado Corazon University, San Juan, Puerto Rico), Museo de Arte de Puerto Rico (San Juan, Puerto Rico), Queensborough Community College Gallery/Museum (Queens, New York), the Transportation Museum (New York).

He is also in the following public collections: New York National Bank (New York), Hispanic Research Center, Arizona State University, University of Puerto Rico, Rio Piedras, Puerto Rico, University of Texas at San Antonio, University Health Center, San Antonio (Robert B. Green Campus and Medical Center), Valley National Bank, Phoenix, AZ.

EXHIBITION STRUCTURE

This retrospective, the first devoted to the artist, features 75 works in 10 sections dating from c. 1966 to the present day. The Early Work section includes his first painting and lithograph, male torsos, and works on paper that survived the 1985 fire. Other sections consist primarily of Tablescapes from different periods. One section features nude photographs taken on top of tablecloths that make allusions to erotic fruits as well as galaxies. *Spinning San Antonio*, the centerpiece of the exhibition, explores the whitewashed legacy of the Alamo. A Public Art section includes studies, metal capitals, and prints after public works. The Moctezuma's Table section of this retrospective (which commences with the cases in the entrance and continues to the next gallery) treats foods from the Americas, including buildings fashioned out of corn tortillas, and paintings that use chile as a pigment.

EARLY WORK

Adam is Briseño's first painting (Fig. 1). It was made when he was seventeen, under the tutelage of Jacqui Von Honts, who gave Briseño private lessons. Von Honts had trained at the Universidad de las Americas in Mexico City, and she was influenced by the Mexican muralists, especially Siqueiros, which accounts for the scumbling technique Briseño utilized in *Adam*.

Briseño was exploring his interest in male sexuality in *Adam*, and in the brightly colored torso paintings on the wall opposite it, which were done a decade later in 1976 (Fig. 2). The latter compositions were variations on the artist's own torso. Sometimes they were cropped like totemic pillars. The male and female chests and genitalia (reflecting, says Briseño, his bisexuality at that time) are sometimes stacked like totem poles. The rays behind the torsos (similar to those behind the Virgin of Guadalupe) endow them with sanctity, a sanctity Briseño extends to all bodies, and to sexuality as well.

The Kabbalah, Briseño's first print, is a lithograph executed in the traditional manner on a thick stone. The artist has

FIG. 1 *Adam*, c. 1966, Acrylic on Masonite, 36 x 24 in. Courtesy the Artist.

FIG. 2 *Torso Paintings*, c. 1976, Acrylic on unstretched canvas, Dimensions variable. Installation view at Centro de Artes in San Antonio, TX.

FIG. 3 *Chicano in the Barrio,* 1976, Crayon on paper, 11 x 7.5 in. Collection of the Benavides Family.

always been attracted to esoteric cultural phenomena and mysterious knowledge systems. He likes making multiple prints, because it enables him to disseminate his work more fully, and also to benefit economically from their sale.

Chicano in the Barrio and *Chicano on the Moon* represent antithetical outcomes. The latter expresses a hopeful vision, one in which the Chicano, elevated from poverty, makes limitless progress — all the way to the moon. The halo and the Virgin of Guadalupe on his chest imply sanctity. *Chicano in the Barrio*, on the other hand, represents a Chicano "deluded by patriotism," who waves an American flag, completely oblivious to the fact that he is impaled on a meat hook (Fig. 3). It symbolizes his death via military butchery in an unjust war (the Vietnam War ended in 1975).[4]

When Briseño had an artist's residency at Yaddo (in Saratoga Springs, New York) in 1985, he was "taken by the exuberance of the grass growth on the property." He utilized the grass to make art by applying biodegradable paint onto the grass and pressing paper onto the painted grass. Then he "embellished" the grass prints with additional paint in the studio. *Grass Ghost*, when it emerged from the grass, had a form that suggested an abstract, ghostly figure. Briseño emphasized these qualities by reinforcing the features that resembled a face. The grass prints helped Briseño to develop a sense of movement that he utilized in his subsequent paintings.

Lovers, also created during Briseño's time at Yaddo, is one of the most figural of his grass paintings. One golden figure is seated, with head directed upward. The other figure descends from above, with an outstretched left arm hanging downward. The suggestion of the two figures that emerged from the grass was heightened by blue/black paint. These schematic contours were worked over with splattered paint, adding depth and complexity to the composition.

Michelangelo on the Table, painted in Rome a decade later than the torso paintings, is a more dynamic and mature treatment of the male nude. This section of the exhibition affords a short stylistic survey of Briseño's development of this motif. *Michelangelo on the Table* also features his favorite motif: a table top with food. Briseño is partial to images of whole chickens, which, because they retain their limbs, are recognizable as animals. Consequently, images of whole chickens prepared as food show that humans are "animals that eat animals."* Implicitly, Briseño believes that this reality raises the issue of cannibalism.

Women Fighting at the Table (1983) and *Figures in Motion* (1984) survived Briseño's 1985 studio fire because they were stored in a metal flat file. They display the artist's early efforts to depict motion. These efforts culminate in the more dramatic, expressionistic style seen in *Dance on the Table* (1987) and *Computer Fast Food* (1989), which are hung nearby.

FIG. 4 *Judgment of Paris*, 1984, Enamel on Masonite, 84 x 84 in., Collection of Pedro Lujan and Leah Gitter, New York, Not in exhibition. Photo by Ruben C. Cordova.

FIG. 5 *After the Fire*, 1987, Acrylic on canvas, 36 x 40 in., Collection Unknown, Not in exhibition. Courtesy the Artist.

Briseño's *Judgment of Paris* is one of the few paintings from the artist's New York period to survive the 1985 fire (Fig. 4). Briseño was deeply interested in Greek Mythology, and he was drawn to this myth in particular, in which Paris had to choose the most beautiful goddess in a competition between Aphrodite, Athena, and Hera. This painting was done after graduate school at Columbia, when Briseño was at last able to pursue his own interests, instead of making works dictated by conventional New York taste. He recalls that New York—and the art world in general—was in the grip of Minimalism. "Painting and figurative work was completely out of fashion," says the artist, "painting was declared 'dead.'" He remembers "mock funerals with coffins" utilized to celebrate the death of painting.

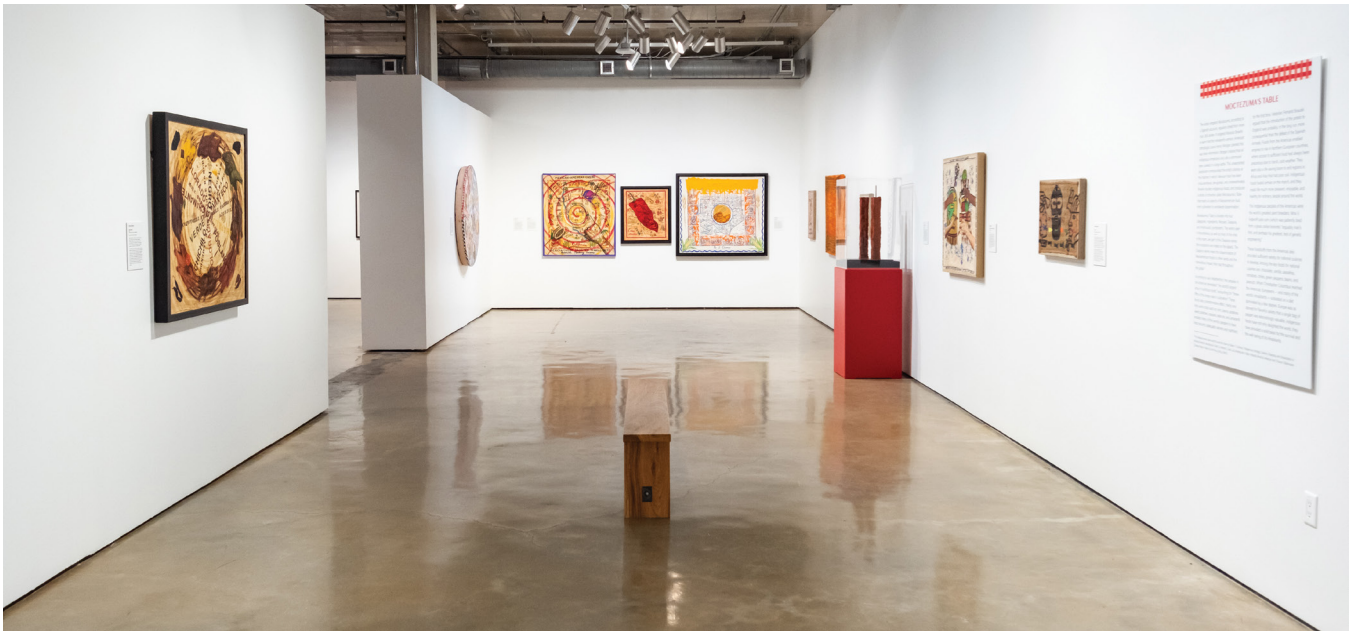
Briseño placed Aphrodite on the table because, as the winner, "she belongs on top of the table." In the artist's work, the table, in addition to an area for food and for dining, is a "place for negotiation, for deal-making." As *his* prize, Paris received Helen of Troy, the world's most beautiful woman. The result was the Trojan War.

Artistically, Briseño drew inspiration from figural work by Henri Matisse, and from Botticelli's *Birth of Venus*. He utilized enamel paint. This medium was inspired by paintings he saw in *taquerias* in San Antonio during frequent visits he made to his native city to escape cold New York City winters.

After the Fire was one of the first paintings Briseño made after the studio fire (Fig. 5). The artist was distraught when he made it. Only in retrospect did he realize that the painting's black and red color scheme represented the 1985 fire, and the dismembered man he depicted in it reflected his own state of devastation.

MOCTEZUMA'S TABLE

The Aztec emperor Moctezuma, according to a Spanish account, regularly dined from more than 300 dishes. It angered Rolando Briseño to learn that the nineteenth-century American ethnologist Lewis Henry Morgan claimed this was false information. Morgan instead insisted that all indigenous Americans consumed communal stews cooked in large pots. This unwarranted skepticism compounded the artist's dismay at the manner in which Mexican food has been misunderstood, denigrated, and underestimated. Briseño studied indigenous foods, and produced a series of artworks called *Moctezuma's Table* that treats all aspects of Mesoamerican food, from cultivation to worldwide dissemination.



Moctezuma's Table is divided into four categories: Ingredients, Recipes, Diaspora, and Inframundo (symbolism). The works seen in the entrance, as well as most of the ones in the first room, are part of the Diaspora series (works from other categories are treated first and noted below). The Diaspora series treats the dissemination of Mesoamerican foods to other lands and the momentous impact they had throughout the globe.[5]

According to Jack Weatherford, the peoples in the Americas developed "the world's largest array of nutritious foods," accounting for "three-fifths of the crops now in cultivation." These foods had a transformative effect. Hardy and high-yield crops such as corn, beans, potatoes, sweet potatoes, cassava, peanuts, and amaranth enabled many of the world's peoples to have food security (adequate calories and nutrition) for the first time. Historian Fernand Braudel argued that the introduction of the potato to England was probably, in the long run, more consequential than the defeat of the Spanish Armada. Foods from the Americas enabled empires to rise in Northern European countries, where access to sufficient food had always been precarious due to harsh, cold weather. They were also a life-saving boon to arid regions in Africa and Asia that had poor soil. Indigenous foods fueled armies on the march, and they made life much more pleasant, enjoyable, and healthy for ordinary people around the world.

The indigenous peoples of the Americas were the world's greatest plant breeders. Nina V. Federoff calls corn (which was patiently bred from a grass called teosinte) "arguably man's first, and perhaps his greatest, feat of genetic engineering."

These foodstuffs from the Americas also provided sufficient variety for national cuisines to develop. Among the key foods for national cuisines are: chocolate, vanilla, sassafras, tomatoes, chiles, green peppers, beans, corn, potatoes, and peanuts. When Christopher Columbus reached the Americas, Europeans — and many of the world's inhabitants — subsisted on a diet dominated by a few staples. Europe was so starved for flavorful variety that a single bag of pepper was astonishingly valuable. Indigenous foods have not only delighted the world, they have provided a solid basis for the survival and the well-being of its inhabitants.

Birth of the Tuna (1997, acrylic on ayate tablecloth) is part of the Inframundo section of Moctezuma's Table. It explores the Aztec myth that explains the origin of the tuna, the fruit of the prickly pear cactus. The Aztec god Huitzilopochtli tore out the heart of an opponent and threw it in Lake

From Left to Right: *Chile Mandala*, 1995, Ground chile on napkin, 19 x 20 in.; *Corn Tortilla Twin Towers*; *The First Course of An Aztec Banquet*, 1998, Acrylic on tablecloth, 36 x 36 in. Installation view at Centro de Artes Gallery in San Antonio, TX.

Texcoco. The cactus grew out of that heart, and its red fruit symbolically replicates the human heart. Briseño has depicted a human heart in the center of this work, from which cacti extend in all directions. Tunas form a circle around the perimeter of the painting.

The First Course of an Aztec Banquet is also part of the Inframundo series. The first course of an Aztec banquet consisted of smelling flowers and smoking from tubes. Briseño offers a contemporary update in the form of women smoking cigars. Stylistically, Briseño utilizes different modes of representation. The exchange of smoking tubes is rendered in a relatively flat style, similar to that utilized in ancient codices (books). The lighter-skinned hand belonging to a contemporary woman is receiving tobacco from a darker, mestizo hand. Both hands are rendered in a more three-dimensional style, in keeping with Western conventions.

Prince of Flowers is part of the Recipe section of Moctezuma's table. The seated figure is based on a famous Aztec statue in the Anthropology Museum in Mexico City known as Xochipilli, the patron god of flowers, poetry, and dance. The flowers depicted on his body and in the margins of Briseño's painting are hallucinogenic.

Worshippers ritually rubbed achiote (powdered annatto seeds) on his body as an offering. The red halo-like field that encircles the statue of the god refers to the emblem of the Liberty Bar, a bar and restaurant in San Antonio, which was the only place the artist could find food seasoned with achiote in the 1980s and 1990s. Now, several restaurants serve cochinita pibil, a Yucatecan pork dish seasoned with achiote.

Mole, invented in Puebla, is a colonial dish that uses indigenous and European ingredients. Briseño traveled in Mexico, researching all of the mole sauces he had heard of or read about. When he returned to San Antonio, his mother's caregiver provided him with several more.

In *Mole Wheel*, part of the Recipe section, Briseño pays homage to the many varieties of mole sauces. His colors are made with actual dried mole sauce powders. Their

From Left to Right: *Fast American Mexican Food, Taco Hell, Jack-in-the-Pot*, 1998, Ceramic clay and acrylic, approx. 7.5 x 6 x 6 in. each. Private collection.

coloristic variety gives a symbolic representation of their varied flavors. The mole-flavored chickens, which form a wheel, are represented in motion. Briseño has a penchant for depicting movement, which he finds visually exciting. In this work, the mole wheel seems to be spinning. Several mole ingredients, including chilies, tomatoes, and cinnamon, are depicted in the painting.

DIASPORA SERIES OF MOCTEZUMA'S TABLE

Taco Hell refers to Taco Bell, the leading international purveyor of fast, ersatz Mexican food. Its founder imitated the assembly-line model developed by McDonald's. Standardized packets of frozen and dehydrated ingredients are shipped throughout the world, to be warmed, assembled, and served at individual franchises. This is a denatured corporate cuisine, drained of culture and history, as well as taste.

As if insulting imitations of Mexican food were not enough, the global companies that market them have utilized insensitive marketing. One of the most famous is the talking Taco Bell Chihuahua, a mascot some have criticized for representing Mexican-ness with a dog.

The clown/antenna ball is the mascot of Jack in the Box, Taco Bell's aggressive competitor discussed in more detail in connection with *Jack-in-the-Pot*.

Jack-in-the-Pot's ghostly white, snowball-like Jack in the Box emblem seems appropriate for a fast-food business whose aggressive anti-Taco Bell advertising has been perceived as anti-Mexican. One ad had the Jack in the Box mascot shouting at a Taco Bell Chihuahua impersonator: "So what — you're a dog," with the implication that Mexican food is dog food. Another ad had the mascot berating the Chihuahua "Who's been eating beans?" Jack in the Box also serves denatured Mexican fast food in the form of tacos, breakfast burritos, and poppers.

Jack-in-the-Pot also features the product name Doritos, whose parent company utilized the most controversial of ersatz Mexican spokespersons, the Frito Bandito. This much-criticized stereotypic cartoon character, first introduced on children's programs, was reluctantly withdrawn only after protracted protests. *Fast American Food* refers to Taco Cabana, the Texas-based corporation, which uses palm trees as a corporate emblem.

The vessels (and the fragment) exhibited here were purchased in Metepec, Mexico, from a factory that produces tourist souvenirs. By combining Pre-Columbian vessel shapes and painted motifs with corporate logos, Briseño highlights the manner in which these corporations capitalize and profit off of a cuisine that developed over thousands of years in Mexico. These vessels, as well as the building models made of tortillas are part of the Diaspora section of the series entitled *Moctezuma's Table*, featured in the lobby and the first gallery.

UT Austin Tortilla Tower was inspired by a sculpture's plaque that reads "Mexico the Mother of Texas." Briseño created his replica of the UT Austin Tower out of corn tortillas. He regards the tower as the "symbol of education" in Texas. The tortillas were quick-fried in corn oil and placed on metal

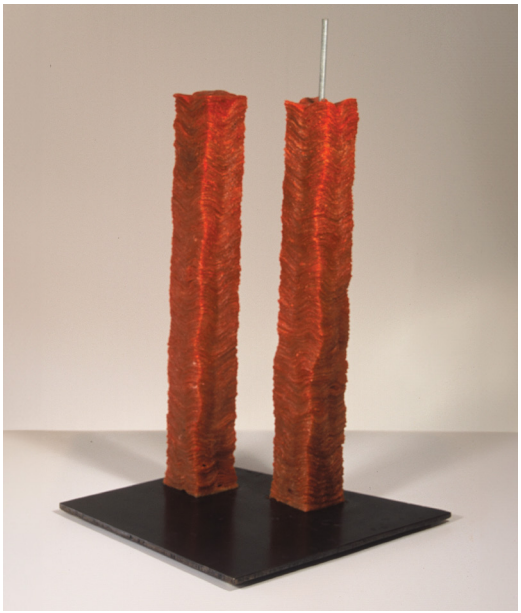


FIG. 6 *Corn Tortilla Twin Towers*, 2002, Corn tortillas, ground chile, iron, 28 x 16 x 14 in. Collection of Michael Imbimbo. Courtesy the Artist.

FIG. 7 *Piri-Piri*, 1997, Acrylic and chile on African cloth, 16 x 24 in., Courtesy the Artist.

armatures while still wet. Briseño utilized a chile patina to emulate the burnt orange color of his alma mater.

Corn is the quintessential Mexican foodstuff, the primary fuel of several great Mesoamerican civilizations. Briseño reasoned that corn was therefore the appropriate material for this model edifice, because "From cowboys to chili, Texas' motherland is Mexico."* The artist was pleased with this model, and he resolved to create corn tortilla versions of other emblematic Texas edifices.

The former Texaco building in Dallas, crowned by a red Pegasus, inspired *Magnolia Tortilla Tower.* The artist viewed it as an extraordinarily beautiful building, which is why he wanted a corn tortilla model of it.

Replicating the building's complex masses and voids required the utilization of several layers of tortillas, which warped, emphasizing the properties of the corn tortilla building blocks. The color of the building was emulated with brown pasilla chile as pigment.

Corn Tortilla Twin Towers is a corn tortilla version of New York's World Trade Center, which was destroyed in the September 11, 2001 attack (Fig. 6). It is Briseño's memorial to "*los hijos de maiz"* (the sons of corn) that perished when the twin towers came down. He surmises that many unknown Mexicans died that day: undocumented low-level employees, such as busboys and janitors, who worked early in the morning. "So many never made it back home," says the artist. He made the *Twin Towers* to scale: they rest on a base whose dimensions are proportionate to the footprint of the twin towers. Each tower is fashioned out of 300 corn tortillas.

MasAlamo is a punning title. "Masa," means dough. Briseño calls it "the basis of Mexican civilization." Since "mas" means more, "MasAlamo" means "more Alamo," as well as "dough Alamo."

The missions — including the Alamo — were the first European settlements in Texas, built by Spanish and Native Americans. Briseño calls them a *mestizaje*, "a cultural and biological mixture." Masa, and other indigenous traditions, came with the Tlaxcalans, who were brought to Texas by the Spanish. Briseño calls masa the "mortar of Mexican culture," and he deems the Alamo to be "the birthplace of the Mexican American." *MasAlamo* was featured in the "Olvidate del Alamo" (Forget the

Alamo) and "Arte Contemporaneo" exhibitions at the Centro Cultural Aztlán in San Antonio in 2004.

In *Piri-Piri*, Maya and Aztec heads face one another on a cloth from Senegal as four varieties of chiles pass between them, symbolizing the transmission of culture and cuisine within Mesoamerica (Fig. 7). Meanwhile, an African mask in the center calls out "Piri-Piri" (an African word for chile) to signal Africa's appreciation for this food. The African taste for chile even contributed to Cajun-style cuisine.

Footprints (inspired by Mesoamerican manuscripts) allude to the migration of food as well as to human migration. The global dissemination of Mesoamerican foods, like the chile stains that color this cloth, have enabled the development of national cuisines. By using chile powder as a pigment, Briseño has transformed an object of culinary delectation into one of aesthetic delectation.

Tabasco is a response to "hot pepper" sauces and "Louisiana sauces," such as the Tabasco brand that uses the word pepper instead of chile. Briseño notes that all of these sauces are made from chilies from Mexico, and he also uses chile as a pigment to color the painting.

Chile Mandala is painted with chile and mole sauces as pigments. The spiral symbolizes infinity, and the fact that chile is mixed into mole sauces. Briseño uses the word mandala as a reminder that Indian cuisine was not hot prior to the introduction of chilies.

Briseño has included an outlined flower in the center of the work. The four leaves attached to it represent the four directions, which were important in Mesoamerican philosophy. Thus, at the center of this work, Briseño references a core Mesoamerican belief.

Bitter enemies of the Aztecs, the Tlaxcalans were indispensable allies of the Spanish. As his canvas, Briseño utilizes a dish towel devoted to bread (which is inscribed three times in the banner at the top of the painting). The towel features a rolling pin in the center, ears of wheat on either side of it, as well as other references to European bread-making. Above these elements, Briseño has

FIG. 8 *Picnic: 2500 B.C.E.*, 1996, Acrylic on kitchen napkin, 18 x 18 in. Collection Unknown, Not in exhibition. Courtesy the artist.

painted the glyph for Tlaxcala (two hands making a tortilla over two hills). He refers to corn, the indigenous staple foodstuff, by utilizing an ear of corn as a paint roller (which added irregular vertical streaks of magenta). Indigenous traditions are thus superimposed over their European counterparts. This work is from the Recipes section of Moctezuma's Table. The Tlaxcalans, credited with the first corn tortillas, also created the first flour tortillas. Additionally, they brought tortilla-making technology to the present-day Southwestern U.S., including San Antonio. The Nahuatl words express indigenous reverence for tortillas.

Picnic: 2500 B.C.E. is the final work in the Diaspora series (Fig. 8). Briseño contrasts condiment sauces that are utilized at contemporary picnics (mustard and barbeque sauce) with salsa picante. He notes that the recipe for this salsa has existed for 5,000 years or more, unlike the condiments seen in this painting. This passage of time is represented by red and green spirals tinged with white. They reflect the colors of salsa picante's primary ingredients: chile, tomatoes, herbs, and onions.

FIG. 9 *Mexican American Cuisine: California,* 2000, Acrylic on tablecloth, 52 x 46 in., Courtesy the Artist; *New Mexico,* 2000, Acrylic, oil, and chile on tablecloth, 32 x 28 in. and *The No. 2 Dinner*, 2000, Acrylic on tablecloth, 48 x 53.5 in. Collection of the University of Texas at San Antonio. Installation view at Centro de Artes, San Antonio, TX.

California and the two following paintings comprise the triptych *Mexican American Cuisine* (Fig. 9). All three were painted on cloth maps that have touristic vignettes. *California* has colonialist "Spanish fantasy" images with romanticized, stereotypic features. The red and yellow spirals suggest an earthquake epicenter as well as a target. Painted after the passage of anti-immigration legislation (Propositions 187 and 209), the pink and brown fists symbolize an Anglo-Mexican conflict over California. The hands in the other two corners, however, exchange food (a hand-made taco, and a commercial version in a Taco Bell bag). This exchange is an alternative to conflict, and the plate in the center awaits these food products.

The kitschy imagery painted on the *New Mexico* tablecloth emphasizes peaceful and diligent Native Americans who weave blankets and fashion jewelry. Implicitly, they have been pacified by the pioneers in the work's center, highlighted by an ox-driven covered wagon, bearing a "Sante Fe Trail" inscription. Labeled the "Land of 'Billy the Kid,'" the printed imagery has little reference to modernity (except for oil wells). The sole Mexican presence is a sombrero-wearing cotton picker near the border. Thus New Mexico is the "Land of Enchantment" specifically because it has marginalized its people of color. Briseño has painted an enormous Anaheim chile to mark the state as a place of chile monoculture.

Painted over a map of Texas, the thick yellow paint in *The No. 2 Dinner* mimics molten cheese (a Tex-Mex specialty) that is humorously — and not so humorously — meant to suggest a pool of dripping blood, like those depicted in horror movie posters. American cheese does double duty not only as a foodstuff, but as an American occupier and invader. This implication is reinforced by the presence of the Alamo church on the right, which is the most potent Anglo American symbol in Texas. Briseño's triptych is a commentary on the conquest and annexation of half of Mexico, and of continuing political struggles and types of representations that are utilized to represent these three states.

Briseño's *Fatso Watso Table* is a fitting concluding image for the section devoted to Moctezuma's Table (Fig. 10). On a base that includes a picnic tabletop, Briseño depicts a "convergence" of three fattening cuisines: Tejano/Norteño, Euro American, and African American. They contribute mightily to the high proportion of overweight people in San Antonio and in Texas. Unlike the relatively healthy Native American foods featured in Moctezuma's banquet, the foods in this painting are fried, filled with fats, and/or saturated in fattening sauces.

Nonetheless, this complex mixture of cuisines from three continents is shared with pleasure and generosity, as all ethnic groups dine and grow fat together. The hands in the

FIG. 10 *Fatso Watso Table*, 1995, Enamel on plastic tablecloth, 53 in. diameter, Collection of Peter Krulevitch & Susana Lopez-Krulevitch.

painting were modeled on those of Briseño's friends, and his own hands are depicted in the lower center as an artistic signature.

DYNAMIC FIGURES ON RED WALL IN CENTER OF MAIN GALLERY

Briseño made a number of single figures in the mid-1980s in order to explore movement on both a figural level and a molecular level. He was especially intrigued by the incredible movements necessary to throw a discus, which the artist describes as "especially strong and beautiful."* At the same time, Briseño views the human race as part of nature, rather than a semi-divine being modeled on a god's image. "We are natural," says the artist, "we are animals, we are all made of the same stuff."* While depicting a tightly-wound athlete, who is about to make a spinning movement in order to develop torque, Briseño also wanted to suggest that this figure is made up of tiny atoms and quarks, that are themselves in constant motion.

Briseño's single figures were inspired by his interest in anthropology, specifically ceremonial activities that centered on the hearth. These include rituals and the sharing of food during meals.

His interest in movement was spurred by the grass paintings he executed at Yaddo, two of which are in this exhibition. Briseño studied magazines to search for images that had the most movement. The red underpainting in *Spirit of the Warrior* symbolizes the inner turmoil of a hunter/killer. It also reflects the artist's vexing medical condition (ulcerative colitis, which has now developed into Crohn's disease), which required multiple surgeries.

The point at the bottom of the figure represents the dangerous insecurity of someone who feels the need to always attack other animals, including other people. Thus the piece has contemporary resonance, as well as historical significance.

TABLESCAPES

Briseño utilized Tablescapes to explore many themes, including cultural mixing, human interaction, dining habits, sexual attraction, the interpenetration of technology with dining at the table, and the structure of the universe.

Fighting by the Table reflects a non-dining experience Briseño had when he returned to San Antonio in 1994, after many years in New York City. He was particularly struck by billboards, which he describes as "the largest objects on the Texas landscape." The horizontal table reflects the proportions of a billboard, with depictions of fruit and a ubiquitous chicken. The two men above it, who are dressed as boxers, symbolize the act of fighting at the table. Such fights were the opposite of the polite sociability that Briseño expected at the dinner table. The gloves and the food are rendered with enamel paint, which gives them an emphatic sheen. This utilization of enamel was inspired by another phenomenon that Briseño experienced in San Antonio. When he noticed that little *taquerias* rendered their dishes on the walls in enamel paint, he liked the effect, and he followed suit in this painting.

San Antonio Table utilizes a dark man's body as the dinner table. The painting has four spinning plates, one of which is superimposed over the man's head. A crossed knife and fork (which recall human crossbones used by both the Spanish and the people indigenous to the Americas in their graphic and sculptural iconography) rest on the center of this man's chest. These common dinner utensils seem to be transfixed, transformed into a contemporary religious emblem that potentially references both cultures.

Center: *Fighting By the Table*, 1983, Enamel on wood and masonite, 96 x 52 in. Installation view at Centro de Artes Gallery in San Antonio, TX.

Silverware, everyday objects, are thus highlighted as important elements of a fundamental ritual, one that Briseño refers to as "the ritual of the table." A light-skinned hand, reminiscent of the hand of god in Christian paintings, reaches down from the right (the side of righteousness in Christian iconography). Meanwhile, a television remote flies in from the left (the sinister), the direction of the damned. While utilizing a male body as a table, Briseño plays with iconographic conventions.

Proton Couple is a complex tabletop with a stylized male and female figure, as well as the symbols of the proton (three interlocking circles). In this manner, Briseño emphasizes that all objects in the universe are made of the same subatomic particles. All bodies, large and small, from people to planets, are subject to the same laws of attraction. The male and female figures symbolize sexual attraction and its product: procreation. The half-hidden skull, meanwhile, serves as an emblem of mortality.

Confusion at the Table features a group of people who are arguing above a table filled with fruit. The people make chaotic, intertwined motions that render them almost illegible. Briseño had created a drawing with similar tumult. He liked it so much that he rendered it in paint. The artist reveled in the confusion of gestures. A solitary person grabs a piece of fruit. According to the artist, it is perhaps a forbidden snack before the meal is formally served — or perhaps it is a weapon of opportunity. Such is the confusion and danger when agitation and violence supplant conviviality.

Mexico is an aerial view of a table set with a Mexican colonial tea service, superimposed over an indigenous man who is performing a dance ceremony (Fig. 11). Sand is utilized to represent what the artist calls "the earthiness of Pre-Columbian cultures." The painting represents *mestizaje* (the mixing of races and cultures in Mexico). The plates are configured in the form of a cross, which symbolizes the central tenet of Christianity, as well as the Mesoamerican concept of the four directions. The handgun refers to modern violence in contemporary Mexico, enabled by weapons smuggled from the U.S. A television remote symbolizes the obtrusion of modern technology onto the dinner table, which, in this painting, is held in equilibrium with ancient customs and beliefs. The oranges in the

FIG. 11 *Mexico*, 1992, Acrylic on tablecloth, 49 x 32 in., Collection of Dr. Ellen Riojas Clark.

FIG. 12 *Games People Play*, 1992, Acrylic and oil on wood, 64 x 72.5 in.

central plate are in a configuration that signifies the proton, referencing the sub-atomic building blocks of the universe, and the ultimate commonality of all things.

Mesa Cotidiana, unlike *Mexico*, depicts a table in flux. The table, like the *Mole Wheel* seen in the first gallery, seems to be in motion, as are several diners, who are reaching out onto the table.

Games People Play features two men who face each other across a table (Fig. 12). They are perhaps on their first date. But both of them look to the side, at other men on monitors (which could be either television or computer screens). This kind of distraction or alienation from interpersonal communication struck the artist as an odd, American phenomenon, so unlike the sociability he experienced at his family's dinner table. It is a symptom of what the artist regards as the alienated culture that typifies mainstream America, born of technology rather than tradition.

Table Punch is an aerial view of a round dinner table (Fig. 13). Dishes and fruit encircle two boxers with red gloves in the center of the painting. One boxer has just taken a punch to the head, causing his head to turn to the rear. *Table Punch* is both a depiction and a symbol of fighting at the table, another reference to violence in U.S. society.

Ballo della Tavola reflects Briseño's enjoyment of the movement of the human body, including traditional and contemporary dance (Fig. 14). In *Ballo della Tavola*, an ambiguously gendered person is dancing with a table as a partner. The latter is set with fruit and two chickens.

Original Proton Table is an aerial view of a round table with three interlocking circles in movement, which represent the proton (Fig. 15). Within these three circles are three smaller circles, perhaps oranges, with two personages and a spiral inside of them. There are also three screens on the table, one depicts a woman's breasts, the other a roasted chicken. The third (an image on the screen of a laptop computer) features a human hand that is reaching for the breasts and the chicken (or one might say the breasts and the breast). The hand reflects the artist's study of disembodied hands

FIG. 13 *Table Punch*, Acrylic on poly tablecloth, 63 in. diameter.

FIG. 15 *Original Proton Table*, 1989, Oil on wood, 48 in. diameter, Collection of BK and John Marc, Scarsdale, New York, Not in Exhibition. Courtesy the Artist.

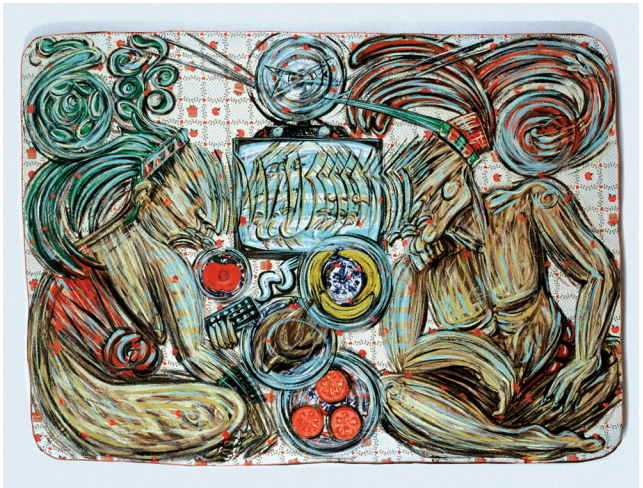


FIG. 16 *Chicken Mole*, 1992, Enamel on plastic tablecloth, 50 x 70 in. Collection of El Museo del Barrio, New York, Not in Exhibition. Courtesy the Artist.

FIG. 14 *Ballo della Tavola*, 1986, Oil on wood, 66 x 44 x 1 ½ in. Collection of the Brooklyn Museum, New York, Not in exhibition. Courtesy the Artist.

in Medieval art, and his belief that the quest for sex and food were the primary human drives. In this work Briseño replicates the structure of the proton with a trio of elements repeated multiple times.

In *Chicken Mole,* two Mayans (based on a relief) are watching television (Fig. 16). Their headdresses intermingle with the television antenna, making a connection between the ancient Maya and their contemporary descendants. "The Maya are still alive," emphasizes the artist, "they are watching a television screen."* Meanwhile, this transhistorical event is witnessed by the symbol of the proton–made with three tomatoes–and a circle of bananas that represents cyclical time. In this manner Briseño connects ancient and contemporary knowledge.

T.V. Love Table is the ultimate in alienation. The two "lovers" are not present at all at the dinner table. Instead, they are images on separate television screens, united by a central spiral. The spirals above the television sets represent their separate sexual and television signals.

The table is set for one, and the place setting features a remote control device inside the fork, as if it were a piece of silverware. Its positioning represents the normalization of technology as a fact of life, and, specifically, technology's incorporation into contemporary dining practices. The banana, situated in the center, between the male and the female screen images, is intended as a phallic symbol, one marked with an emphatic black shadow that endows it with a greater presence.

FIG. 17 *American Table*, 1994, Acrylic on Tablecloth, 31 x 51 in. Collection of the City of San Antonio.

American Table, which was exhibited at the Museum of Modern Art in New York City last year, features a tabletop with a solitary male diner (Fig. 17). He is cutting the food on his plate, while holding his silverware in the American manner. This diner is viewing a sexy woman, whose face appears on a television screen. Meanwhile, on the other side of the table, a chicken is cooking in a microwave oven. Three tomatoes on a plate are positioned in a triangular configuration, in order to refer to the symbol of the proton. In this manner, Briseño invokes the common building blocks that make up everything in the world. The bananas, like the spiral in the center of the painting, are seemingly in motion, symbolizing erotic reverie, as well as the passage of time.

Punch on the Table features a man being punched in the center of the painting. Each of the four plates has a depiction of a male hand. They symbolize what the artist calls "hands-on eating and hands-on fighting" at this dinner table. Instead of a ritual of sharing and conviviality, the dining scenario has devolved into a Social Darwinian site of struggle and violence.

PHOTOGRAPHS AND PRINTS

Briseño began utilizing digital technology in the 2000s, which allowed him to combine the visual material in his photographs with content from other sources. Critic and curator David Rubin calls his *Celestial Tablescapes* series "the most thought-provoking of these explorations" (Fig. 18). They were exhibited in 2007 as part of Fotoseptiembre USA, the annual photography festival held in San Antonio.[6]

For this series, Briseño took inspiration from a Swedish Brain Institute essay on pheromones. It connected sexual attraction to scents emanating from erogenous zones.

FIG. 18 *Goddess of the Table*, 2007, Giclee print, 31 x 33.5 in. Courtesy the Artist.

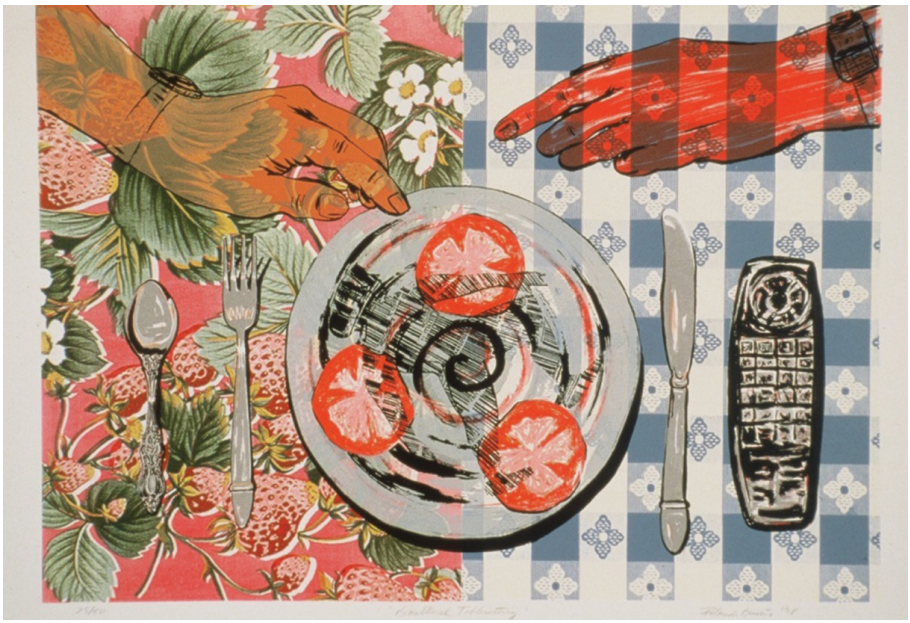


FIG. 19 *Bicultural Table Setting*, 1998, Serigraph print, 16 x 22 in. Courtesy the Artist.

"Humans," says Briseño "are animals, and pheromones are further proof."* In his images, Briseño combined heavenly bodies and terrestrial (human) bodies. Consequently, as Rubin says, Briseño's cosmological visions were expanded "to include references to sexual appetite."[7]

Curator and scholar Scott Sherer observes that Briseño is "intrigued by the physical mysteries of attraction as central components of personal and social relationships."[8] Briseño combines fruits and flowers with nude couples (both same-sex and opposite-sex) that are posed on tablecloths, which renders them tablescapes. "Flowers superimposed over the figures' erogenous zones identify the locations of attracting scents," notes Rubin, "while phallic or vaginally shaped fruit appears scattered across the tablecloths as symbols of eroticism."[9] As Sherer points out, Briseño thus "provocatively locate[s] the mysteries of organic experience within the themes of still life."[10]

Rubin says Briseño views sexuality "as merely one of the many energies making up the cosmos," thus he "floats the tablescape compositions in outer space."[11] The *Celestial Tablescapes* series is a continuation of Briseño's long fascination "with scientific studies showing that elements of attraction extend from subatomic particles to the limitless aspects of the universe."[12] The series is also a continuation of the artist's habitual co-mingling of technology on tabletops (Fig. 19). Several of the figures hold cell phones, referencing "the relatively new cultural practices of using these devices as tools for sexting and hooking up."[13]

Cosmic Mirror, a print that includes a self-portrait, likewise treats many of the artist's ongoing themes: it "addresses the sacred relationship between the individual and the cosmos, between culture and nature."[14] The table, cloth, and place settings symbolize culture, with the self-portrait seemingly wearing the plate like a halo. The superimposed spiral symbolizes time and infinity. The fifteen galaxies, stars, and supernovas in the top half of the piece, based on Hubble Space Telescope photographs, form a "halo" that "becomes a window into the infinite."[15]

FIG. 20 *Spinning San Antonio de Valero, a.k.a. Upside Down San Antonio*, 2009, Painted Styrofoam on processional base, 192 x 41 x 64 in. Courtesy the Artist. Installation view at Centro de Artes, San Antonio, TX.

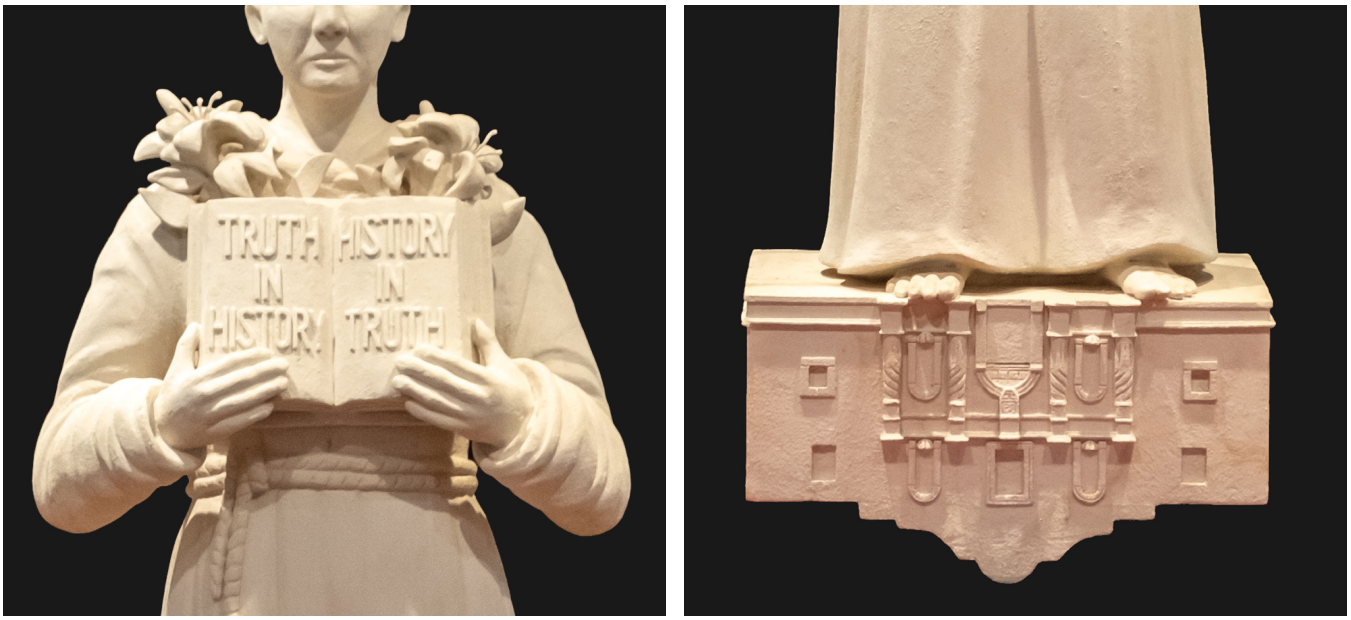


FIG. 21 *Spinning San Antonio de Valero, a.k.a. Upside Down San Antonio*, 2009 (Detail)

THE ALAMO

In folk Catholicism, when a devotee makes a request to Saint Anthony that is unfulfilled, that devotee may "punish" a statue of Saint Anthony by placing it upside down. The ingenious, double-ended structure of Briseño's *Spinning San Antonio de Valero* (a.k.a. *Upside Down Saint Anthony)* statue ensures that either Saint Anthony, the patron saint of lost causes (also understood as the city of San Antonio) or the church of the former Misión San Antonio de Valero (the Alamo) is upside-down (Fig. 20). Designed for performances, this statue has a processional base, with a hand-cranked pivot bar for spinning it.

Briseño's *Spinning San Antonio Fiesta* was performed four times (2009-12) in front of the Alamo church on June 13, Saint Anthony's feast day. Briseño's statue was carried and spun by four actors dressed as a *Pachuco*, an enslaved African, a 19th century undocumented Anglo immigrant, and an undocumented Mexican prisoner in the U.S. It began with an indigenous cleansing, and it featured music and dance. The performance concluded with the breaking of an Alamo-shaped *piñata* filled with toy babies of color. The title of the piñata performance is "The Alamo Hatches Brown Babies."

Briseño sought this miraculous intervention:

"The favor being requested in this case is that Mexican Americans/Tejanos take their rightful place as the heirs and descendants of the builders and the original inhabitants of this city. Our mixed ancestry—European, African, and Native American—has long been disdained by Anglos, but it is in fact a source of pride to our Mexican-origin population. In many respects, our multi-ethnicity represents the future of the United States."[16]

Briseño's title exposed the "'spinning' of the narrative of the Alamo," wherein we are given a story "whose purpose is to legitimize the privileged status of Anglo Americans in a hegemonic manner."[17] This distorted narrative, in turn, makes Mexican-descended people feel unwelcome at the Alamo. Because Saint Anthony is a Doctor of the Church, Briseño endowed his statue with a book whose open pages read: "Truth in History/History in Truth" (Fig. 21).[18]

The artist is hopeful that the Alamo will "become a place where all people can go to leave behind discord and contemplate the convergence of cultures."[19]

In 2005, at the second *Forget the Alamo* exhibition, held at the Centro Cultural Aztlán in San Antonio, Briseño

staged *The Alamo Hatches Brown Babies*, an interactive performance piece wherein visitors smashed an almost-impregnable Alamo-shaped piñata. The brown babies that spilled out of it symbolized the birth of the Chicano.[20]

The exhibited plastic babies are like those utilized in the various performances, and the two Alamo piñatas that flank Briseños statue refer to the Alamo piñatas mentioned above. A third Alamo piñata (one with a Texas motif) was smashed by visitors to the Centro de Artes gallery in a performance during the run of this exhibition.

PUBLIC ART PROJECTS

Briseño values public art projects as important sources of artistic recognition, broadened public access, and vital means of economic support.

At the Table, his first public project involved the creation of aluminum column capitals (1991) for the North White Plains Train Station in New York. The Metropolitan Transit Authority site Museum Without Walls features photographs of the capital reliefs in situ.[21] The two double-sided capitals on view in this section, which are unpainted, represent hands holding remote control devices.

Briseño moved to Monterrey, Mexico to cast these sculptures, initially utilizing melted Tecate beer cans for material. Commuters discussed details of this commission in the *New York Times*: one saw "footballs and skulls," while another commuter perceived "halved watermelons and jack-o'-lanterns… . Other images are more obvious – bowls of fruit, hands holding telephone receivers."[22]

Briseño's commission (1992) for the Columbus Circle subway in New York City made use of a new technique that transformed the sketch included in this exhibition into a much larger enamel plaque designed to withstand the heavy wear of an always-busy subway. Via a skull and Mexican produce, Briseño injected "a taste of Mexico" into New York City.*

In 1996, Briseño created a dramatic entrance to the Cypress Hills Branch of the Brooklyn Public Library, which featured a book in the center that opened as the gates opened, as well as a stylized reader reaching for the book, and a computer symbolizing technological advancement.

Briseño's *Macro/Micro Culture* installation at the Austin Convention Center (2002) "reconciles nature and techno-culture by mythologizing a contemporary creation theory."[23] Prints after three Austin images (*Brain Listening to Music*, *The Sun*, and *Heart*) are included in the exhibition.

In 2005 Briseño created "Galaxy Way," a representation of proto-stars in their gaseous state, which were photographed by the Hubble Telescope. This work, which is on an elevated train platform, is fashioned out of heat-formed plexiglass. [https://www.fly2houston.com/iah/art/galaxy-way] [http://rolandobriseno.art/]

For the Metropolitan Transit Authority in Houston, Briseño created images of Tejano heroes for a glass wall for a North Line train station platform in 2013. Images include Lorenzo de Zavala, the first vice-president of the Republic of Texas, Olga Y. Solic, an educator, Gustavo C. Garcia, the Texas Civil Rights attorney, Dr. Hector P. Garcia, the American G. I. Forum organizer, and Lillia Mendoza, a notable singer.

Briseño's commissions in San Antonio begin with *Father Damian Massanet's Table* (1991), commemorating the encounter of the Spanish and the Cuahuiltecans on the San Antonio River. It helped bring about a revivification of the site, now known as "marriage island."[24]

Briseño's most impressive public commission in San Antonio is *The Learning Tree*, a 25 feet tall, 2 ½ ton grill forged out of bronze with a waterfall behind it. It depicts the learning tree (with large roots that refer to education and locally rooted culture). The tree is nurtured by the sun's rays and water from the waterfall. Clouds, the source of water, are depicted at the top of the grill. The tree branches grow into spirals that represent learning and development throughout life. Briseño created the grill for the new administration building at Trinity University in 2006. This metaphor for learning was featured on the cover of *Texas Architecture*.

Briseño's later public art projects in San Antonio (2010-12) include two more works on the river: *Puente de los Encuentros; Puente de Rippling Shadows,* and one at the airport: *Gateways: The Four Directions.*[25]

FIG. 22 *Four Lunch*, 1988, Acrylic and oil on wood, 83 x 48 in.

TWO LARGE PAINTINGS

Briseño's experiments in depicting movement, such as in the drawings and paintings seen earlier in this exhibition, find fulfillment in *Four Lunch*, which depicts three dramatically gesticulating figures (the fourth is on a television monitor) (Fig. 22). Thus he combines dining and modern technology: one figure is communicating with the person on the screen rather than with his dining companions. In an almost sacramental act, the other two figures are physically merging with each other, as well as with the watermelon they consume. The other human figure, on the other hand, is blasphemously (in Briseño's conception of appropriate table behavior) "consumed" by the television set. He represents the American mode of dining, in which solitary consumers are more invested in technology than they are in sociability.

A decade before he made *The Annunciation*, Briseño took a class on medieval art at Columbia University. He was surprised to learn of the strict conventions that governed the painting of religious subjects. For instance, the angel Gabriel always approached the Virgin Mary from the left. It struck the artist as "weird" that rules would be so specific. Briseño decided to violate this convention by reversing their positions, "just for the hell of it, to be an iconoclast."*

The subject allowed Briseño to depict motion and emotion. He also, as another act of artistic rebellion, included a huge table in his annunciation painting. Thus he imported his favorite subject, the table setting, into this painting, transforming it into a work that invokes images of the Last Supper.

Briseño notes: "I am interested in myths from the world's many cultures, including those found in Christian mythology."* He adds: "I am culturally Catholic, I enjoy a maximalist, Baroque aesthetic, which comes from the art produced by the church, especially during the Mexican Baroque period. I utilize the stories and the imagery, but I quit believing in all the supernatural aspects of the religion after high school."*

CARTOON DISH TOWEL SERIES

In 1993, Briseño bought five dishtowels in Cuernavaca, Mexico, that were imprinted with U.S. cartoon characters. He painted over portions of these towels, rendering them "altered readymades" in Duchampian terms. These five paintings conclude the exhibition.

Before Briseño's interventions, the towels exemplified the transmission of popular U.S. culture to Mexico. Through the addition of other elements, Briseño further layered transnational and transcultural experiences to this mix.

PIC NIC

In *Pic Nic*, Briseño encapsulates a pre-existing image of Pluto, a Disney cartoon dog, within a television frame. In the work's lower image, Mickey Mouse wears a chef's hat while he stirs a pot. Briseño has superimposed a roast chicken over Mickey's body, such that his head seems to belong to that chicken.

As previously noted, Briseño utilizes whole chickens as recurring motifs because they are recognizable as carcasses when they retain their limbs, underscoring his conception: "we are animals that eat animals." By seemingly endowing the fowl with Mickey's anthropomorphized head, Briseño seeks "to evoke the notion of cannibalism."* To further this suggestion, a knife-and-fork-wielding pair of hands are about to feast on the unlucky victim. The fork, in fact, is about to be driven into Mickey's head (Fig. 23).

GOOFY'S DILEMA [SIC]

Goofy, always a nervous character, is losing control over a tall pile of dishes. The detergent in the foreground and the washing machine in the background mark Goofy as a germaphobe. To externalize this phobia in visual terms, Briseño depicted germs and viruses on the frame of the painting, as well as a spinning revolver "to further freak-him-out."* Briseño notes that virtually all guns in Mexico are smuggled from the U.S. The pear, apple, and orange simultaneously evoke juggled fruit and orbiting planets.

BUEN PROVECHO

Minnie Mouse, which Briseño calls "an American icon,"* looks out coyly while holding an ice cream cone. The orange-yellow orb behind her implicitly makes her the

FIG. 23 *Pic Nic*, 1993, Acrylic on dish towel, 24 x 18 in. Collection of Mimi Swartz. Courtesy the Artist.

FIG. 24 *NAFTA*, 1993, Acrylic on dish towel, 24 x 18 in. Collection of the City of San Antonio.

sun, around which four Mesoamerican heads orbit. The lizard's long curling tongue references Mesoamerican speech glyphs, and may signal a desire to devour Minnie and her ice cream. The other three heads belong to formidable Mesoamerican gods.

FRUTAS FRESCAS

Dopey, one of Snow White's seven dwarves, is a vendor surrounded by his wares. He prepares to bite into a slice of watermelon, holding it with hands that are comically encased in his over-long sleeves. Briseño has superimposed a schematic, linear rendering of a Mesoamerican deity wearing a jaguar mask. This fearsome image stands in stark contrast to the foolish dwarf.

NAFTA

Briseño painted a television screen around Bambi and placed a remote control in the lower left corner. Bambi is behind a basket of mushrooms in an almost sitting position. The inscription "ricos champiñones" (delicious mushrooms) encircles her. The white spiral represents the television signal waves that provide reception to the antenna, as well as to the passage of time. Meanwhile, a hand with a fork (held in the American manner) appears to be assaulting Bambi's innocent, uncooked head. This technocratic assault on the innocent fawn is an allegory of the North American Free Trade Agreement (Fig. 24).

ENDNOTES

1. *Quotes marked with an asterisk are from conversations between the artist and the author in 2024. For a comprehensive interview with the artist, see Carey Cordova, "Oral History Interview with Rolando Briseño, 2004, March 16-26," Smithsonian Archives of American Art. (Henceforth referenced as AAA Interview.) https://www.aaa.si.edu/download_pdf_transcript/ajax?record_id=edanmdm-AAADCD_oh_247313

2. See AAA Interview for details.

3. Rodríguez-Díaz was the subject of a retrospective at Centro de Artes in 2017. See the exhibition catalogue: Ruben C. Cordova, *Ángel Rodríguez-Díaz: A Retrospective, 1982-2014* (City of San Antonio: Department of Arts and Culture, 2017). https://www.getcreativesanantonio.com/Portals/3/Files/AngelRodriguezDiaz_Catalogue.pdf

4. See Ruben C. Cordova, *Con Safo: The Chicano Art Group and the Politics of South Texas* (Los Angeles: UCLA Chicano Studies Research Center, 2009, p. 50-51).

5. The texts in this catalogue on the Diaspora series of Moctezuma's Table draw on Ruben C. Cordova, "Indigenous Heritage, Culinary Diaspora, and Globalization in Rolando Briseño's Moctezuma's Table," in Norma E. Cantú, ed., *Moctezuma's Table: Rolando Briseño's Mexican and Chicano Tablescapes* (College Station: Texas A & M Press, 2010, p. 69-91).

6. David S. Rubin, "Rolando Briseño's Cultural Adjustments," *Glasstire*, October 3, 2015. https://glasstire.com/2015/10/03/rolando-brisenos-cultural-adjustments/

7. Ibid.

8. Scott A. Sherer, *Still Life in New Time: Rolando Briseño, Karen Mahaffy, Chuck Ramirez, Barbra Riley* (San Antonio, University of Texas at San Antonio, 2007).

9. Rubin, "Cultural Adjustments."

10. Sherer, Still Life.

11. Rubin, "Cultural Adjustments."

12. Sherer, Still Life.

13. Rubin, "Cultural Adjustments."

14. Serie Project.org. https://serieproject.org/product/roland-briseno/

15. Ibid.

16. This discussion of Spinning San Antonio de Valero is adapted from Ruben C. Cordova, *The Other Side of the Alamo: Art Against the Myth* (San Antonio: Guadalupe Cultural Arts Center, 2018, p. 138-141).

17. Ibid.

18. Ibid.

19. Ibid.

20. For an extensive account of this performance, see Ruben C. Cordova, *Con Safo: the Chicano Art Group and the Politics of South Texas* (Los Angeles: UCLA Chicano Studies Research Center, 2009, p. 83-84, note 44).

21. North White Plains, "At the Table," Rolando Briseño. https://new.mta.info/agency/arts-design/collection/at-the-table Museum Without Walls. https://themuseumwithoutwalls.org People?peopleId=29819

22. "The View From: North White Plains Station; Critics on the Run: Commuters Appraise a New Art Project," *New York Times*, August 11, 1991. https://www.nytimes.com/1991/08/11/nyregion/the-view-from-north-white-plains-station-critics-on-the-run.html

23. https://www.austinconventioncenter.com/artist-rolando-briseno/

24. Jack Morgan, "The Art He Created A Quarter Century Ago Has New Meaning Due To The Supreme Court," Texas Public Radio, June 26, 2015. https://www.tpr.org/arts-culture/2015-06-26/the-art-he-created-a-quarter-century-ago-has-new-meaning-due-to-the-supreme-court

25. See: Steve Bennett, "River Walk Bridges Made in the Shade," MySanAntonio.com, June 10, 2012 https://www.mysanantonio.com/entertainment/visual_arts/article/River-Walk-bridges-made-in-the-shade-3617733.php and David S. Rubin, "Rolando Briseño's Cultural Adjustments," *Glasstire*, October 3, 2015. https://glasstire.com/2015/10/03/rolando-brisenos-cultural-adjustments/

Rolando Briseño (left) and Ruben C. Cordova, PhD (right) at Centro de Artes Gallery, San Antonio, TX. September 2024.

ABOUT THE CURATOR

Ruben C. Cordova has a BA from Brown University (Semiotics) and a PhD from UC Berkeley (History of Art). He has curated or co-curated 34 exhibitions. Other retrospectives in San Antonio include those devoted to Jesse Almazán (2007), Jesse Treviño (2009-10), Mel Casas (2004, 2005), and Ángel Rodríguez-Díaz (2017). Major survey exhibitions include *The Other Side of the Alamo: Art Against the Myth* (2018) and *The Day of the Dead in Art* (2019-20).

Cordova has written or contributed to 20 catalogues and books, including *Con Safo: The Chicano Art Group and the Politics of South Texas* (UCLA Chicano Studies Research Center, 2009), the first book on a Chicano art group. Forthcoming publications include an essay in *A Handbook of Latinx Art* (University of California Press) and a catalogue essay for The Whitney Museum of American Art. He has published 80 articles and reviews, which have appeared in *Art Lies, Aztlán, Burlington Magazine, Glasstire, San Antonio Report, The New Journal of the Philosophical Research Society, Trouble Art Magazine,* and *Voices of Art*.

As an artist (primarily photography), Cordova has participated in 46 exhibitions, including four solo exhibitions, the last of which was *Besos de la Muerte* (Kisses of Death) in 2014. Cordova taught art history, film, and museum studies at UC Berkeley, UT-Pan American, UT-San Antonio, Sarah Lawrence College, and the University of Houston. He received seventeen fellowships and grants while at UC Berkeley and several as a professor. He also wrote institutional grants awarded by the Judith Rothschild Foundation, the NEH, and the Andy Warhol Foundation for the Visual Arts.

LIST OF EXHIBITED WORKS

ADAM
c. 1966
Acrylic on masonite
36 x 24 in.
Courtesy the Artist

THE KABBALAH
c. 1966
Lithograph on paper
14 x 18 in
Courtesy the Artist

BROWN CHEST
c. 1976
Acrylic on unstretched canvas
25 x 21.25 in.
Courtesy the Artist

LIBIDO TORSO TOTEM
c. 1976
Acrylic on unstretched canvas
48.5 x 19.5 in.
Courtesy the Artist

LIBIDO TOTEM
c. 1976
Acrylic on unstretched canvas
59.5 x 20.75 in.
Courtesy the Artist

PHALLIC TORSO
c. 1976
Acrylic on unstretched canvas
18.75 x 14.25 in.
Courtesy the Artist

CHICANO IN THE BARRIO
1976
Crayon on paper
11 x 7.5 in.
Collection of Benavides Family

CHICANO ON THE MOON
1976
Crayon on paper
11 x 7.5 in.
Collection of Jamie Jarosek and John W. Gonzalez

WOMEN FIGHTING AT THE TABLE
1983
Permanent marker on paper, damaged by 1985 fire
9.5 x 7.5 in.
Courtesy the Artist

FIGHTING BY THE TABLE
1983
Enamel on wood and masonite
96 x 52 in.
Courtesy the Artist

FIGURES IN MOTION
1984
Graphite on paper
17 x 11 in.
Courtesy the Artist

GRASS GHOST
1985
Grass print
37.75 x 23.5 in.
Courtesy the Artist

LOVERS
1985
Grass print
approx. 36 x 20 in.
Collection of Arturo Infante Almeida and Daniel Guerrero

MICHAELANGELO ON THE TABLE
1986
Acrylic on canvas
57.5 x 46.5 in.
Courtesy the Artist

FIGHT AT THE TABLE, NO. 4
1986
Oil on linen
59 x 47 in.
Collection of Sandra Castro Guerra and Dr. Raphael Guerra

NATURA VIVA
1986
Oil on wood
47 x 42 in.
Collection of Bill and Ann FitzGibbons

DANCE ON THE TABLE
1987
Graphite on paper
14 x 11 in.
Courtesy the Artist

DISCOLOBUS
1988
Acrylic on wood
73.5 x 43.5 in,
Collection of Dr. Hector Nevarez

THE ANNUNCIATION
1988
Acrylic and oil on wood
96 x 120 in.
Courtesy the Artist

FOUR LUNCH
1988
Acrylic and oil on wood
83 x 48 in.
Courtesy the Artist

COMPUTER FAST FOOD
c. 1989
Graphite on paper
11 x 8 1/2 in.
Courtesy the Artist

CONFUSION AT THE TABLE
1989
Acrylic and oil on wood
45 x 66 in.
Courtesy the Artist

PROTON COUPLE
1989
Acrylic on wood
80 x 95 in.
Courtesy the Artist

SPIRIT OF THE WARRIOR
1989
Acrylic on wood
75 x 48 in.
Courtesy the Artist

CAPITALS, FOR NORTH WHITE PLAINS, NY TRAIN STATION
1991
Cast aluminum
18 x 35 x 1/2 in.
Courtesy the Artist

SKETCH FOR PUBLIC ART AT COLUMBUS CIRCLE
c. 1992
Acrylic on paper
12.25 x 15.25 in.
Courtesy the Artist

MEXICO
1992
Acrylic and sand on tablecloth
49 x 32 in.
Collection of Dr. Ellen Riojas Clark

MESA COTIDIANA
1992
Acrylic on tablecloth
53 x 53 in.
Collection of Sandra Castro Guerra and Dr. Raphael Guerra

TABLE PUNCH
1992
Acrylic on poly tablecloth
63 in. diameter
Courtesy the Artist

GAMES PEOPLE PLAY
1992
Acrylic and oil on wood
64 x 72.5 in.
Courtesy the Artist

SAN ANTONIO TABLE
1992
Acrylic on poly tablecloth
31 x 37 in.
Collection of Christopher J. Arevalo

PUNCH ON THE TABLE
1992
Acrylic on paper
36 x 48 in.
Courtesy the Artist

TV LOVE TABLE
1993
Enamel on plastic table cloth
51.5 x 53 in.
Courtesy the Artist

BUEN PROVECHO
1993
Acrylic on dish towel
24 x 18 in.
Collection of Mimi Swartz

GOOFY'S DILEMA [SIC]
1993
Acrylic on dish towel
24 x 18 in.
Collection of Louie Chavez

FRUTAS FRESCAS
1993
Acrylic on dish towel
24 x 18 in.
Collection of the City of San Antonio

NAFTA
1993
Acrylic on dish towel
24 x 18 in.
Collection of the City
of San Antonio

PIC NIC
1993
Acrylic on dish towel
24 x 18 in.
Collection of Mimi Swartz

AMERICAN TABLE
1994
Acrylic on tablecloth
31 x 51 in.
Collection of City of
San Antonio

CHILE MANDALA
1995
Ground chile on napkin
19 x 20 in.
Courtesy the Artist

TLAXCALLI/TORTILLA
1995
Acrylic on dish towel
24 x 18 in.
Courtesy the Artist

FATSO WATSO TABLE
1995
Enamel on plastic tablecloth
53 in. diameter
Collection of Peter Krulevitch
and Susana Lopez-Krulevitch

MOLE WHEEL
1995
Mole, acrylic, and oil on
tablecloth
39 x 43 in.
UTSA Art Collection

TABASCO
1996
Ground chile on tablecloth
40.5 x 43 in.
Collection of Norma Bodevin

PIRI-PIRI
1997
Acrylic and chile on African
cloth
16 x 24 in.
Courtesy the Artist

**UT AUSTIN TORTILLA
TOWER**
1997
Corn tortillas, ground chile
and cardboard
18 x 18 x 18 in.
Collection of Veronica Briseño

**THE FIRST COURSE
OF AN AZTEC BANQUET**
1998
Acrylic on tablecloth
36 x 36 in.
Courtesy the Artist

**FAST AMERICAN
MEXICAN FOOD**
1998
Ceramic clay and acrylic
3.75 x 8.5 x 8.5 in.
Private Collection

JACK-IN-THE-POT
1998
Ceramic clay and acrylic
7.5 x 6 x 6 in.
Private Collection

TACO HELL
1998
Ceramic clay and acrylic
7.5 x 6 x 6 in.
Collection of Susan Guerra

TACO HELL (FRAGMENT)
1998
Ceramic clay and acrylic
6.5 x 4 in., irregular fragment
Private Collection

**BICULTURAL TABLE
SETTING**
1998
Serigraph print
16 x 22 in.
Courtesy the Artist

CALIFORNIA
2000
Acrylic on tablecloth
52 x 46 in.
Courtesy the Artist

NEW MEXICO
2000
Acrylic, oil, and chile on
tablecloth
32 x 28 in
UTSA Art Collection

THE NO.2 DINNER
2000
Acrylic on tablecloth
48 x 53.5 in.
UTSA Art Collection

PRINCE OF FLOWERS
2000
Acrylic on tablecloth
37 x 32 in.
Courtesy the Artist

**MAGNOLIA TORTILLA
TOWER**
2000
Tortillas, ground chile,
and cardboard
21 x 17 x 17 in.
Courtesy the Artist

GLOBAL TABLESCAPE
2000
Giclee print
28 x 34 in.
Collection of Jamie Jarosek
and John W. Gonzalez

TESTOSTERONE TABLE
2000
Giclee print
27 x 32 in.
Courtesy the Artist

**CORN TORTILLA
TWIN TOWERS**
2002
Corn tortillas, ground
chile, iron
28 x 16 x 14 in.
Collection of
Michael Imbimbo

**BRAIN LISTENING
TO MUSIC**
2002
Giclee print
10 x 30 in.
Courtesy the Artist

THE HEART
2002
Giclee print
10 x 30 in.
Courtesy the Artist

THE SUN
2002
Giclee print
10 x 30 in.
Courtesy the Artist

PLASTIC BABIES
(salvaged from performance)
2004
Plastic Box with Brown Babies
6 x 7 x 2.5 in.
Private Collection

MASALAMO
2004
Masa (corn dough)
3 x 4 x 6 in.
Courtesy the Artist

CELESTIAL GODDESS
2007
Giclee print
32 x 23 in.
Courtesy the Artist

CELESTIAL TABLESCAPE
2007
Giclee print
35 x 48 in.
Courtesy the Artist

COSMIC CONNECTION
2007
Giclee print
17 x 22 in.
Courtesy the Artist

ELEMENTAL TABLESCAPE
2007
Giclee print
37 x 44 in.
Courtesy the Artist

GODDESS OF THE TABLE
2007
Giclee print
31 x 33.5 in.
Courtesy the Artist

COSMIC MIRROR
2007
Giclee print
31.5 x 23.5 in.
Courtesy the Artist

**STUDY FOR SPINNING
SAN ANTONIO**
2009
Pencil on paper
10.5 x 16 in
Courtesy the Artist

**SPINNING SAN ANTONIO
DE VALERO, A.K.A.
UPSIDE DOWN
SAN ANTONIO**
2009
Painted Styrofoam on
processional base
192 x 41 x 64 in.
Courtesy the Artist

ALAMO PIÑATAS
2024
Papier-mâché
18 x 32.5 x 20.5 in.
Courtesy the Artist

ABOUT CENTRO DE ARTES

Centro de Artes gallery is dedicated to showcasing San Antonio and South Texas Latino/a artists. Found in the heart of the Zona Cultural, an officially designated and state-recognized cultural district, Centro de Artes is dedicated to telling the story of the Latino experience with a focus on South Texas through local and regional art, history, and culture. As a space that is free and open to the public, and located in Historic Market Square—one of the most visited cultural venues in Texas—Centro de Artes is at the center of a cultural and historical crossroads, accessible to residents and visitors, alike.

Since October 2016, the Department of Arts & Culture has managed Centro de Artes and showcased the works of more than 500 San Antonio artists. The City of San Antonio continues to support local artists and provide opportunities for them to show their works. Through a robust community-engaged process to develop the Centro de Artes Strategic Plan, overseen by the Centro de Artes committee, the mission celebrates and honors Latino arts and culture, with a priority on showcasing San Antonio and regional artists.

COMMITTEE

Yadhira Lozano, Chair
San Antonio Arts Commission
Member, District 3

Ellen Riojas Clark, PhD
San Antonio Arts Commission
Member, District 7

Sarah Gould, PhD

Nicole Amri

Gabriella Scott

CENTRO DE ARTES SAN ANTONIO

CITY OF SAN ANTONIO TEXAS

ARTS & CULTURE