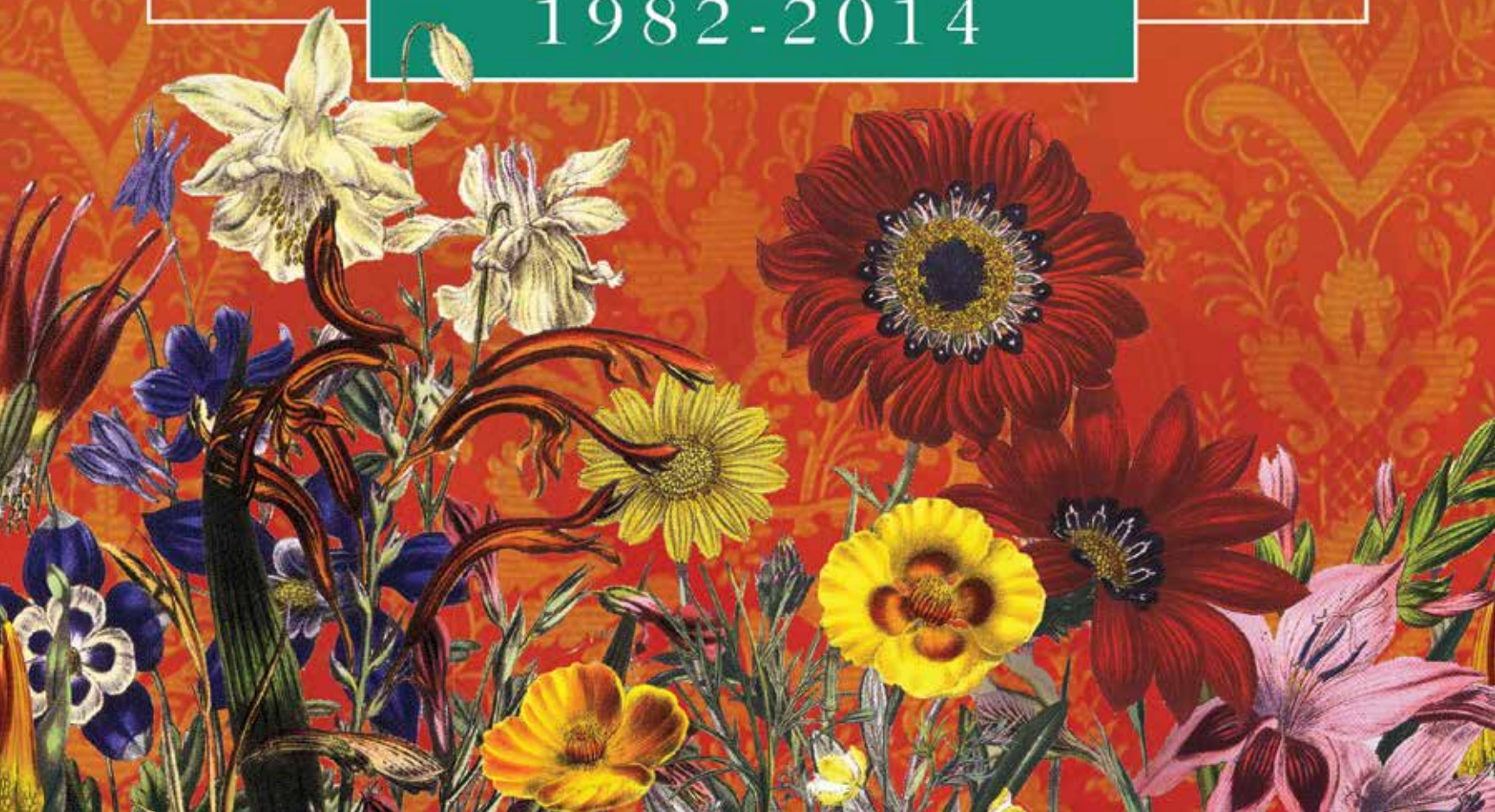


ÁNGEL

RODRIGUEZ DÍAZ

A Retrospective

1982-2014



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EXHIBITION DATES | FEBRUARY 9, 2017 - JUNE 11, 2017



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INTRODUCTION

This retrospective is presented by The City of San Antonio's Department of Arts & Culture and curated by Dr. Ruben Cordova. It is the largest and the widest-ranging exhibition ever devoted to Ángel Rodríguez-Díaz (b. 1955), a Puerto Rican native whose dazzling portraits engage in social commentary.

It extends from 1982, the year Rodríguez-Díaz received his MFA degree at Hunter College in New York City, to 2014, when he produced panoramic digital landscapes and completed public art projects in San Antonio. Rodríguez-Díaz moved from Puerto Rico to New York City in 1978, soon after he realized he was gay. In New York he experienced being part of a "minority" with respect to sexual orientation as well as ethnicity. This experience of being an outsider became a driving force of his art. The artist moved to San Antonio to be with his partner Rolando Briseño in 1995. They have lived and worked in San Antonio since that time.

For Rodríguez-Díaz portraiture is a vehicle to "explore thoughts of identity, power, passion, and the everyday masks we all wear," and he uses it to "depict, re-imagine, and to celebrate our social and cultural diversity."* His dramatized portraits also address cultural stereotypes, social inequality, cultural invisibility, colonialism, and war.

This exhibition is enriched by rediscovered paintings that had not been seen by anyone in over twenty years. They provide crucial insights into Rodríguez-Díaz's development as an artist. Several works are publicly displayed here for the first time. At Hunter College Rodríguez-Díaz's advisor declared that painting was dead and that he didn't want to see any paintings. The artist provided his own continuing education by studying paintings in museums and books. Rodríguez-Díaz's many artistic exemplars, from the Renaissance to the contemporary, are discussed in the sectional wall texts and the individual labels.

Rodríguez-Díaz's work has been widely exhibited since the late 1970s, and it is represented in many permanent collections, including the Smithsonian American Art Museum, Washington DC; El Museo del Barrio, New York; The National Museum of Mexican Art, Chicago; El Museo de Arte Contemporáneo de Puerto Rico, San Juan. The exhibition begins with the two rediscovered paintings and the drawing in the vestibule, and it continues in the first gallery, which is devoted to self-portraits on the left.

* Artist statement published in flyer for the exhibition "Retratos ... Between You and I," Blue Star Contemporary Art Center, San Antonio, 2006.



Rolando Briseño and Ángel Rodríguez-Díaz, Opening Reception February 9, 2017

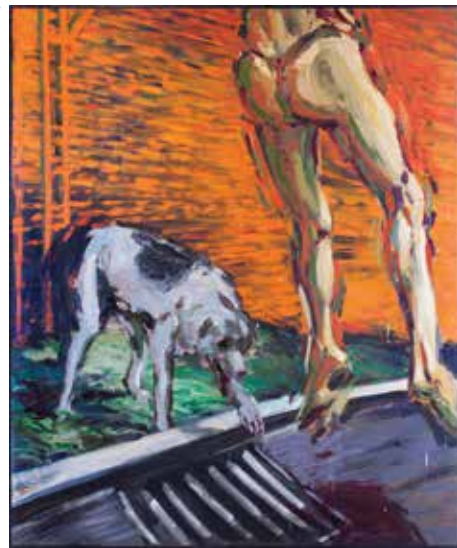
During a period when the artist's work schedule left little time to make art in 1982, he used a mirror to quickly sketch a self-portrait each day. Here Rodríguez-Díaz depicts himself wearing a toucan mask. This work prefigures his career-long interest in masked images and self-portraits that suggest a narrative. Though Rodríguez-Díaz purchased the mask in Venice, his shaded, elongated neck suggests a symbolic or ritualistic context rather than a simple European masquerade. This drawing was exhibited in the "Obscure Guerrilla Chieftains of the Hemisphere" exhibition at Area X Gallery in the East Village in 1986. It was purchased by John Caldwell, the renowned Carnegie International exhibition curator. Caldwell had the drawing returned to Rodríguez-Díaz after his death in 1993 because he recognized its importance to the artist. Another drawing from this series is in the first gallery.



State of Mind #5 [Mask]
April 1982
charcoal on paper
32 x 24 inches
collection of the artist

The earliest painting that Rodríguez-Díaz retains in his possession, *Dog and Suspended Body* dates from July of 1982, which is just after he received his MFA degree from Hunter College in New York City. *Dog and Suspended Body* reveals multiple influences from the Irish painter Francis Bacon (1909-1992), who was widely regarded as the world's greatest living artist. Rodríguez-Díaz concentrated intensely on Bacon's art during the early and mid-1980s. *Dog and Suspended Body* is deeply engaged with some of

Untitled [Dog and Suspended Body]
July 1982
oil on canvas
59 ½ x 49 ¾ inches
collection of the artist



Bacon's most important paintings in both form and symbolic content. It can also be related to some of Rodríguez-Díaz's favorite Old Master artists and to the tragic colonial history of the Caribbean.

Rodríguez-Díaz discovered Bacon's art in the late 1970s, when he was still living in Puerto Rico. He was simultaneously attracted and repulsed when he looked at illustrations of Bacon's triptych titled *Three Studies for Figures at the Base of a Crucifixion* from c. 1944: "at first I didn't like it because I said, they're so ugly. But then it's like so powerful, the color. The images are so harsh, the way it was painted. It's sort of unfinished, you know. There's something that really was so abrasive about them."* When the artist saw this painting in person at the Tate Museum in London around 1980, he was thunderstruck. The intense orange background color of Bacon's triptych is repeated in *Dog and Suspended Body*, though instead of a solid background, Rodríguez-Díaz uses dot and dash patterns that are similar to those Bacon deployed in areas of shadow in many of his later paintings. Bacon's triptych was first exhibited in April 1945, when images of Nazi concentration camps were released, thus associating *Three Studies for Figures at the Base of a Crucifixion* (and Bacon's tormented humanoid forms in general) with the Holocaust and with the horrors of industrialized death during World War II.**

The gender ambiguity of Bacon's *Two Figures* (1953) mesmerized Rodríguez-Díaz and "triggered" his latent homosexuality.* Bacon's blurry, "homosexual images of wrestlers" were based on Eadweard Muybridge's (1830-1904) time-lapse photographs,*** which Rodríguez-Díaz also utilized directly in collages he made in the 1980s.

Rodríguez-Díaz's imagery in *Dog and Suspended Body* combines aspects of three Bacon paintings that feature a central, predatory-looking dog based on Muybridge's photographs of dogs in motion. The relative clarity of Rodríguez-Díaz's dog is a quality shared by *Dog* (1952) in New York's Museum of Modern Art (MoMA). The dog's spots are drawn from the Tate Museum's blurry *Study of a Dog* (1952). The structure of Rodríguez-Díaz's painting derives from the Albright-Knox Art Gallery's *Man with Dog* (1953), which includes a sidewalk curb and a rain grate in the foreground. None of these Bacon paintings has a pool of blood on the ground, but both the MoMA and Tate pictures have red geometric areas that suggested Rodríguez-Díaz's pool of blood.

Bacon's *Painting* (1946) also deeply affected Rodríguez-Díaz. He characterized its massive dictatorial figure and animal carcasses as "enigmatic" and "very dark" (though he conflated *Painting* with another Bacon painting, the Tate's *Figure in a Landscape* of 1945).* The window shades in *Painting* reflect photos of Hitler's bunker, and the looming, "cruciform" shape of the monumental beef carcass seems to invoke human death and suffering.**** At the same time that it recalls Rembrandt's (1606-1669) famous *Slaughtered Ox* (1665) in the Louvre, it also suggests the torture and murder of humans on an industrial scale: the world transformed into a slaughterhouse.

In his painting, Rodríguez-Díaz substitutes a human body for an animal carcass. The blurriness of this figure and the lines beside the limbs suggest that this man is alive and twitching—if not actively kicking. The blood loss suggests that some kind of torture is taking place, but without the upper portion of the body, we cannot be certain of anything. Could this be a modern-day equivalent of one of the naked victims of Francisco

Goya's (1746-1828) *Disasters of War*, whose mutilated bodies were hung from trees? Or is this person being flayed alive? Could the dog be rushing in to lap up the blood, as in Titian's (c. 1448-1576) late masterpiece, *The Flaying of Marsyas*, from the 1570s? Or could it be a reworking of the Death of Acteon theme? The hunter Acteon inadvertently saw the goddess Diana and she caused him to be devoured by his own dogs.

Rodríguez-Díaz is likely most concerned with referencing the cruel, genocidal policies promulgated by the Spanish against the kind and peace-loving indigenous inhabitants of the Caribbean, known as the Taíno. He observes: "the indigenous people disappeared within like 50 years of the conquest. ... due to diseases, enslavement, and also mass suicides."**

Cruel Spanish practices included chopping a living person in half to demonstrate prowess with a sword, feeding children to dogs, and sending fierce dogs to devour living people. As Bartolomé de las Casas noted:

"In the Year 1509, the Spaniards sailed to the Islands of St. John and Jamaica ... perpetrating innumerable Robberies and Villanies as before; whereunto they added unheard of Cruelties by Murdering, Burning, Roasting, and Exposing Men to be torn to pieces by Dogs; and Finally by afflicting and harassing them with un-exampled Oppressions and torments in the Mines, they spoiled and unpeopled this Contrey of these Innocents. These two Isles containing six hundred thousand at least, though at this day there are scarce two hundred men to be found in either of them, the remainder perishing without the knowledge of Christian Faith or Sacrament." *****

There is something both emblematic and concentrated in this ambiguous image of destruction. But does *Dog and Suspended Body* represent the suffering and death of one individual, or that of an entire race? Rodríguez-Díaz has found a way to engage Bacon's art and to make a very unconventional, open-ended political painting at the same time. In many works in this exhibition, Rodríguez-Díaz utilizes the genre of self-portraiture in a very unconventional manner to serve as a vehicle for political commentary.

* Oral history interview with Ángel Rodríguez-Díaz, April 23-May 7, 2004, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution. <http://www.aaa.si.edu/collections/interviews/oral-history-interview-angel-rodriguez-diaz-13193>

** Francis Bacon, *Three Studies for Figures at the Base of a Crucifixion*, September 2016, Tate website. <http://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/bacon-three-studies-for-figures-at-the-base-of-a-crucifixion-n06171>

*** Matthew Gale, Artist biography, Francis Bacon 1909-1992, December 1997, Tate website. <http://www.tate.org.uk/art/artists/francis-bacon-682>

**** Francis Bacon, *Painting*, 1946, Museum of Modern Art website. <https://www.moma.org/collection/works/79204>

***** See Bartolomé de las Casas, *A Short History of the Destruction of the Indies*. Written in 1542, first published in 1552.

de las Casas' abbreviated account of St. John (present-day Puerto Rico) is cited above; see *Hispanola* (chapter 3) for a more substantial account of Spanish atrocities. https://en.wikisource.org/wiki/A_Short_Account_of_the_Destruction_of_the_Indies



Babilonia
January 1985
oil on canvas
38 x 54 inches
collection of the artist

Babilonia is a playful compilation of artist self-portraits and styles, set in a fictional New York City bar, whose title is meant to evoke the spectacle and allure of the big city and its decadent, pleasure-

loving inhabitants. The dominant stylistic references are French, from Manet through Post-Impressionism, and German Expressionism, which culminated in Berlin in the 1930s. Rodríguez-Díaz's cast of characters includes two very real humans: the artist himself, who wears a pink dotted hat, and his lover, a fashion designer named George Gillen, who is rendered as an all-knowing bartender.

The structure of *Babilonia* is inspired by *Le Bar aux Folies-Bergère* of 1882, Édouard Manet's (1832-1883) last great painting, which features a bartender with a mirror at her back that takes up most of the composition.* In *Babilonia* the mirror only occupies the upper portion of the painting, behind the bottles, which are reflected in the mirror, along with the terrarium, bartender, and elements of the bar's interior. The artist has added diagonal streaks to emphasize that the upper portion of the painting depicts a reflection in a mirror. The two round lights and the two bottles on the left of the bartender are direct quotations from *Le Bar aux Folies-Bergère*.

The pose of the bartender was inspired by Edvard Munch's (1863-1944) stunning and mysterious *Self-Portrait with Cigarette* of 1893, which was exhibited at the Museum of Modern Art in 1979. Munch's strange, unsettling spatial effects must have inspired the ghostly figure that is conjured out of cigarette smoke above the monkey. Monkeys are symbols of licentiousness that are often restrained, as in Pieter Bruegel's (c. 1525-1569) *Two Chained Monkeys* of 1562. Rodríguez-Díaz has seemingly freed one of Bruegel's monkeys and situated it in the center of the composition as a symbol of freedom and liberty, which should be understood sexually as well as politically. Due to their imitative nature, monkeys are symbolically associated with artists, so this monkey should also be seen as an embodiment of artistic freedom. The theme of freedom is echoed by the presence of the head of the Statue of Liberty that is visible in the upper right of *Babilonia*. This is likely a reference to Georges Seurat (1859-1891), who included a woman with a similar hat in his cabaret dance painting titled *Le Chahut* in 1890. Rodríguez-

Díaz would also have been very familiar with the leashed monkey in Seurat's *A Sunday Afternoon on the Island of La Grande Jatte* (1884/86), since the final study for that painting is on permanent display at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York City. Rodríguez-Díaz also signals his interest in Seurat by utilizing a Pointillist technique in his hat.

The greenish smoking figure in the lower right of *Babilonia* combines Van Gogh's (1853-1890) *Self-Portrait* of 1889 in the National Gallery in Washington D.C. with elements common to many Max Beckmann (1884-1950) self-portraits. Van Gogh's painting has a slightly greenish cast, and Rodríguez-Díaz has amplified it considerably. Beckmann habitually painted himself smoking in a dark jacket with exaggeratedly flattened hands.

The next figure is a self-portrait close to Paul Gauguin's (1848-1903) *Self-Portrait with Hat* from 1893. The festive, pink-dotted hat and the watch worn by the adjacent figure might reference New Year's Day festivities, since this painting was completed in January of 1985. Pink is also a color associated with gay rights activism, commencing in the U.S. in the 1970s.**

The blonde woman with roses in her hair has roots in Fauvism and German Expressionism, but perhaps its closest counterparts are found in paintings by American artists Reginald Marsh (1898-1954) and Paul Cadmus (1904-1999) from the 1930s.

The person with the feline mask is based on John Heartfield's (1891-1868) *On the SPD Party Crisis*, a photomontage published June 15, 1931. It also recalls a mask worn by an Aztec Jaguar Warrior painted by Mexican Muralist Diego Rivera (1886-1957). Rodríguez-Díaz copies Rivera's figure in *Guerrero Azteca* (1995), which is included in the Portraits and Mestizaje section of this exhibition. The next figure is derived from the leftmost figure in Van Gogh's first masterpiece, *The Potato Eaters* of 1885. Transported into the late twentieth century and outfitted with a tie, this time-traveler is identified by the artist as a chauffeur.

The figure on the extreme left has points of contact with Expressionism and Fauvism, but doesn't completely follow a particular work or artist. She has circles around her eyes like many of Munch's female figures, but she lacks their death-like aspect. Overall, this painting has more in common with the conviviality of Post-Impressionist café scenes than with the disturbed, alienated, sickly, and perverse currents that are common in Symbolist and Expressionist art.

The frieze of faces in the lower portion of *Babilonia* recalls Diego Rivera's habit of plucking historical figures from different eras and situating them side-by-side in the same fesco. The anthropomorphized tree branch in the terrarium is reminiscent of those featured in Rivera's Surrealist-inspired paintings of the twenties and thirties. The green iguana also has a Surreal aspect since it is posed in a manner that makes it resemble a stegosaurus. Iguanas are common in Puerto Rico, where they grow to several feet in length. The artist also had a pet monkey when he was a child, so he is introducing elements from his Puerto Rican childhood into this New York City scene.

Paradoxically, the artist has failed to reverse the bar's name that is partially reflected in the mirror. This logical contradiction likely references the puzzling reflections of the bartender and her male suitor in Manet's *Le Bar aux Folies-Bergère*. Viewers have struggled to explain the precise spatial relationship of these two figures since Manet's painting was first exhibited. By introducing his own visual paradox, Rodríguez-Díaz continues his dialog with Manet's final masterpiece.

* "Édouard Manet, *A Bar at the Folies-Bergère*," The Courtauld Institute of Art website. <http://courtauld.ac.uk/gallery/collection/impressionism-post-impressionism/edouard-manet-a-bar-at-the-folies-bergere>

** "Symbols," Association for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender Issues in Counseling of Alabama (ALGBTICAL). <http://www.algbtical.org/2A%20SYMBOLS.htm>

SELF-PORTRAITURE

Rodríguez-Díaz has always revered portraiture, which, in his view, gives expression to social as well as an individual characteristics: "Portraiture is a representation of historical and social mores condensed into a sense of self. It is a collection of the essential traits that emphasize the dignity and the grandeur of the human being. No other genre of painting is capable of transmitting such an intimate sense of living presence."*

This room provides a survey of Rodríguez-Díaz's self-portraits, from an early drawing on the right that dates from 1982 to some of his best-known political paintings, including *El Chupacabra* (1998) and *The Good Old Days* (2005). Dramatized self-portraits that serve as a vehicle for social commentary are rare in the history of art: the closest precedent for this kind of self-portraiture is found in the work of the Mexican artist Frida Kahlo (1907-1954). Even Kahlo's deeply personal works, such as *The Wounded Deer* (1946), which features a self-portrait on the body of a stag shot full of arrows could have influenced an explicitly political work by Rodríguez-Díaz, such as *El Chupacabra*. Moreover, Kahlo also painted a number of politically explicit works, such as *Self-Portrait on the Border Line* (1932), *My Dress Hangs There* (1933), and *Marxism Will Heal the Sick* (1954).

On the East Coast, the publication of Hayden Herrera's biography in 1983 led to a reassessment of Frida Kahlo's work and stimulated interest in Mexican art. Mexican art had been anathema during the Cold War because it was associated with Communism, and it was subsequently regarded as outmoded. We know Rodríguez-Díaz was studying Kahlo the year of the earliest paintings in this room because one of his rediscovered paintings *Untitled [Double Portrait with Heart, Pelvis, and Umbrella]*, from May 1987 (not in exhibition), is structured on Kahlo's



State of Mind #9 [Self-Portrait with El Greco Hand]
April 1982
charcoal on paper
32 x 24 inches
collection of the artist

The Two Fridas (1939) and it includes a skeletal pelvis that references Kahlo's *Henry Ford Hospital* (1932). There are many points of contact between Rodríguez-Díaz's work and that of Kahlo, and these commonalities are discussed in texts in several areas of this exhibition.

Rodríguez-Díaz's favorite period is the Baroque (17th century), and he refers to the Spanish master Diego Velázquez (1599-1660) as his "hero." His devotion to Velázquez is especially evident in *Mirrored Mirror* (1990). Rodríguez-Díaz sometimes combines elements from different eras, as in *Primordial Feeling* (1990), which has sources in Velázquez, Salvador Dalí (1904-1989), and Francis Bacon (1909-1992). Two of the paintings on the left (*Red Interior* and *The Visitation*) have been characterized by the artist as premonitions of receiving an HIV positive diagnosis, and the first painting *Untitled [Self Portrait with Green Head]* arguably belongs in that category as well. Rodríguez-Díaz's late self-portraits are also exhibited in other portions of this exhibition.

*Artist's statement published in *Goliad: A Cultural Convergence*.
Goliad: Presidio La Bahia, 1999.



The artist looks directly at the spectator, just as he would have looked directly into the mirror when he was making this drawing. It is an image of deep concentration. Rodríguez-Díaz's symmetrical and frontal head is characteristic of Renaissance art. In that respect, one can compare it to images such as Albrecht Durer's famous self-portrait of 1500, which has a highly pronounced Christ-like character. The oversized, elongated hand, however, is a Mannerist trait, from a post-Renaissance period (the end of the High Renaissance is usually placed in the 1520s), when artists prized invention, complexity, and distortion over naturalism. El Greco (1540/1 – 1614) was a Mannerist who created ecstatic, dynamic figures. Rodríguez-Díaz's hand is based on that of El Greco's *Christ Carrying the Cross* (c. 1580-85) in the Metropolitan Museum of Art, which, unlike El Greco's later work, is relatively naturalistic.

Rodríguez-Díaz has made the hand even stranger by twisting the index finger and making the hand disproportionately larger than El Greco's. The hand, of course, is the vehicle of artistic agency. In art history, one even speaks of recognizing the "hand" of the artist when making an

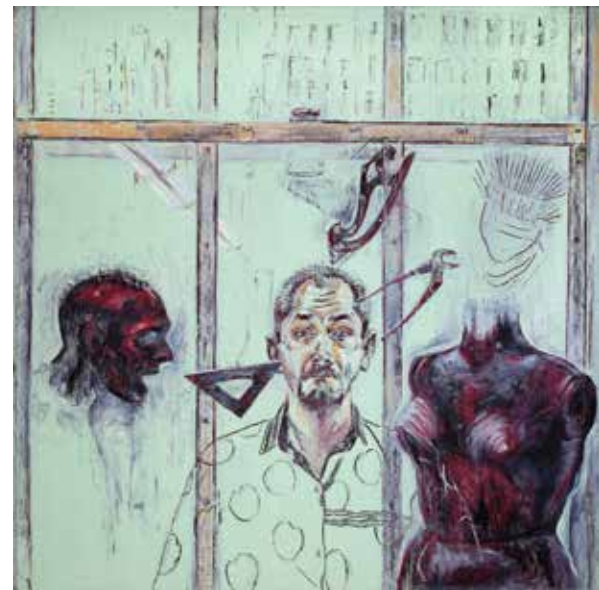
attribution. By foregrounding his hand, Rodríguez-Díaz emphasizes his artistic vocation. By making his shoulders uneven and his right side much larger, the artist implies movement and dynamism, which are hallmarks of the Baroque period, which had its heyday in the seventeenth century. The Baroque is Rodríguez-Díaz's favorite period because he relishes its high drama.

The artist has introduced a good bit of drama of his own by including two blurry grotesque figures in the background. They derive from Leonardo da Vinci's (1452-1519) studies of grotesque faces. These two background figures have the character of mockers or accusers. One could thus interpret this scenario as something akin to a mocking of Christ. Conversely, the artist could be mocking his detractors and antagonists—such as the art establishment, which was opposed to both painting and portraiture—by making them grotesque. Given the artist's pointy ears, which are also derived from El Greco, one could imagine another scenario: the artist could be a damned soul surrounded by his similarly cursed company. In this rapidly rendered sketch, the artist has given us a capsule history of art and a richly suggestive self-portrait that sets the stage for the dramatized self-portraits that fill this room.



Untitled [Self Portrait with Green Head]
September 1987
oil on colored and textured fabric
58 ¼ x 40 inches
collection of the artist

This is one of five known paintings in which Rodríguez-Díaz used textured fabric instead of canvas. The raw fabric is visible on the edges of this unframed painting. George Gillen, Rodríguez-Díaz's partner at this time, was a designer of one-of-a-kind clothing. He wears one of his own creations in the painting *Babilonia*, which is hanging just inside the entrance to the Centro. Rodríguez-Díaz's use of these fabrics prefigures the luxurious and colorful painted fabric backgrounds in the artist's later paintings. In the lower right portion of the canvas a disembodied brain is superimposed over a mannequin. Rodríguez-Díaz painted mannequins for seven or eight years, and he sometimes used discarded mannequin parts to decorate his apartments. Rodríguez-Díaz has given the mannequin body a very naturalistic finish—in contrast to his own eerie green head. The floating brain was likely inspired by the floating body parts and emblems that Frida Kahlo (1907-1954) used in her paintings. The shower curtain most closely follows Francis Bacon's *Painting* of 1950. The dark strokes stem from Bacon's depictions of jungle grass, which here seem to have a sinister aspect, like some mysterious form of contagion.



The Visitation
February 1988
oil on canvas
50 x 50 inches
collection of the artist

The artist has depicted himself in an enclosed, austere space that recalls quasi-abstract paintings by Richard Diebenkorn (1922-1993). Yet the simple window elements suggest the bars of a prison. The artist's transparent shirt gives him a ghostlike presence that contributes to the painting's haunting mood. A demonic, disembodied red and black head appears to be delivering an ominous message, seemingly made visible by the tools that float around the distressed artist's head. The object above the mannequin body is meant to evoke an "exploding head." It was created by a wire template that was pressed into the wet greenish paint to reveal the layers of black and red that were beneath it.

In an interview conducted in 2004, Rodríguez-Díaz retrospectively interprets this painting and *Red Interior* as premonitions of receiving a positive HIV diagnosis. He recalls that everyone was frightened of "being outcast" and "basically put in a concentration camp,"* which endows this prison-like setting with ominous significance. The triangle that nearly pierces the artist's ear might unconsciously reference the inverted pink triangles that the Nazis forced gays to wear in concentration camps. This highly dramatized self-portrait has many points of contact with those of Frida Kahlo, especially the floating symbolic objects, which are reminiscent of those in Kahlo's *Henry Ford Hospital* of 1932.

* Oral history interview with Ángel Rodríguez-Díaz, April 23 - May 7, 2004. Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution. <https://www.aaa.si.edu/collections/interviews/oral-history-interview-angel-rodriguez-diaz-13193>



Red Interior
March 1988
oil on canvas
50 x 50 inches
collection of the artist

As noted in the previous label, Rodríguez-Díaz interprets this painting as a premonition of receiving a positive HIV diagnosis. He again depicts himself in an enclosed, imprisoning space. But in contrast to *The Visitation*, the artist's expression here is impassive, despite the searing, sanguinary imagery. The artist characterizes it as an expression of "utter exhaustion, of feeling trapped."

The technique of scratching into the paint to reveal lower layers suggests desperate—presumably earlier—efforts to escape. The artist's meditative calm implies that he is looking inward instead of seeking a means of flight. Parallels in art can be found in images of Christ and Christian martyrs, especially Spanish colonial images of Christ bleeding into a vat filled with his own blood. Frida Kahlo, the Christian martyr's secular counterpart, also bears her horrific wounds with an impassively calm countenance. Andy Warhol created a strikingly analogous image in 1984 when he appropriated Edvard Munch's *Self-portrait with Skeleton Arm* and printed it on a blood red background.

Rodríguez-Díaz has splattered his head and body with red paint, which invokes blood, the primary mode of transmission for the HIV virus. It also summons age-old images of plagues and depictions of them in literature, such as Edgar Allen Poe's *Masque of the Red Death*.



Mirrored Mirror
January 1990
oil on canvas
64 ½ x 66 inches
collection of the artist

The first three paintings in this gallery exhibit stark vulnerabilities. *Mirrored Mirror* is their antithesis. Rodríguez-Díaz has gone from a blood-splattered nude in *Red Interior* to a confident and proud gay man who wears his leather jacket like a knight wears a coat of armor. His jacket and even the skin on his face take on the reflective properties of shining armor.

This large-scale image of mastery and assurance draws specific elements from several works by the great Spanish painter Diego Velázquez (1599-1660), who painted King Phillip IV and his court. It also draws on Velázquez's majestic images in a general fashion. Before he served the king, Velázquez painted vigorous and robust figures from plebian models that he endowed with strong ethnic characteristics and a heightened sense of three-dimensionality. The powerful neck, chin, and the highlighted cheekbone in this self-portrait are derived from Velázquez's *St. John the Evangelist* on

Patmos (c. 1618). Rodríguez-Díaz's brush strokes don't blend together like those in Velázquez's early works, thus the painterly technique in this picture has more in common with Velázquez's late portrait of Phillip IV (c. 1656). Rather than imitating a particular work or period of Velázquez's style, Rodríguez-Díaz is entering into a productive dialog with the Spanish master though multiple, partial references.

We have already seen Rodríguez-Díaz's interest in mirrors and reflections in *Babilonia* (1985), whose structure is based on Manet's painting of a bar. Manet was in turn deeply influenced by Velázquez, whose masterpiece is *Las Meninas* (1656). *Las Meninas* shows Velázquez at work on a large painting whose back is turned away from the spectator. He is presumably painting the king and queen, who are reflected in a distant mirror in the far background of the picture. The spectator who is looking at the picture would seem to be standing where the king and queen would be posing. Yet their mirrored reflection is too large, leading to the conclusion that the mirror instead reflects the royal pair on the large canvas in front of Velázquez, or on a large canvas on the opposite wall. The profound paradoxes of Velázquez's masterpiece still generate debate.

Mirrored Mirror employs two mirrors. A hand-held vanity mirror (such as one typically held by a naked Venus figure in Old Master paintings) paradoxically reflects the near side of the artist's face. The hand and forearm that hold this circular mirror must belong to a person standing approximately where the spectator is standing. But the reflected hand and vanity mirror are too large to be held by a person that is so distant from the background mirror. This paradox demonstrates that Rodríguez-Díaz's painting is in part a meditation on the spatial complexities of *Las Meninas*.

The reflected image of the artist is considerably darker than the non-reflected self-portrait. Rodríguez-Díaz did this to reference Juan de Pareja, Velázquez's mixed race slave and assistant (he had

a Moorish mother and a Spanish father). Pareja is the subject of one of Velázquez's greatest portraits, which is in the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, where Rodríguez-Díaz frequently admired it. One of the most famous and most dignified portraits of a person of color, it has been justifiably acclaimed since it was unveiled in Rome in 1650.

Rodríguez-Díaz identifies with Phillip IV as well as with Pareja, for the eye in the vanity mirror recalls Phillip IV's droopy right eye, whose iris is habitually in the outer corner of its socket in Velázquez's portraits. Antonio Palomino, a Velázquez biographer, apocryphally claimed that Pareja was liberated because the king discovered his hitherto secret knowledge of painting. Thus it was the king's "eye" that liberated the slave. Velázquez in fact signed the papers that set Pareja free when they were in Rome. Pareja became an independent painter whose works survive in several museums. In his doubly reflected mirror image, Rodríguez-Díaz conflates his self-image with that of the Spanish king and the legend of Velázquez's proud slave who was freed by his mastery of art.

* Xavier F. Salomon, revised by Keith Christiansen, "Diego Velázquez, Juan de Pareja (1606-1670)," Metropolitan Museum of Art website. <http://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/>



Primordial Feeling
May 1990
oil on canvas
36 x 36 inches
collection of the artist

As in *Mirrored Mirror*, the artist's neck and lower head closely follow those features in Velázquez's *St. John on Patmos*. The top of the artist's head is absent, as if it were a broken statue. This gives a sense that the artist is lost in his thoughts, which extend into a fiery primordial field featuring small, atomistic spheres and tropical vegetation. This head with a missing top evolved from a self-portrait situated in a jungle called *The Cannibal* (September 1988, not its exhibition), in which the top of the head is lost in shade. The artistic source for a figure with a missing upper head is Francis Bacon's *Head VI* (1949), which is one of his series of screaming figures after Velázquez's portrait of *Pope Innocent X* (1650), which was painted in Rome soon after his portrait of Juan de Pareja.

This is the earliest of Rodríguez-Díaz's paintings that contains the small spheres that figure in the backgrounds of so many of his subsequent works (and sometimes in the figures, as well). The artist made stencils with circular holes from butcher paper and applied paint through these holes. Rodríguez-Díaz's inspiration to use spheres likely came from Salvador Dalí's (1904-1989) *Madonna of 1958*, which is primarily composed of small spheres and their shadows.* As Lisa M. Messinger notes, the work appears to be abstract from close-up; from a few feet away the *Madonna and Child* from Raphael Sanzio's (1483-1520) *Sistine Madonna* (after 1513) come into focus; from a greater distance one sees what Dalí referred to as "the ear of the angel."** Dalí's small spheres create a dynamic, shifting sense of depth and simultaneously generate multiple forms. Dalí's *Madonna* was exhibited at the Met in 1985 and after its donation in 1987 it was frequently on view, so the artist had considerable exposure to it. Rodríguez-Díaz initially utilized the small spheres as independent structuring devices, but soon blended them with other forms, such as the snakeskin pattern in *El Chupacabra* (1998), which is on the North wall of this gallery.

* "Salvador Dalí, *Madonna*." Metropolitan Museum of Art website. <http://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/484894?sortBy=Relevance&ft=dali%2c+madonna&offset=0&rpp=20&pos=1>

** Lisa M. Messinger in "Twentieth Century Art," Recent Acquisitions: A Selection, 1987-1988. New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1988, p. 62. <https://books.google.com/books?id=f8BmK8qGQ18C&pg=frontpage&hl=en#v=onepage&q&f=false>



Circulos de Confusion (Circles of Confusion)
June 1993
acrylic and oil on paper mounted on linen
31 7/8 x 24 inches
San Antonio Museum of Art
purchased with funds provided by Edward A. Fest, by exchange, 95.16

Rodríguez-Díaz has utilized the small spheres that appeared in *Primordial Feeling* to powerful effect in *Circulos de Confusion*. They form a daunting vertiginous atmosphere that the artist says he "is attempting to break through." Circles of confusion is an optics term that is also used in photography with reference to focus and depth of field.

This is the first painting Rodríguez-Díaz painted in Mexico, which he visited with his partner Rolando Briseño in mid-1993. They stayed in a friend's house in Cuernavaca. Rodríguez-Díaz worked on paper because it was easy to roll up and transport back to New York.

The imagery expresses the artist's response to the "exuberance" of the art and culture of Mexico.* Though he had always admired Mexican culture, Rodríguez-Díaz here resisted painting "la Mexicana."** On his next trip to Mexico, Rodríguez-Díaz engaged very directly with the work of artists such as Diego Rivera and Frida Kahlo (the first work he painted on that trip is in the Portraits and Mestizaje section in the next room).

Rodríguez-Díaz has represented himself in deep concentration, peering through his hands, as he is bedazzled by the spectacle of Mexico. At the same time, he is "trying to diffuse all the things that might be interfering with my ability to focus." He endowed his eyes with unusual intensity in order to convey the urgency of needing to know how to "move forward" in his artistic journey. The challenge of achieving focus is expressed by a field of confusingly focused circles.

* Ángel Rodríguez-Díaz, Interview with David S. Rubin, "Artist Conversations at the San Antonio Museum of Art," July 20, 2010. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OiDpZ6qErw-c&list=PL2gM9cn_45ZWJ_9JBUwaf7hwVazpOY9vA&index=3



Self-Portrait
August 1997
oil on canvas
18 1/2 x 22 1/2 inches
collection of Dr. Raphael and Sandra Guerra

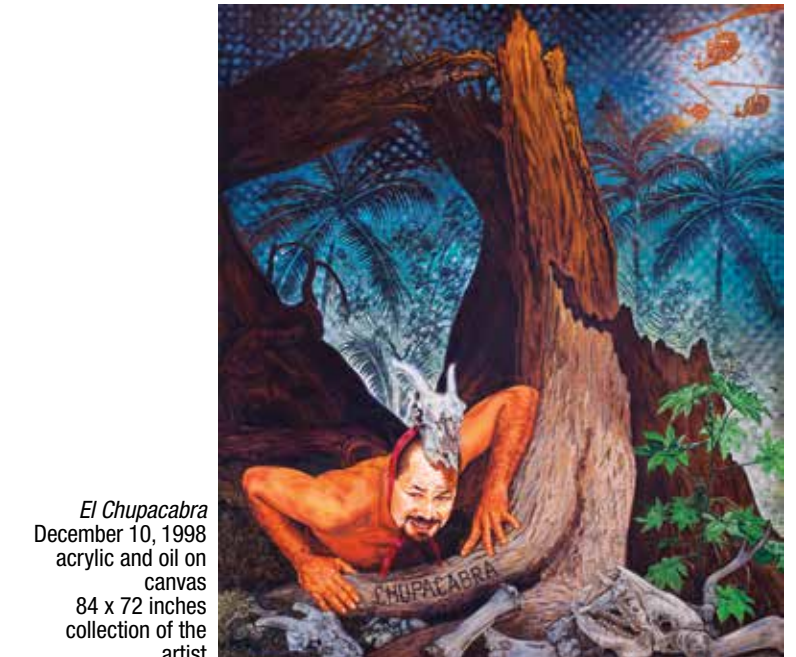


Rodríguez-Díaz has depicted himself as if he had posed out of doors, with the glistening effects of sun-dappled light filtering through trees. The splotchy effects recall those of Auguste Renoir's (1841-1919) *Study. Torso, Effect of Sun* (1876), which, when it was first exhibited, was compared to decomposing flesh by an anti-Impressionist critic. Rodríguez-Díaz uses relatively thin paint, which lets the weave of the canvas show. The many independent color accents on his face and body reference Impressionist techniques. A hazy, grey-blue highlight surrounds the contours of his body. Though his self-image is based on a slide taken outside, the painting's fabric background serves to deny an open-air setting. The artist describes his facial expression as one that "shows an awareness of life and the world around me."

El Chupacabra is the sole painting Rodríguez-Díaz included in his installation "A Splendid Little War" at Artpace in 1998-1999.* When Rodríguez-Díaz was notified of his selection for this artist in residency program, he realized that the scheduled opening on December 10, 1998 coincided with the centennial of the Treaty of Paris that brought an end to the Spanish American War. This treaty launched the United States as a world power by ceding Guam, Puerto Rico, and the Philippines to the U.S. and designating Cuba as a U.S. protectorate. It marked the apogee of U.S. imperialism under the banner of Manifest Destiny. Advocacy for this war was provided by two competing newspapers: William Randolph Hearst's *New York Morning Journal* and Joseph Pulitzer's *World*. Their manufactured content and inflammatory rhetoric gave rise to the term Yellow

Journalism. The Artpace exhibition title "A Splendid Little War" is a phrase the artist and others have credited to Hearst,* but it was actually used by John Hay in a letter to Theodore Roosevelt dated July 27, 1898.** Hearst's paper *did* take responsibility for the war: it queried "how do you like the *Journal's* war?" in June of 1898, and in September of that year Hearst reveled in his new-found power as a publisher: "newspapers form and express public opinion. They suggest and control legislation. They declare wars. ... The newspapers control the nation...."***

In his Artpace installation Rodríguez-Díaz made enormous chalk drawings on facing black walls that drew parallels between the Mexican American War (which resulted in the forcible annexation of the present-day Southwestern U.S.) and the Spanish American War. Rodríguez-Díaz compared the conquest and colonization of Puerto Rico to that of Texas. An image of the Alamo faced that of the battleship Maine, whose sinking served as a pretext for the Spanish American War. "Remember the Alamo" and "Remember the Maine" were the rallying cries of these two wars.



El Chupacabra
December 10, 1998
acrylic and oil on canvas
84 x 72 inches
collection of the artist

El Chupacabra was hung between these two wall drawings. Rodríguez-Díaz depicts himself as the modern mythological creature known as the chupacabra (goat-sucker). The first reports of chupacabras surfaced in Puerto Rico in 1995, where they were credited with attacking, sucking the blood, and sometimes mutilating 2,000 animals within two years.***

As the personification of the chupacabra, Rodríguez-Díaz becomes the ultimate “exotic Latino.” He has applied whiteface to emphasize his assumption of this tragicomic role. The word chupacabra is branded on the tree root on which he rests, underscoring the fact that he is figuratively “branded” as an exotic. In the artist’s view, Latinos are either ignored to the point of cultural invisibility, or they are endowed with fantastic, fetishistic qualities. Rodríguez-Díaz played out this dichotomy on the façade of Artpace in the form of a “satiric self-portrait” made of blinking Christmas lights. When his caricature of a happy Latino was illuminated, the bulbs at the top read “NOW YOU SEE ME,” when the caricature was off, they read “NOW YOU DON’T.”* A banner that wound behind him bore the phrase “SPLENDID LITTLE WAR.”

For Rodríguez-Díaz, impersonating the chupacabra is yet another masquerade of “Puerto Rican-ness,” for the chupacabra is the most chimerical of all exotic Latino creatures. It has been described in numerous ways: as a grey alien with red eyes and multicolored spines on its back; as a dinosaurian lizard; as a panther-like stalker. Sometimes they are said to hop like kangaroos while exuding an odor of sulfur; other witnesses have them floating like butterflies or gliding like bats.***

In *El Chupacabra*, Rodríguez-Díaz wears a goat’s skull, which is attached to his head with a red ribbon as a sign of his blood-sucking character. As he crawls through the forest, fleshless skulls and bones are strewn beneath him, including the large skull in the lower right that fantastically combines the remains of a boar, a moose, and a deer. Bats are the only land-based mammals native to Puerto Rico (many others

were brought by Europeans), so the implication is that the chupacabra has vanquished these various invasive species. Moose cannot survive in a tropical climate. This mutant moose’s remains doubtlessly refer to Theodore Roosevelt, who, after his charge on Kettle Hill declared: “I feel as big and strong as a bull moose!”**** Roosevelt ran for the presidency in 1912 on the Progressive ticket, which was nicknamed the Bull Moose Party. His charge was “the most celebrated feat” of the Spanish American War, and this notoriety is what brought him success as a political candidate.**

The background sky and tropical foliage are woven together with a snakeskin pattern blended with the network of small spheres (Rodríguez-Díaz began utilizing the spheres in *Primordial Feeling* in 1990). This tightly knit background camouflage is simultaneously natural and unnatural: it contrasts sharply with the more realistically painted foreground elements, which are left in a rougher state of finish in order to represent the “real.”



Fig. 1
detail image of
El Chupacabra

Toppled trees shelter Rodríguez-Díaz, helping him evade the trinity of helicopters that stalk him like a horde of killer bees. The helicopters are united by a circular Latin inscription *e pluribus unum* (out of many, one) (Fig. 1), which served as the original

motto of the U.S. While this thirteen-character motto originally referenced the thirteen states that made up the union, it has more recently been interpreted to stand for the diversity of peoples that make up the nation. The phrase *e pluribus unum* is borne by the eagle on the Great Seal of the United States, and it also appears on U.S. currency. The trio of helicopters is also a reference to the Christian Trinity and to the phrase “In God We Trust,” which became the official motto of the U.S. in 1956 and which also appears on U.S. currency.

Rodríguez-Díaz holds that—contrary to these mottos—Latinos are excluded from full participation in society. The Latino immigrant is thus like the chupacabra: simultaneously demon and victim, he is dispossessed and hunted—even in his native land. Despite his absurd hat, Rodríguez-Díaz is just a man. Though he has no magical or extra-terrestrial powers, he possesses the resiliency of the many men and women who have protected their homelands in the face of superior U.S. military technology, and who have successfully traversed increasingly militarized borders in the New World Order.

* For reproductions and a discussion of the installation, see Eleanor Heartney, “Angel Rodríguez-Díaz: Splendid Little War,” Artpace, 1998, exhibition pamphlet.

** See John T. Bethell, “A Splendid Little War”: Harvard and the Commencement of a New World Order,” *Harvard Magazine*, November, 1988. <https://harvardmagazine.com/1998/11/war.html>

When he wrote this letter, Hay was serving as the ambassador to Great Britain. In August he was appointed Secretary of State, and in that capacity he was a negotiator of the Treaty of Paris. See: “John Milton Hay, 1838-1905,” Hispanic Division, Library of Congress. <https://www.loc.gov/rr/hispanic/1898/hay.html>

*** Within a year, the chupacabra was allegedly rampaging across Florida, Texas, California, Long Island, and Mexico, as well as other parts of Latin America. Some believe chupacabras are alien’s pets; others are convinced they are the progeny of top-secret experiments (either nefarious ones, or experiments gone bad). In any case, believers suspect the U.S. government cynically suppresses evidence of the chupacabra’s existence.

See Bucky McMahon, “Goatsucker Sighted, Details to Follow,” *Outside Magazine*, September, 1996. <http://www.outsideonline.com/1845106/goatsucker-sighted-details-follow>

**** Jackson Lears, “How the US Began Its Empire,” review of Stephen Kinzer, *The True Flag: Theodore Roosevelt, Mark Twain, and the Birth of the American Empire* (Harry Holt, 2017). *New York Review of Books*, February 23, 2017. <http://www.nybooks.com/articles/2017/02/23/how-the-us-began-its-empire/>



The Butterfly
oil and acrylic on
canvas
January 1994
50 x 50 inches
collection of The
University of Texas
at San Antonio

The Butterfly is one of Rodríguez-Díaz’s most whimsical creations. He utilizes a square format that centers the butterfly mask that he wears on his head, which protrudes from the body of the mask. The mask reads more like a two-dimensional photographic prop than a three-dimensional mask. In his most amusing conceit, the artist utilizes a second self-portrait for the head of the butterfly, whose antennae suggest devil horns. Rodríguez-Díaz further anthropomorphizes the butterfly by endowing it with only two legs instead of six.

In Mexican folk culture, devil figures are regarded as amusing and relatively benign figures, and depictions of them commonly adorn households, including shrines, and altars. The expressions found on these two self-depictions are significantly different. The larger one is jovial, while the smaller one is somewhat glum. These differing expressions

suggest duality: we can imagine the bigger head as the better self, and the smaller as a devilish or id-driven tempter. With his right hand the artist touches a leg and wing of the butterfly, intimating dominance and control—hence the unhappiness of the little head.

Rodríguez-Díaz created a beautiful blue-and-purple butterfly habitat by spraying acrylic paint through a lace-like fabric with butterfly and floral patterns. He also utilized a stencil to make small spheres to produce a shifting sense of depth. This painting is reminiscent of the work of Frida Kahlo, who habitually painted self-portraits, often with masks and/or folk art objects, and who typically presented herself as a holy innocent. Both Kahlo and Rodríguez-Díaz were deeply engaged with Surrealism, and both utilized butterflies or moths as emblems of transformation. Rodríguez-Díaz is also referencing Aztec mythology: butterflies represent the souls of Aztec warriors. The Mexican imagery of this painting reflects Rodríguez-Díaz's recent trip to Mexico.

In this most enigmatic and Surreal of Rodríguez-Díaz's self-portraits, the pair of hands with eyes was inspired by the same motif in a photomontage by Herbert Bayer (1900-1985) called *Lonely Metropolitan* (1932). Bayer's disembodied hands and clothed forearms float against the backdrop of a Berlin apartment building courtyard. As its title implies, *Lonely Metropolitan* addresses the theme of urban alienation. In the Middle East and northern Africa, an amulet known as Hamsa consists of a stylized hand with an eye. Hamsa is valued as a powerful means of warding off evil eye.

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Rodríguez-Díaz utilizes the eye-in-palm motif for a very different purpose. He is in a deep trance or meditative state. "I'm trying to compose myself," says the artist. His hands are turned outward in a manner that is not physically possible. We are afforded the artist's view of his own open palms, rather than what we would see if he extended them out to the viewer of this picture. With his own eyelids firmly closed, his vigilant eyes have seemingly taken up residency in his palms. Rodríguez-Díaz has rendered what could appropriately be called "seeing hands." The artist's hands—the very agents that give form to his unique inner visions—have symbolically been gifted the sense of sight. This apparition of "seeing hands" can be understood as an externalization of the union of senses that are most essential for artistic creation.



Looking into my Hands I see a Distant Memory
August 2004
oil and acrylic on canvas
42 x 28 inches
collection of Dr. Raphael and Sandra Guerra

The floral motif that is projected over the artist's body (via fabric utilized as a stencil) reads more as an expression of the artist's "organic" character than as a tattoo, for the latter is mere surface ornament. The running horses in the background conjure the title of a famous Jasper Johns (b. 1930) painting: *Racing Thoughts* (1983).



The Good Old Days
February 2005
acrylic and oil on canvas
72 x 60 inches
collection of the artist

In *The Good Old Days* Rodríguez-Díaz has painted his head almost four feet high. The combination of big head and banner relate this painting to the artist's blinking light self-portrait in his "Splendid Little War" installation at Artpace in 1998 (see the text for *El Chupacabra*). In *The Good Old Days* Rodríguez-Díaz has given himself the scale of an imperial portrait, and, fittingly, the artist has garlanded himself with a horseshoe-shaped laurel wreath, an attribute commonly associated with the processional Triumph of a Roman general, which was "the summit of

military glory."* The laurel crown (*Corona Triumphalis*) was the most prestigious crown that could be bestowed upon a Roman victor,* and generals, emperors, and other luminaries in subsequent ages have had themselves depicted with this attribute. But in *The Good Old Days*, Rodríguez-Díaz appears to be naked, with no sign of a toga, royal robe, uniform, or other professional attribute. Moreover, both his face and the hand that makes the "okay" gesture are besmirched with a black, sooty substance.

How do we make sense of this puzzling combination of imagery? As David S. Rubin points out, Rodríguez-Díaz has represented himself as an "oil mogul" assuming the mantle of "the new emperor of America."** The purple background also evokes lofty associations. Roman generals were cloaked in purple during their Triumphs and purple came to be regarded as a color reserved for imperial elites. We can assume that the mogul might be unaware that he is naked, like the deluded title character in Hans Christian Anderson's "The Emperor's New Clothes."

The dark stains on the mogul's body—to which he is apparently oblivious—are from oil, the liquid gold that is the source of his wealth and power. He is literally cloaked in crude filth. Thus we can be certain that the mogul is not worried about oil's polluting effects or about its role in global warming. Rodríguez-Díaz dramatically implicates fossil fuels in global warming by surrounding the black oil derricks with an intense red glow that evokes the fires of hell. This fiery imagery is depicted on either side of the mogul's hand, indicating that these conditions are his "handiwork." Oil is also a strategic commodity that is a major source of war in the contemporary world. Nonetheless, the mogul is all-too-willing to transform the earth into a hell for the sake of his own profit.*** He stands in stark contrast to the Christmas imagery that is woven into the purple background: a child with wrapped gifts, candles, bells, snowflakes, holly, and poinsettias. Christmas represents salvation, peace, and generosity towards of humanity. The mogul stands for damnation, war, destruction, and personal enrichment.

The uses of Christianity are called into question by the banner that hangs over the mogul's head. Though oligarchs usually profess to be good Christians, their personal and business practices often conflict with Christian ideals. A sumptuously bejeweled hand holds a banner with three of the four words of the official U.S. motto: "In We Trust." The word "God" is turned away. The implication is that the wealthy have turned away from God and that they trust only in themselves. The letters GOD are also an acronym for Good Old Days. Thus, in the minds of moguls, GOD might mean the days before anti-trust regulations, income tax laws, and the Environmental Protection Agency.

While the smiling mogul winks to indicate that the fix is on, his open mouth could well point to his eternal damnation, for it has much in common with that of the screaming *Damned Soul* portrayed by Michelangelo Buonarroti (1475-1564), Gian Lorenzo Bernini (1598-1680), and a host of other masters. His blackened skin could thus prefigure his roasting in Hell.

* The god Apollo was habitually depicted with such a wreath and it has often been associated with artists and the arts. In ancient Greece, winners of athletic and poetry competitions were given laurel wreaths. For the Roman context, see: Linda Alchin, "Roman Crowns and Wreaths," SiteSeen Limited, 2015. <http://www.tribunesandtriumphs.org/roman-clothing/roman-crowns-and-wreaths.htm>

** David S. Rubin, "Ángel Rodríguez-Díaz's Spiritual Evolution," *Glasstire*, April 14, 2015. <http://glasstire.com/2015/04/14/angel-rodriguez-diazs-spiritual-evolution/>

*** According to GreenPeace, since 1997 Charles G. Koch and David H. Koch, the U.S.'s most eminent oil oligarchs, have contributed over \$88.8 million to groups that deny climate change science. See: "Koch Industries: Secretly Funding the Climate Denial Machine," GreenPeace. <http://www.greenpeace.org/usa/global-warming/climate-deniers/koch-industries/>

On the other hand, the Rockefeller Family Fund is divesting its holdings in fossil fuel companies, starting with ExxonMobil (the largest corporate "descendent" of U.S. oil oligarch John D. Rockefeller's Standard Oil) because of its "morally reprehensible conduct" in denying climate change. See: David Kaiser



and Lee Wasserman, "The Rockefeller Family Fund vs. Exxon," *The New York Review of Books*, December 8, 2016. <http://www.nybooks.com/articles/2016/12/08/the-rockefeller-family-fund-vs-exxon/>

MEXICAN MASKED WRESTLERS

Commencing in 2001, Rodríguez-Díaz donned Mexican wrestling masks in his self-portraits. They give colorful expression to his status as a cultural warrior, and also signal his assimilation of Mexican and San Antonian popular culture.

The artist explains that these masks are utilized as "a metaphor of how as an artist, I wrestle with the medium, wrestle with the art world, and wrestle with getting my work out there."* The Spanish word *luchador* means fighter as well as wrestler.

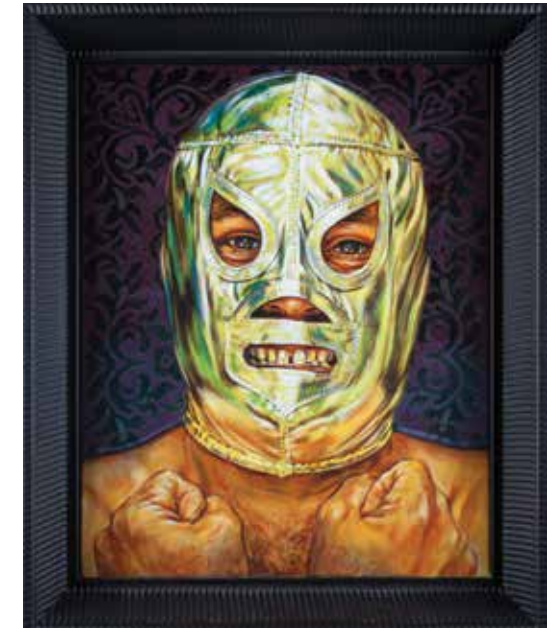
Rodríguez-Díaz has continuously fought against the biases of the art establishment. His graduate school advisor told him that painting was "dead" and that he didn't want to see any paintings. In New York as well as San Antonio, he has wrestled with the art establishment's prejudices against figural art, ethnic art, political art, and portraiture.

As a Puerto Rican native living and working in an overwhelmingly Mexican-American community, Rodríguez-Díaz assumes the personas of these wrestlers with humorous irony, often visualizing them as giants as well as superheroes.

For Rodríguez-Díaz the Mexican wrestling masks are a mode of "creating another type of portraiture."* Moreover, like his self-portrait impersonation of the chupacabra, the wrestling masks are a way of addressing the invisibility of Latinos in the United States, in this case by literally effacing most of his face.

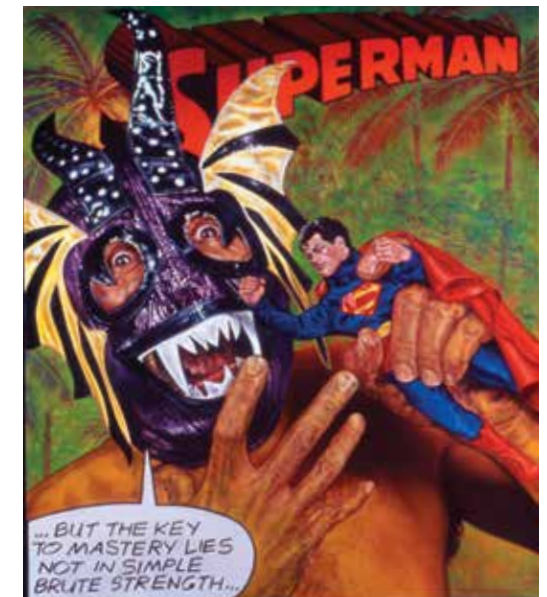
* "Brief Bio," written for Southwest School of Art exhibition, San Antonio, 2005.

This is Rodríguez-Díaz's first Mexican wrestling painting. He wears the mask of El Santo (1917-1984), who played a key role in popularizing the sport in Mexico, becoming a folk hero and a movie star in the process. After El Santo's death, one of his sons began wrestling under the name El Hijo del Santo (Son of the Saint).



Hijo de Santurche
May 2001
acrylic and oil on canvas
20 x 16 inches
Collection of Andy Benavides

Rodríguez-Díaz appropriates Santo's famous silver mask and calls himself Hijo de Santurche (Son of Santurche). The artist is from Santurce, the largest and most populous district of San Juan, Puerto Rico. Therefore Rodríguez-Díaz ironically naturalizes Santo as a Puerto Rican and claims his legacy as a familial inheritance.



Alebrije: But the Key to Mastery Lies Not in Simple Brute Strength, April 2003
acrylic and oil on canvas
72 x 60 inches
collection of the artist

Superman, as an emblem of the U.S.'s superpower status, has seemingly been superceded on the cover of his own comic book by a King Kong-sized, fantastically masked Mexican wrestler named Alebrije, who toys with the tiny man of steel while he delivers a Zen lecture to the little brute.



Self-portrait #3
March 1999
acrylic and oil on canvas
20 x 16 inches
collection of Rolando Briseño

This small self-portrait is one of the most finely rendered faces that Rodríguez-Díaz has painted. It shows particular sensitivity to the nuances of light and reflected color. This self-portrait provides a dramatic contrast to the Mexican wrestling pictures, since the masks efface many of the very qualities that the artist spent years mastering in his previous portraits.

This painting was created in the immediate aftermath of the U.S. invasion and occupation of Iraq that began in March of 2003. George W. Bush had advocated the removal of Saddam Hussein in his 2000 presidential campaign. After the September 11, 2001 attacks on the World Trade Center in New York, President Bush declared a "War on Terror" and justified "pre-emptive" military action. His administration implied that the 9/11 attacks were linked to Hussein. Furthermore, it falsely claimed that Hussein possessed Weapons of Mass Destruction (WMD) and the means to deliver attacks on the U.S. These claims provided the pretext for the invasion of Iraq.



Atlantis: Pre-Emptive Strike? ... Coming Back To Haunt You!
June 2003
acrylic and oil on canvas
54 x 60 inches
collection of the artist

Rodríguez-Díaz wears the mask of the Mexican wrestler Atlantis (note the blue fish-shaped elements that surround his eyes). Deep in his underwater abode, which is presumably the lost continent of Atlantis, he receives word of Bush's pre-emptive strike via his seashell, which he holds to his ear like a telephone with his left hand. Wide-eyed with incredulity, Atlantis questions what has become known as the Bush Doctrine with individual oxygen bubbles that serve as an aquatic Morse Code: "pre-emptive strike?" He simultaneously makes a mocking gesture with his right hand.

On May 1, 2003, President Bush gave a speech on the aircraft carrier *USS Abraham Lincoln* behind a large red-white-and-blue banner that declared: "mission accomplished." Rodríguez-Díaz contrarily predicted negative consequences in the blue banner floating in the foreground: "... coming back to haunt you!" When Rodríguez-Díaz made this prophetic painting, he couldn't know just how disastrous the consequences of the Iraq war would be, from international outrage over false justifications for

the war and torture at the Abu Ghraib prison to the regional instability it created and its role in the rise of ISIS. A war intended to demonstrate the U.S.'s power, expertise, and ability to "spread democracy" through "regime change" instead demonstrated its inability to impose its will through force of arms.



In The Mirror of Your I ... Mil Mascaras
February 2004
charcoal, pastel and oil on canvas
72 x 60 inches
collection of the artist

Mil Mascaras is a Mexican wrestler with—if he lives up to his name—a thousand masks. Mil Mascaras literally means thousand masks. One can even read the word mascararas as a compound made up of two separate Spanish words, "mas" and "caras." These two words translate as "more faces."

The "M" emblazoned on this mask's forehead indicates that this is yet another face of Mil Mascaras. Wrestlers are defined by their large, muscular physiques. Yet despite its monumental scale, this image of Mil Mascaras has a decidedly child-like aspect. Because this face is masked, we are only given access to a few features: enormous, child-like eyes, a small slice of nose, and pouting

lips. Moreover, the lower portion of the patterned red background reads like a tiny infant's body that is subsumed by the enormous black-and-white head. If Mil Mascaras is a wrestler with a thousand masks, Rodríguez-Díaz is an artist with a thousand faces, and this is one of them. One of the possible meanings of the punning title is that Rodríguez-Díaz mirrors and reflects the "I" (the unstable, form-shifting essence) of the luchador Mil Mascaras.



Antifaz: Forget The Alamo. Yellow Rose
July 2004
acrylic and oil on canvas
39 1/2 x 60 inches
collection of the artist

"Remember the Alamo" was a rallying cry used at the Battle of San Jacinto during the Texian revolt against Mexico in 1836, and during the Mexican American War of 1846 - 48. The latter was precipitated by the U.S. annexation of Texas, and it resulted in the U.S. annexation of the northern half of Mexico.

In his Artpace installation of 1998, Rodríguez-Díaz paired the Alamo with the battleship Maine as symbolic pretexts for U.S. wars of conquest (see text for *El Chupacabra* in the first gallery). In this painting, a mysterious dark-skinned woman (only her hand and sleeve are visible) offers a Christmas ornament in the shape of the Alamo. Antifaz, Rodríguez-Díaz's wrestler persona, twists himself into a human pretzel

in a dramatic gesture of refusal. Antifaz recognizes the Alamo as an emblem of Manifest Destiny freighted with anti-Mexican and anti-Chicano sentiment.

Yellow was a term used for mixed race people in the South, so the “Yellow Rose” of Texas is often thought to refer to a mixed race woman. Legendary accounts identify the Yellow Rose with a real person named Emily, who worked for a slave owner named James Morgan, who evaded Mexico’s anti-slavery laws with various subterfuges. Emily D. West was a free-born black woman, though she is usually mistakenly referred to as Emily Morgan (since slaves took the last names of their owners), and often identified as a mixed-race person who was either an indentured servant or a slave. Emily was reportedly captured and abducted by Mexican soldiers shortly before the battle of San Jacinto. The most fantastic of the tales associated with her credits Emily with convincing another captured servant to escape and inform Texian General Sam Houston of the Mexican army’s location; she, meanwhile, out of Texian patriotism, allegedly distracted and sexually exhausted Mexican General Antonio López de Santa Anna in his tent until Houston made his victorious advance at San Jacinto.* Kent Biffle, who notes that scholars reject these tales, argues against associating Emily with the popular song “The Yellow Rose of Texas.”**

Curiously, the promoters of pro-Texian Yellow Rose legends expect a black or mixed-race woman to side with the pro-slavery forces. Sam Houston was also a slave owner: two of his slaves liberated themselves by escaping to Mexico. In any case, at the same time that Antifaz is recoiling from the myth of the Alamo, we should view him as recoiling from the myth of the Yellow Rose, as well.

* For a credulous account of these legends, see: Mark Whitelaw, “In Search of the ‘Yellow Rose of Texas,’” *Texas Legends*. <https://www.tamu.edu/faculty/ccbn/dewitt/adp/archives/yellowrose/yelrose.html>

** Kent Biffle’s Texana, “The Sweetest Little Rosebud ‘We Never Knew’ Yellow Rose still Unsolved,” *Dallas Morning News*, April 13, 1997. <http://www.tamu.edu/faculty/ccbn/dewitt/adp/archives/yellowrose/yellowrose.html>



Blue Panther, The Stealthy Watcher
December 2004
acrylic and oil on canvas
36 x 36 inches
collection of the artist

As in *The Butterfly* in the first gallery, Rodríguez-Díaz has depicted himself twice in this painting. These two self-portraits are so vastly different in character that dualism is clearly the guiding principle of this work. The contemplative artist in the foreground is stalked by his other self: a frenzy-eyed, growling-mouthed, panther-masked wrestler who exaggeratedly pantomimes a big catty pounce. The foreground self-portrait is rendered in dark blues and purples in order to approach the colors of the blue and purple panther mask.

This kindred coloring suggests a deeper connection between the two selves: could the Blue Panther wrestler represent the dreaming man’s nahual, his animal spirit counterpart? The indigenous peoples of Mesoamerica believed that everyone possessed a nahual, into which they could be transformed, either in spirit or in animal form. Jaguars and other big cats are the most common nahuals. We have already seen intimations of big cat nahuals in Rodríguez-Díaz’s



art: the tiger mask in *Babilonia* (1985) and *Guerrero Azteca* (1995). The latter painting replicates Diego Rivera’s Aztec Jaguar Knight killing an armored Spanish conquistador with a flint knife.

This painting’s jungle background, with its combination of small spheres and snakeskin motifs, harkens back to *El Chapacabra* (1998). The jungle motifs and snakeskin patterns that are imprinted onto the wrestler’s flesh give it a phantasmagoric quality, implying that this dreaming man’s Blue Panther nahual is present in spirit rather than in the flesh.

EARLY MALE IMAGES

Rodríguez-Díaz’s earliest paintings in New York were mostly of males who were close friends. Because of his desire to paint from life, it was impractical to paint people who were not frequently in his company, since it took several weeks to complete a painting. By 1990 Rodríguez-Díaz began to use pictures instead of live models, and, for purely practical reasons, he came to work exclusively from slides rather than live models. The paintings in this section are among the last ones he painted from life.



Metropolis #3
March 1986
charcoal on paper
33 x 25 inches
collection of Dr. Raphael and Sandra Guerra

This drawing depicts Manuel Ramos Otero (1948-1990), who had been Rodríguez-Díaz’s partner several years before. Otero was a highly renowned Puerto Rican poet whose work often treated sexual and political themes. Otero, who was suffering from AIDS, had fallen asleep on a couch when he was working on a fashion-related project in the garment district of New York. Rodríguez-Díaz sketched Otero’s head, then he later rendered a view of the building in which he slept.



The Annunciation
May 1986
charcoal on paper
33 x 25 inches
collection of Dr. Raphael and
Sandra Guerra

The relationship between Rodríguez-Díaz and Otero had been stormy because the latter was often violent when he drank. This drawing is a way of saying farewell. The artist describes the dark form in the lower left as a “vortex,” part of a “force field of reverberations.” This globe-like form enclosed by concentric circles recalls the one in Giovanni di Paolo’s (1398-1482) *Creation of the World and Expulsion From Paradise* (1445), which also features a pointing God and a naked angel expelling a naked Adam.* Rodríguez-Díaz says the headless angel in his drawing is “skinny because of sickness.” His pointing hand marks an end rather than a beginning. The ambiguous form in the vortex is Rodríguez-Díaz’s self-portrait, seemingly displaced from the headless angel and reflected as in a distorting mirror. Rodríguez-Díaz says the dark diagonal marks “a passageway to death that captures the moment of leaving.” He recalls that the elongated forms of the departing body were inspired by Cimabue (c. 1230-1302), the late Medieval painter who set the stage for the Italian Renaissance. A small *Flagellation of Christ* by Cimabue at the Frick Collection in New York likely inspired the legs in this drawing.** In this painting, Christ is disproportionately large, with particularly enormous, curved legs, much like those

in the drawing. Cimabue handled calf muscles in a very stylized manner—this is evident in one of the flagellators in the Frick painting, as well as many other paintings. These stylizations account for the strange handling of the calf muscles in the drawing. Ángel Rodríguez-Díaz made remarkable use of an image by Cimabue of Christ just before his death, and he likely unconsciously identified with the angel in Giovanni di Paolo’s expulsion, which is why this drawing seems more like an expulsion than an annunciation.

* “Giovanni di Paolo, *The Creation of the World and the Expulsion From Paradise*,” Metropolitan Museum of Art website. <http://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/458971>

** Cimabue, *The Flagellation of Christ*, Frick Collection website. <http://collections.frick.org/media/view/Objects/380/2950?t:state:flow=b4fd162a-a63d-4d05-8944-38feb-2c7d511>



In the Shadow of a Rainforest
February 1990
oil on canvas
72 x 52 ½ inches
collection of the artist

Rodríguez-Díaz summoned a Philippine rainforest in his New York studio, with Ramon Hodel serving as a model. The large-scale trees, vines, and leaves were painted from imagination to evoke the Philippines, the sitter’s native country. The ferns and grasses were available locally in the form of potted

plants. The artificiality of this creation is emphasized by the lamplight. A yellow bulb takes the place of the sun. In the cold New York winter the artist longed for the tropical sun of his childhood when, like his model, he could go shirtless.



The Strangeness of Being
March 1990
oil on canvas
50 x 72 inches
collection of the artist

Rodríguez-Díaz wanted to create a painting with a dramatic setting. A shy, introspective friend named Raúl posed for the figure, which was painted from a photograph. During the 1990s, the dramatic skies that Rodríguez-Díaz painted owe much to the example of the Hudson River painter Frederic Edwin Church. The clouds and the orange light behind the trees were created from imagination. A band of orange light on the horizon such as this one would occur near sunrise or sunset. At such a time, the sky would be darker, and the man’s head and body would not be so well lit. This disequilibrium of lighting effects endows the man’s ambiguous facial expression with greater mystery. The trees were inspired by a photograph of similar trees at the Asylum at St. Remy, where Vincent Van Gogh had himself committed during the last year of his life. Rodríguez-Díaz’s trees mysteriously appear to be struggling to extend their tentacles in all directions.



The Card Players,
aka *The Accomplice*
May 1990
oil on canvas
50 x 60 inches
collection of the artist

The game is brisca, a Spanish card game. The players are using an archaic deck, the kind the artist used in Puerto Rico. The man in the white sweater is rendered dramatically from life, as if he were caught in a pair of spotlights. His opponent is Rodríguez-Díaz, who has darkened his skin to create greater contrast. He extends his arm to present *la espada* (the sword), which is the winning card. Rodríguez-Díaz says he is “taking over” from the left flank. The tablecloth was copied from one of the cloth samples Rodríguez-Díaz collected. The leaves were hand-painted on the rear wall to provide variety and visual interest. They point the way to the fabric-patterned backgrounds that become ubiquitous in the next few years.

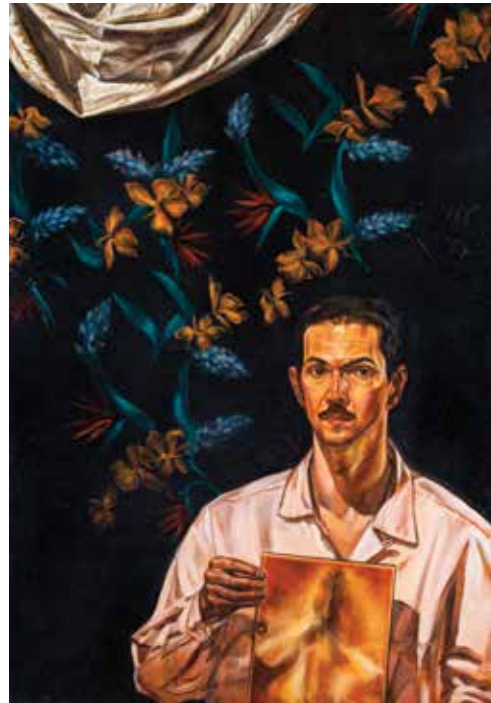
The model is Arnaldo Cruz-Malavé, a professor at Fordham University and the artist’s best friend. He is from the city of St. Sebastian in Puerto Rico, which is why the painting is titled *From St. Sebastian*. The artist’s love of Baroque flair and opulence is evident in this painting, from the pink pajama top to the textured fabric background to the cloth in the upper left corner. By de-centering Cruz-Malavé to the lower right of the picture, Rodríguez-Díaz creates an unsettling effect that is common in Mannerist painting. This interest is further emphasized by the figure’s elongated neck, which was inspired by El Greco. Cruz-Malavé seemingly externalizes his own covered chest with a picture of a man’s bare chest. When Rodríguez-Díaz was forbidden to paint while he was in graduate school at Hunter College, he

exhibited an installation dedicated to St. Sebastian in 1980 that included medical x-rays of torsos. This imagery reflects that experience.

St. Sebastian—idealized in art as a beautiful youth who is stripped of his clothes, bound to a tree, and ecstatically pierced by arrows—has long been a gay icon. He has also been dubbed the patron saint of homosexuals. Rodríguez-Díaz recalls that of all his grandmother’s images of saints, “Saint Sebastian always caught my eye because of the arrows, that he was still alive and he had all these things piercing him. And he had this demeanor and his face was like in some kind of ecstasy.”*

Historically, St. Sebastian achieved popularity as a saint who rescued communities afflicted by the plague. In the aftermath of the AIDs epidemic, that function is more relevant than ever.

* Oral history interview with Angel Rodriguez-Diaz, April 23 - May 7, 2004. Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution. <https://www.aaa.si.edu/collections/interviews/oral-history-interview-angel-rodriguez-diaz-13193>



From *St. Sebastian*
March 1991
oil on canvas
58 x 38 inches
collection of the artist



Janus Agenda: Like a Dream There is No End and No Beginning
September 1989
pastel on paper
32 x 24 inches
collection of Ms. Norma Bodevin

A torso and a deer skull and rack serve as a very unusual combination in this composition. Rodríguez-Díaz was very familiar with this skull, because it was one of two bucks that his partner Rolando Briseño had killed on a hunting trip with his father when the latter was seventeen. He deeply regretted his marksmanship: “When I saw their bodies, I hugged them. They were so beautiful.” He never hunted again. Briseño’s proud father mounted both skulls and racks, noting that both kills were “heart shots.” The skulls are in the San Antonio apartment Rodríguez-Díaz shares with Briseño. When Rodríguez-Díaz began making this depiction of his torso, he wanted to make some kind of symbolic substitution for his genitals. He found the solution in this skull and rack, which, superimposed over his own body, juxtapose images of life and death.

PORTRAITS AND MESTIZAJE, 1995 – 2010

Mexico, and Aztec culture in particular, had fascinated Rodríguez-Díaz from the time he was in grade school. In 1994 he won a National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH) grant that enabled him to realize a life-long dream and experience Day of the Dead in Mexico. During this six-month trip he was based in Cuernavaca, which is home to a mural cycle by Diego Rivera at the Palacio de Cortés.

Guerrero Azteca is the first painting Rodríguez-Díaz made on this trip to Mexico. The next two that he made in Mexico engage in a dialog with works by Diego Rivera and Frida Kahlo.

The first of these, *The Offering* (not in exhibition), combines a Rivera-esque child with Calla Lilies with fruit that references Kahlo’s still life paintings. The faux-naïve perspective (the tipped-up table and the confusing slats on the chair) in this painting and *Tonantzin* (the next painting he made in Mexico) also refer to Kahlo’s and Rivera’s artistic strategies. The paintings include images of the Aztec goddess Coatlicue and the Virgin of Guadalupe as parallel religious icons. Rodríguez-Díaz wanted to explore Mexico on a deep level, and he views this trip as a pivot point in his art and life. After the artist returned from Mexico, he moved to San Antonio.

The works in this section emphasize racial and cultural mixing. Rodríguez-Díaz explains how these paintings connect with his own mixed ancestry: “As a Puerto Rican, my Taino (the indigenous people of Puerto Rico), my Spanish, and my African backgrounds are the founding layers of my identity. Through these portraits, I hold in my hands the mementos of my heritage, reinventing their significance today.”



Guerrero Azteca
January 1995
oil on paper mounted on linen
48 3/8 x 32 1/4 inches
collection of Gilberto Cardenas,
courtesy of the Notre Dame Center for Arts and Culture

The upper portion of this painting is based on a detail from Rivera's *Battle of the Aztecs and the Spaniards* (1930) at the Palacio de Cortés in Cuernavaca. A costumed Aztec Jaguar warrior (Jaguars and Eagles were the two elite Aztec orders) has pinned an armored Spanish conquistador to the ground. He is about to pierce the throat of the Spaniard with his flint knife. Since the Jaguar warrior is on all fours, he mimics an attacking jaguar, which would also go for the throat of its victim.

As Rodríguez-Díaz has often noted, the Taino, who inhabited present-day Puerto Rico and other parts of the Caribbean, were a peace-loving culture. Many committed mass-suicide rather than endure Spanish cruelty. The Aztecs, on the other hand, were a bellicose culture that quickly built up a large empire in Mesoamerica. Of all of Rivera's details he could have selected to copy, Rodríguez-Díaz chose one that dramatically highlighted the differences between Aztec and Taino culture.

This fatal embrace gave birth to the mestizo (mix of Spanish and indigenous), symbolized by the man in the bottom section of the painting, who is modeled on Wilfredo Avila, the artist's host in Cuernavaca. According to Rodríguez-Díaz, this mestizo is "longing for something lost from the catastrophic event of the Spanish conquering. The sculpture is a momento of that struggle, and the image above

him the inescapable reminiscence."* Unlike his first trip to Mexico, Rodríguez-Díaz is engaging directly with Mexican iconography and the work of modern Mexican artists.

* Felipe Arévalo, "Santos y Pecadores," Exhibition brochure, Beeville Art Museum, 2004.

** Felipe Areválo, "Santos y Pecadores," Exhibition brochure, Beeville Art Museum, 2004.



End of the Journey
July 1996
oil on paper mounted on linen
48 x 32 inches
collection of Dr. Raphael and Sandra Guerra



This painting is a triple portrait of Carina, a New York friend of the artist. A serious car accident had left her in a coma, a state represented by the central portrait. On the right, Carina is giving her comatose self the "breath of life." In the portrait on the left, she is fully revived.

The other images refer to her recovery and to her English/Mexican heritage. Gourds hold water and are emblems of pilgrims. Corn represents sustenance, as well as Carina's maternal heritage. Aloe vera facilitates healing. St. George is the protector of travelers. The Mexican sun/moon ornament refers to the passage of time and symbolizes consciousness/unconsciousness. The castle in the background refers to Carina's father's English ancestry.



Choker Around Your Neck
November 1997
acrylic and oil on canvas
9 x 9 inches
collection of Dr. Raphael and Sandra Guerra



Pero Sigo Siendo El Rey [ear]
November 1997
acrylic and oil on canvas
8 x 9 inches
collection of Dr. Raphael and Sandra Guerra

This small painting was made for an exhibition of body parts called "Tienda de los Milagros." Rodríguez-Díaz had Raphael Guerra wear a woman's clip-on earring that had a crown motif. Guerra recalls: "It hurt like hell. It was a heavy, heavy earring. I don't know how women can stand to wear them!" Rodríguez-Díaz explains his motivation: "Sandra calls Raphael 'Rey' [following a child's mispronunciation of Raphael], so I gave the king a little crown."

Sandra Guerra modeled for this painting, which was also done for the "Tienda de los Milagros" exhibition. Rodríguez-Díaz chose this choker from her extensive collection. Guerra had hurt her back, and Rodríguez-Díaz wanted to paint her neck as a restorative *milagro* (the word for a votive offering, which literally means miracle). Guerra couldn't look at the painting at first, because the artist had "captured her pain," which she re-lived when viewing the painting. Instead of miraculously relieving her pain, the artist inadvertently prolonged it.



Con Todo Mi Corazón (With All My Heart)
November 1997
acrylic and oil on canvas
8 inches round
collection of Dr. Raphael and Sandra Guerra

Also made for the “Tienda de los Milagros” exhibition, this heart is identifiable as the Catholic Sacred Heart because of the crown of thorns that surrounds it. It appears to be emanating heat as well as blood. The snakeskin pattern of the background references the Aztec goddess Coatlicue (She of the Serpent Skirt), who represents the life/death duality. Her body was decorated with sacrificial human hearts. *Con Todo Mi Corazón* is a syncretic image that combines the most potent Aztec and Spanish symbols in a compact form.



Hope
April 2000
acrylic and oil on canvas
48 x 36 inches

Faith
December 1999
acrylic and oil on canvas
48 x 36 inches

Charity
December 1999
acrylic and oil on canvas
48 x 36 inches

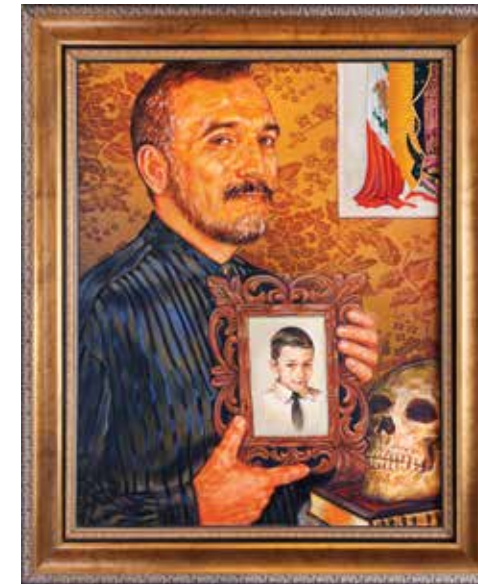
collection of Dr. Raphael and Sandra Guerra

The idea of making portraits of Sandra Castro Guerra and her two sisters began with a conversation Raphael Guerra had with Rodríguez-Díaz when they were on the beach in South Padre Island. It resulted in a non-conventional triptych of the Christian virtues of Hope, Faith, and Charity, each of which has a depiction of the Aztec Stone of the Sun hovering in the background. This combination of Spanish and Aztec influences is a prime example of the cultural mestizaje (mixing) that was inaugurated by *Guerrero Azteca* (1995) and other paintings made during Rodríguez-Díaz’s trip to Mexico in 1994-95.

Sandra (center) was the first of the sisters to be painted. She is the embodiment of Faith, because that is seen as one of her personal qualities. In this context, the flowers express confidence in cultivating and sustaining life. They also reference her “roots” in Floresville, Texas. The Spanish word flores means flowers, so she is literally from the city of flowers. In a humorous juxtaposition, the Aztec Sun god Tonatiuh almost seems to lick Sandra from the center of the Stone of the Sun. His tongue is a flint knife, which symbolizes his thirst for sacrificial human blood. Thus the red background is not without significance.

Martha (right) was the second sister to be painted, and she represents Charity because she is a very giving person. She is also very flamboyant. Much of the jewelry that she wears was borrowed from noted author Sandra Cisneros. Rebecca (left) is the personification of Hope. Because she is the youngest and a physician, she represents hope for the future. Rodríguez-Díaz worked from slides and did not allow anyone to see the portraits until they were all finished.

When Aurora Castro, the mother of the three models, saw the paintings for the first time, she was overcome by their beauty, which she expressed to Rodríguez-Díaz. He replied: “Of course they are beautiful, they came from you.”



El Sueño De Ser Santo
(The Dream of Being a Saint)
August 2000
28 x 22 inches
acrylic and oil on canvas
collection of Mr. Richard Arredondo

This was painted for the exhibition “Santos y Pecadores” (Saints and Sinners), which opened at the Beeville Art Museum in 2004. Richard Arredondo recalls that when he was a child, he didn’t want to be a fireman or a policeman like the other children, he wanted to be a saint. *El Sueño De Ser Santo* was commissioned when Arredondo was fifty, and he wanted to contrast his mature self with this picture of youthful innocence, taken at the age of five in his Catholic school uniform from Our Lady of Sorrows in San Antonio.

Arredondo selected this shirt in consultation with the artist. He believed it looked elegant, dark, and priestly. He imagines that in a previous life he could have been a monk in Spain or in a colonial monastery in Mexico. Aesthetically, Arredondo admires the work of El Greco, especially the *The Burial of Count Orgaz* (1586-88), and he was delighted that Rodríguez-Díaz evoked this sensibility in the painting. Arredondo studied Spanish mysticism in Mexico, and he attends the high mass at San Fernando Cathedral because he has an affinity for ritual and pageantry, which reflects the essence of Old World Catholicism.

It was Arredondo’s idea to include the model skull, a traditional Catholic emblem of mortality, which he normally kept on a shelf. Rodríguez-Díaz decided to place it on the *Book of Wisdom and Mortality*, which the Catholic Church considers to be part of the secondary canon. Arredondo also wanted to include an image of the Mexican-Catholic Virgin of Guadalupe. Rodríguez-Díaz imparted a casual, photographic quality to this much-thought-out composition by cropping the Guadalupe print as well as the top of Arredondo’s head.



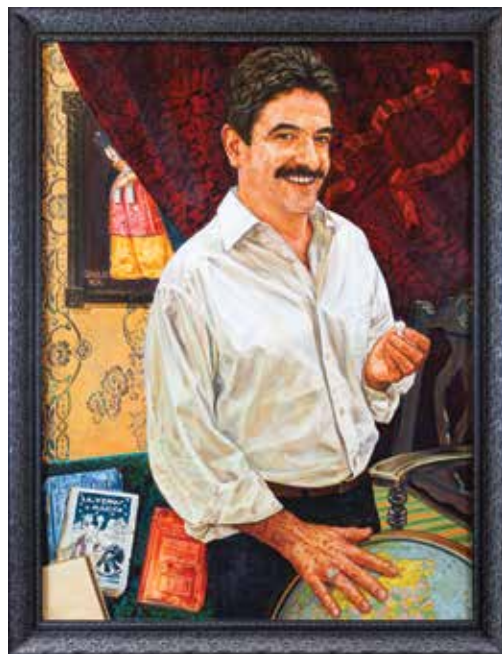
Ochún
February 2001
acrylic, oil, and copper leaf on canvas
20 x 16 inches
collection of Aliah Holman

This beautiful portrait is rich in cross-cultural significance. As Felipe Arevalo notes, the painting *Ochún* “alludes to the diaspora of African civilizations in the Americas.”* One of the primary deity spirits of the Ifá and Yoruba religions, Oshun (her African spelling) is the patron spirit of the Osun River in Nigeria. In Africa she is the deity of fresh water, and she is connected to fertility, beauty, love, wealth, and divination as well. She became syncretized with several Catholic Marian images in the Americas.

* Felipe Arevalo, “Santos y Pecadores,” Exhibition brochure, Beeville Art Museum, 2004.



Raphael y La Venus Magica
August 2001
acrylic and oil on canvas
60 x 48 inches
collection of Dr. Raphael
and Sandra Guerra



Kahlo, bears the title: Raphael and the Magic Venus. Guerra's hand on the globe situates us in the New World and the books in the lower left are testament to his family's journey to the U.S.

Rodríguez-Díaz was intrigued by stories about Guerra's maternal grandfather, Don Viviano, a medical doctor who fled Mexico during the Mexican Revolution. He set up a thriving practice in San Antonio as a *curandero* (folk healer and herbalist). The books in the lower left of the painting had belonged to Don Viviano, including *La Venus Magica*, which is a book on white magic (love spells, etc.). The other books, which treat psychology, herbal medicine, and physiology, were published around the turn of the century in Havana, Cuba and Madrid, Spain. Guerra cried when he saw this painting, because he had "never seen myself bigger than life."

Raphael Guerra is a dentist by profession and an art collector by avocation. The tooth he holds in his hand tells us his occupation and simultaneously evokes Old Master paintings of collectors holding a prized work of art. Behind the curtain we are provided with a partial view of the great Spanish Baroque artist Francisco de Zurbarán's (1598-1664) *St. Apollonia* (1636). An early Christian virgin martyr who was tortured by having her teeth pulled out, Apollonia is the patron saint of dentists. Guerra's tooth-in-hand makes a visual rhyme with the diamond ring on this right hand, which shines like a miraculously resplendent crown. The artist thought Guerra's own shirt was insufficiently beautiful, so he lent him this silk shirt, which—though it is a little large for the dentist—shines like a big creamy tooth.

The rich furnishings evoke Old World splendor: the wall simulates hand-tooled leather; it is sheathed by a richly textured curtain; a glimmering wooden chair sits behind Guerra. A floating ribbon, which recalls colonial paintings as well as those of Frida

Kitty's Mirror
October 2004
oil and acrylic on canvas
48 x 36 inches
collection of the artist



The subject of this painting, or the "protagonist," as the artist calls her, is Kitty Williams, a longtime actress with the Jump Start Theatre Company in San Antonio. Rodríguez-Díaz recalls that he was "enthralled" by her acting ability and commanding presence from the first time he saw her perform. He regards actors as "artists of disguise" and was thus intrigued by the notion of "capturing" such an artist in a painting. After many years of admiring her performances, Rodríguez-Díaz asked Williams to pose in 2004. Though she holds a mirror with both hands, Williams looks directly out of the painting, rather than into the mirror. Consequently, Rodríguez-Díaz says the viewer of the painting is "witnessing the actor's symbolic encounter with the reflection of her true self," for her truest image is that of an actress engaged with a living audience, rather than a mere reflection on a piece of glass. Rodríguez-Díaz places Williams in a literal spotlight by means of his choice of lighting effects: the curved area of shadow in the upper left replicates the effects of a spotlight, as does the shadowed area on her right.

George: Like a Blazing Blade of Grass
February 2004
acrylic and oil on canvas
36 x 24 inches
Drs. George Negrete and
Josie Mendez-Negrete



Josie: A Woman of Good Fortune
January 2005
acrylic and oil on canvas
36 x 24 inches
Drs. George Negrete and
Josie Mendez-Negrete

Josie Mendez-Negrete commissioned this portrait as a surprise 50th birthday present for her husband George Negrete. When his family visited for Thanksgiving, Mendez-Negrete invited Rodríguez-Díaz and his partner Rolando Briseño to the dinner so the artist could photograph Negrete without raising suspicion. The ruse wasn't entirely successful because Rodríguez-Díaz took so many pictures. Negrete was very pleased with the painting because he views it as an image of "confidence and strength." Negrete is a chemist at the University of Texas at San Antonio (UTSA), and for this reason Rodríguez-Díaz added scientific motifs (mostly biological) to his shirt. Mendez-Negrete thought it was important to support Rodríguez-Díaz's art, even though, as she puts it, "people like us would never have been documented in art." Negrete says the painting "makes me feel immortalized."

After Josie Mendez-Negrete had commissioned a portrait of George Negrete, he felt it was appropriate for her to have a commissioned portrait as well. The title refers to Mendez-Negrete's friends and supporters, rather than material wealth: "I truly believe that I am a woman of fortune and that I have not done it alone. Many people have had my back, especially my amazing husband."

The objects that she posed with for this portrait are among her most treasured possessions because they are gifts or souvenirs that evoke her favorite people and places. Mendez-Negrete wears a rebozo that was a gift from her favorite sister, Felisa Mendez-Carranzana. She wears a dress that is reminiscent of a Flamenco dress to refer to her great aunt. Her jewelry includes gifts from friends and relatives. They include works by Rhee Davila, antique jewelry from Taxco, a Frida Kahlo ring, a Cuban bracelet, and a United Farm Workers bracelet. A professor in Mexican American studies at the University of

Texas at San Antonio (UTSA), Mendez-Negrete wore these objects to signal her mestizaje in this portrait. Negrete describes this painting as capturing "an exaggerated sense of Josie: tons of jewelry and a happy face."

This portrait was a commission arranged through a mutual acquaintance. The Mexican-born sitter modeled her favorite Oscar de la Renta dress for this picture. It was finished around Valentine's Day. The artist recalls that the sitter and her family "loved it," but her husband wanted her feet and face repainted. Rodríguez-Díaz spent an enormous amount of time repainting the picture, but the sitter's husband still rejected it. Rolando Briseño, the artist's spouse, recalls: "Angel is very sensitive. He was upset about this for a long time."

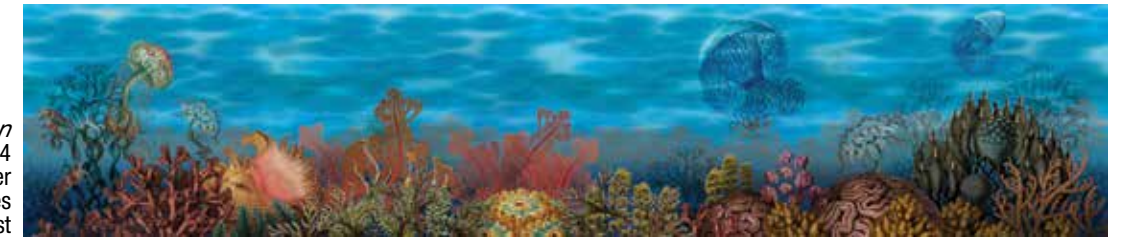
Rodríguez-Díaz never made another painting. He had already been working as a public artist in the early 2000s, and he has devoted himself to public art projects in recent years.



Ana Paula
2010
oil on canvas
72 x 51 1/2 inches
collection of the artist



Tropical Landscape
2014
digital mural on 100% cotton rag paper
13 x 60 inches
collection of the artist



Underwater Garden
2014
digital mural on 100% cotton rag paper
13 x 60 inches
collection of the artist



Purple Landscape
2014
digital mural on 100% cotton rag paper
13 x 60 inches
collection of the artist



Desert Landscape
2014
digital mural on 100% cotton rag paper
13 x 60 inches
collection of the artist



The artist has a pantheistic love of nature, and these prints are born from what he calls “a desire to make large landscapes.” Rolando Briseño notes that they “enjoy walking in parks and neighborhoods with a variety of flora, and these prints are a natural outgrowth of that pleasant experience.”

Rodríguez-Díaz uses books with black-and-white copyright-free clip art. He marks the images that appeal to him, and they are taken from CD-ROMs and composed on a Mac computer with the help of an assistant. He adds color to suit the mood and subject of the individual image. Rodríguez-Díaz is especially interested in desert imagery, which he wanted to explore “because in Puerto Rico we don’t have deserts with cacti, yucca, maguay, nopales, and Joshua Trees.” His *Tropical Landscape* is “meant to be primordial,” a type of landscape that could have been inhabited by dinosaurs millions of years ago. *Underwater Garden* is a fantastically colored reef made of multiple varieties of coral. He even added his favorite shell, the conch, which is encrusted by coral. *Purple Landscape* has saturated, camouflage-like patches of bright color designed to give the work movement.

LATE SELF-PORTRAITS



The Spirit of the Head
December 2006
acrylic and oil on canvas
36 x 24 inches
collection of Orville and Charles Forster
courtesy of Ruiz-Healy Gallery

The artist calls this painting a “reflection on duality in my self-portraits.” His face is doubly masked: he holds a reddish Mexican mask in front of his face; the black element with the undulating snake that looks like a hat is taken from the upper portion of an Haitian mask (a full view of that mask is visible in *I’ve Been Waiting for You*, which hangs on the facing wall). Both of these masks are in the artist’s collection. In a written statement Rodríguez-Díaz explains that this double masking “evokes a reality that transcends the boundaries of quotidian existence. The reflection in the mirror allows both the viewer and myself a glimpse into an imaginary primal state.”

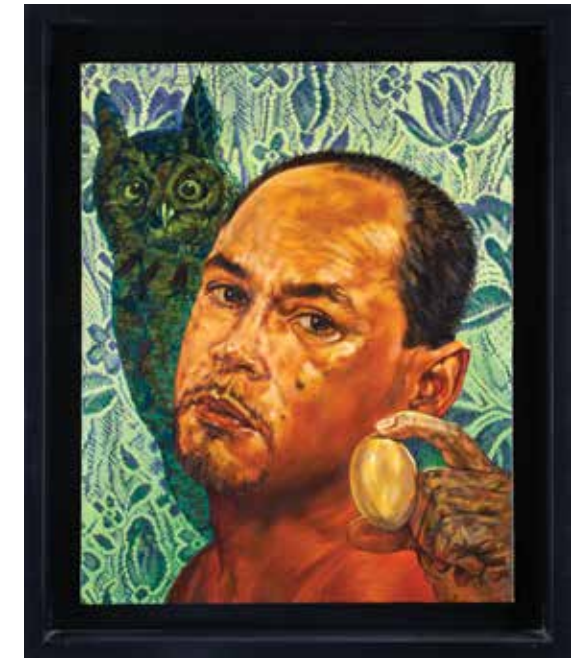
But there is an even deeper ambiguity: are we seeing a simple reflection, or is this a separate, magical reality, one that takes place inside a magic mirror? Are we given some impossible, privileged view of this magician’s reflection, where we would have to be in between the man and his mirror, or are we looking into a mirror to see a man who is looking out at us from the inside? The sense that the tree branch disappears into the man’s body implies a realm of magic. Sparrows sing a “soft song” directly into



The Mirror Image of My Reflection
April 2006
oil on canvas
20 x 16 inches
collection of the artist

his ear. Flowers materialize for his pleasure. Yet he reveals little of his face, and less of his true nature. When questioned if he aged himself prematurely in this painting, the artist replied: “maybe I’m showing the effects of allergies.”

As the artist notes, “the canvas is a mirror, and the hand mirror is another mirror.” Both heads are tilted at complementary angles. The mirror image is out of focus, and the face inside of it is rendered more impressionistically. Rodríguez-Díaz is using the same hand mirror that appears in several other pictures. But in this painting it is rendered in a simpler manner, because Rodríguez-Díaz thought an elaborately detailed hand mirror would “take attention away from the face [inside the mirror].” One of the eyes rendered on the larger face is wider than the other one. The eye nearest to the mirror seems more feminine. We look to the mirror image for confirmation, but the left eye is cropped. This rendering of two differing faces again raises the issue of dualism: which is the “real” Rodríguez-Díaz? Or perhaps this is his way of saying that neither of these images, and no particular painting can adequately represent his true self.



The Oracle
November 2007
oil on canvas
20 x 16 inches
collection of Ms. Norma Bodevin



In this enigmatic self-portrait the artist presents a golden egg to the viewer with his left hand. An owl is perched on the oracle's shoulder in order to impart wisdom to him. The oracle can presumably see the future, just as the owl can see at night. The egg is golden because it represents the future, and, according to the artist, "the future is precious." Rodríguez-Díaz has rendered the background leaves the same color as the owl because the owl is "a master of camouflage." The artist has tilted his head in order to provide variety, but it also suggests mobility—we can imagine the oracle spinning his head around like an owl.

Rodríguez-Díaz highlights his mestizaje (mixed racial heritage) in this mirrored self-portrait. As he puts it, "My indigenous, African, and Spanish ancestries are the founding layers of my identity." The Haitian mask hangs beside the mirror, representing a mixed Caribbean heritage, with an emphasis on Africa. The fan stands for Rodríguez-Díaz's Spanish heritage. The mariachi costume, understood here as a San Antonio costume, represents the mixed Spanish and indigenous ancestries of Mexico. The artist mixes these various elements, "re-inventing their significance for today."



I've Been Waiting for You, aka, El Mariachi
acrylic and oil on canvas
April 2008
24 x 36 inches
collection of Guillermo Nicholas and Jim Foster
courtesy of Ruiz-Healy Gallery

In this self-portrait, Rodríguez-Díaz represents himself as a Chinese man. The artist explains that this transformative act is undertaken to "blur the ethnic and cultural barriers that separate us from each other." The artist is surrounded by a social of butterflies (the plural form of butterfly). The butterflies are of many different varieties, with the implication that there is beauty in diversity. These butterflies appear to be very social, for they are flocking to the man rather than to the orchids. Orchids are native to Asia, and many varieties of this flower are associated by name with butterflies. These flowers are painted from paper flowers in the artist's studio.

Butterflies are emblems of metamorphosis, since they transform themselves from worm-like caterpillars to beautiful, fragile-winged flying creatures, which can be compared to this beautiful fan as well as to the orchids. The butterflies are attracted to the Chinese Rodríguez-Díaz because they understand that he has undergone an ethnic / cultural metamorphosis—though physically he doesn't look much different than he does in his other self-portraits. The artist calls this work a "metamorphosis, endowed with the

qualities of reflection." He adds that it "addresses the notion that we aren't that different from each other after all."

Rodríguez-Díaz renders himself behind a Chinese fan, and one can compare it to the Mexican fans that he uses in other works in this exhibition. The dragon that is painted on this fan has a counterpart in the Mesoamerican god Quetzalcoatl, who also manifests himself as a dragon. The red and blue Yin / Yang devices are emblems of complementarity, and they relate directly to the Mesoamerican concept of Duality, which holds that binary pairs such as life and death are interdependent and forever locked together as part of the same process. Frida Kahlo was also very interested in Asian philosophy and religion, and Diego Rivera painted her holding a Yin / Yang device in his mural *Dream of a Sunday Afternoon in the Alameda Park* (1947). The bird that descends with a ribbon in its beak also has many parallels in the work of Kahlo. As in *The Butterfly* (1993) in the first gallery, Rodríguez-Díaz has provided a floral habitat in the background for his winged creatures.



Ying / Yang. Transformation
August 2008
aerosol, pastel, and color pencil on rag paper
27 x 60 inches
collection of the artist

GODDESS TRIPTYCH



The Myth of Venus
June 1991
oil on canvas
72 x 54 inches
San Antonio Museum
of Art
gift of Sandra Cisneros,
2013.43.1

This is the first of three monumental paintings that became known as the Goddess triptych. It began as a joke when a Dominican friend named Australia Marte approached Rodríguez-Díaz at a party and

suggested that he paint her portrait. She repeatedly pulled back her clothing and teased that the picture would have to “show a little bit of flesh.”* A few days later Rodríguez-Díaz conceived the idea of making a painting based on Marte that would be the antithesis of the skinny, white-blond-Venus figure that is so popular in Western art.

The Myth of Venus revels in what the artist calls “the voluptuousness of the flesh,” a quality the artist values in Baroque art, especially in the paintings of Peter Paul

Rubens (1577-1640).* When Marte modeled for the artist’s camera, she was rather shy, which resulted in a painting that Rodríguez-Díaz says is “about her beauty as a human being.”* The three-quarters pose, with the model looking out at the spectator and her right arm crossing her chest, replicates the upper section of *The Little Fur* (1635), one of Ruben’s most famous paintings. Marte is considerably more bulky than Ruben’s model, so this arm gesture causes her breast to be pushed down and hidden, whereas the same gesture causes Ruben’s model to lift and reveal her breasts.

Rodríguez-Díaz’s New World Venus goes beyond Baroque: it is meant to recall the more physically substantive prehistoric Venus figures. Marte’s powerful, dramatic form is echoed by the turbulent sky behind her. Rodríguez-Díaz was so happy when this painting was complete that he decided to paint two more monumental portraits of women of color in order to have a triptych. All three pictures feature a Baroque-inspired three-quarters pose.

* Oral history interview with Angel Rodriguez-Diaz, April 23 - May 7, 2004. Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution. <https://www.aaa.si.edu/collections/interviews/oral-history-interview-angel-rodriguez-diaz-13193>



Yemayá
January 1993
oil on canvas
84 x 68 inches
collection of the
artist

Belief in Yemoja, the Yoruba mother goddess and goddess of oceans, was brought from Africa to the Caribbean via the slave trade, where she is known as Yemayá. Rodríguez-Díaz wanted his next monumental woman-of-color nude to be the incarnation of Yemayá, but he didn’t know any suitable models. At a reception after the premiere of the Frida Kahlo opera at the Brooklyn Academy of Music, Rodríguez-Díaz saw an African American woman named Diana Fraser in a gold lamé outfit and a turban. He thought her regal demeanor was perfect for his concept of Yemayá, so he introduced himself and asked her to pose.* She was a painter herself and happily complied. When Fraser modeled for photographs in Rodríguez-Díaz’s studio, he felt that her self-confidence and comfort with her body were the perfect qualities for Yemayá, the supreme ocean goddess.* Fraser declared to the artist that people should never have to wear clothes.

Fraser’s open, arms-extended pose was in some ways the opposite of Marte’s closed pose in *The Myth of Venus*. Perhaps the closest European parallel to Yemayá can be found in three depictions of Nereids (Greek sea nymphs) in the foreground of Ruben’s *The Landing of Marie de’Medici at Marseille* (1622-25). Rodríguez-Díaz’s goddess of the sea combines aspects of Ruben’s Nereids, one of which holds a blue cloth. Yemayá’s blue cloth and eye shadow symbolize her power over water. A bright aura serves as a halo around her head and shoulders, and dark rays of light—symbolic of her African origins—crown her glory. Yemayá was conceived as the centerpiece of the goddess triptych: she is the most majestic of the three, she is depicted from a lower point of view (further amplifying her stature), and Rodríguez-Díaz reserved his largest canvas for her.

* Oral history interview with Angel Rodriguez-Diaz, April 23 - May 7, 2004. Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution. <https://www.aaa.si.edu/collections/interviews/oral-history-interview-angel-rodriguez-diaz-13193>



La Primavera
April 1994
oil on canvas
77 x 65 inches
San Antonio
Museum of Art
gift of Sandra
Cisneros,
2013.43.2

Rodríguez-Díaz met Sandra Payne, the African American model for this painting, at an exhibition. When he saw Payne looking closely at the two goddess paintings he had already completed, he invited her to pose for a third.* Since it was Spring, he called it *La Primavera*, after the painting by Sandro Botticelli (1445-1510). Payne, who wears nothing but her tortoise frame glasses and a flower in her hair, smiles broadly. Flowers rain down from an unspecified source. Rodríguez-Díaz remembers Payne as “very bubbly, very sweet.” Since she was working as a librarian, he thought it was fitting to paint her with her glasses.

Botticelli’s *Primavera* (c. 1477-82) is an allegory of Spring. It features eight large figures, none of which are nudes, so Rodríguez-Díaz’s *Primavera* has more in common with Botticelli’s *Birth of Venus* (c. 1482-85). The latter features a centrally posed nude Venus (of the thin blond variety) and a handmaiden on the right who is raising a garment to cloak the nude goddess. The position of the cloaking garment suggested the parted curtains in Rodríguez-Díaz’s painting. A pair of centrally parted curtains often frame the Virgin Mary in Renaissance altarpieces, including Piero della Francesca’s (1415/20-92) *Madonna del Parto* (c. 1455-65) and Raphael’s *Sistine Madonna* (1512), though Renaissance images are posed frontally. The rain of flowers in Rodríguez-Díaz’s painting also follows Botticelli’s *Birth of Venus*, where they are sprinkled before the nude Venus as tribute by the personifications of the winds. Rodríguez-Díaz’s background was painted with stencils. It consists primarily of flowers, though small spheres, butterflies, and a bird are also present in the upper section of the background.

For Botticelli and other Italian Renaissance artists, goddesses were exemplars of spiritual as well as physical beauty, and we can attribute the same intentions to Rodríguez-Díaz, who challenges restrictive contemporary canons of spirituality as well as beauty.

PUBLIC ART



The Birth of a City
14 x 54 feet
giclée photomural at Cliff Morton Business and Development Center
completed in 2003.

This panoramic cityscape was made for the mezzanine of the city’s business development center at 1901 South Alamo Street. The basis of the work is a collage of panoramic photographs that was over-painted by the artist and scanned and printed onto thirteen canvases, which were mounted on acoustic tiles. The stairs feature metal letters with a quote from Domingo Terán de los Ríos, the first Spanish governor of Texas, who described what is now San Antonio as “...a lush area, full of life, where there is an abundance of water and land.” Governor Terán gave the Yanaguana river a new name when he camped on its banks on June 13, 1691: he called it San Antonio, since it was the saint’s feast day. The large photograph that is displayed here was Rodríguez-Díaz’s working model for the photomural. The section of printed canvas on the opposite wall is an actual-size test section for the full-scale photomural.

The Beacon, completed 2008

This sculpture combines two traditional forms. Obelisks have served as important geographical markers dating back to ancient Egypt. The luminaria is an object of Mexican popular culture: it is a stencil-cut enclosure for a candle or light that is usually fabricated out of paper or tin. Rodríguez-Díaz merged these forms by creating an enormous steel luminaria in the shape of an obelisk for the roundabout at Fulton and Blanco roads. Since the Beacon Hill area is rich in Art Deco decor, Rodríguez-Díaz drew on Art Deco motifs for his design.

Mayoral Portrait of the Hon. Phil Hardberger, 2009

Rodríguez-Díaz was commissioned to paint the official portrait of Mayor Hardberger, who served from June 2005 to May 2009. It hangs with the other mayoral portraits outside of the city council chambers in the Main Plaza building. Rather than paint a typically somber portrait with a dark background, Rodríguez-Díaz posed the former mayor in bright sunlight in front of the cathedral. His broad smile is meant to capture Hardberger’s warm personality.

University Health System Hospital, completed 2014

The centerpiece of Rodríguez-Díaz’s designs for the new hospital building in San Antonio’s medical center is a two-story glass curtain called *DNA: Mosaic of Our Humanity* (2013). It features stylized strands of DNA whose purpose is “to serve as a constant reminder of our humanity for patients, staff, and visitors.” Rodríguez-Díaz also designed four murals on the lower floors of the hospital and small murals for each of the 57 nurse stations.

The Crossroads of Enlightenment, 2014

This streetscape at the intersection of Blanco Road and Basse Road features a pair of smokestack-styled luminaria sculptures in pocket parks with stonework benches and three varieties of indigenous vegetation: yucca, ratama, and mountain laurel. The concrete and stone veneer bases of the sculptures refer to the neighborhood’s history as a quarry and as a source of “natural cement.” The luminarias are fabricated out of steel, with cut-out stencil imagery on four levels, beginning with machine gears at the bottom, leaf and foliage images on the next level, followed by water patterns, and ending with clouds at the top. These internally lit luminarias become dramatic landmarks at night. Felix Padrón, director of the San Antonio’s department of Arts and Culture for 21 years, cited *Crossroads* as one of his favorite public artworks made during his tenure.**

* For illustrations and discussions of several of these projects, see: Marco Aquino, “New Sculptures to be Unveiled Near ‘Cementville,’” *Rivard Report*, November 16, 2014. <https://therivardreport.com/crossroads-enlightenment-cementville-angel-rodriguez-diaz/>

** Elda Silva, “Outgoing official empowered artists to transform San Antonio,” *San Antonio Express-News*, April 1, 2016. <http://www.expressnews.com/entertainment/arts-culture/article/Outgoing-official-empowered-artists-to-transform-7221243.php>



STILL LIFE



Self-portrait in Veracruz
July 1997
oil on paper mounted on linen
48 x 32 inches
collection of Dr. Raphael and Sandra Guerra

Self-portrait in Veracruz records one of the artist's favorite places in Mexico: a hotel room overlooking the Cathedral of Veracruz. The seashells symbolize the Puerto Rican native's love of the beach and its restorative powers. The ceramic sculptures from Colima likewise express his love for dogs. The lace tablecloth is the type of fabric Rodríguez-Díaz uses as stencils to paint his backgrounds. The skull and the cut flowers allude to the brevity of life and connect this work with a long history of still life subjects. The skull was modeled after an antique skull owned by Pedro Lujan. It was modified with springs that flip open the top to permit art students to view the inside.

This painting is also about maintaining health. The holy card features St. Roch, the patron saint of dogs who is invoked during times of plague. St. Roch ministered to the sick. When he became ill, St. Roch was saved by a dog that licked his sores and brought him bread. The onion and garlic are foods used in traditional healing recipes. The artist has placed three *milagros* (votive offerings) on his passport: the eyes are central to his vocation as an artist; he uses his hand to make art; his feet give him the mobility to travel and find desirable subjects to paint. These artistically relevant offerings function as lucky charms.

Though it was made in anticipation of Rodríguez-Díaz's 1998 installation at Artpace, which coincided with the centennial of the Spanish American War, this painting did not become part of it (see the text for *El Chupacabra* for more information). The map and the postcard of Cuba are understood in parallel with the postcard of the Alamo: they symbolize the Spanish American and Mexican American Wars. Even the amount of money on the table has symbolic value: the bills and coins total 1898 cents.

The still life objects also represent the artist's social network, since many were gathered from various friends, and many of them reference places

Rodríguez-Díaz has lived. He loves sand, the beach, and seashells. He chose Don Q Cristal because it is made near his native city.

Rodríguez-Díaz's mirrored self-portrait forms the lower point of a circle of objects. The tin *milagro* eye serves as the artist's other eye. The card with the *Anima Sola* (Soul in Purgatory: woman in flames being cleansed of sin before being able to enter heaven), the cement sculpture of a head with cowrie shell eyes, and the candle of the Santo Niño de Atocha are all related. In the Caribbean Santería religion, they are all manifestations of Eleguá, who originated in Africa as the Yoruba trickster god of crossroads.* The artist owns this image of Eleguá, whom he says "watches the door and protects the house. You have to give him candy." Rodríguez-Díaz included the card with St. Michael vanquishing Satan because he likes its eternal imagery: "It's always the battle for the souls." In a humorous note, the mating dogs, borrowed from noted author Sandra Cisneros, are shaking the table, which is causing the statue of St. Teresa to fall from the table. Consequently, this is not such a still life, after all.

* "Eleguá, Lord of the Crossroads," About Santería website.
<http://www.aboutsanteria.com/eleguacuteeshu.html>



At The Turn of The Century In San Antonio
July 1998
acrylic and oil on paper
mounted on linen
32 x 48 inches
collection of Dr. Raphael and Sandra Guerra

PROCESS, TECHNIQUE, AND FINISH



The “magic” of art was revealed to Rodríguez-Díaz at the age of three when his mother created an elephant by drawing circles and ovals. He credits her support for his decision to become an artist. Rodríguez-Díaz was already a successful painter when he attended the University of Puerto Rico at Rio Piedras, so he majored in printmaking. When he moved to New York in 1978, painting was considered passé, so he developed his painting style largely on his own.

Rodríguez-Díaz used both acrylic and oil in Puerto Rico, but he dislikes acrylic because he finds it “artificial and rubbery.” He prefers oil, because it is “more organic.” Since oil doesn’t dry as fast, it can be worked longer, and it acquires a lush sheen that better approximates human skin.

The artist preferred to paint from a live model because he valued interactions with his models. This method, however, proved impractical in New York because it was difficult to find models that could pose over the course of several weeks. Rodríguez-Díaz painted from photographs as early as 1990, and the use of slides became his preferred method. The model was needed only for a single photographic session. The artist would paint an acrylic or oil base, and use a slide to sketch the image on the canvas. He rarely made preparatory drawings.



Rodríguez-Díaz prefers to concentrate on one painting at a time, which he usually finishes in four weeks or less. The three paintings on this wall provide insights into Rodríguez-Díaz’s painting process. The first painting, *Untitled [Self-Portrait as Wrestler Rey Misterio]*, c. 2005, was abandoned at a very early state. The second painting, *Untitled [Frances, Double Portrait]*, c. 2006-7, is fully drawn, but is painted with relatively little color. The third painting, *Untitled [Self-Portrait with Two Mirrors]*, c. 1998, has some elements, such as the mirror frame and wallpaper that are brought to a nearly complete finish. The figure and the hand mirror (especially the latter) still show the green under-painting.



Untitled [Self-Portrait as Wrestler Rey Misterio]
c. 2005
oil on canvas
60 ½ x 42 ½ inches
collection of the artist

As we saw in the first gallery, Rodríguez-Díaz used a stencil to paint background areas in *Primordial Feeling* in May of 1990, where small spheres make their first appearance. He used a lace-like cloth as a stencil in *The Butterfly* in September of 1993. Rodríguez-Díaz’s use of stencils became increasingly elaborate: he often combined the small spheres with varied textile patterns. He often sprayed several colors through his cloth stencils, which were always fixed in a single position on his canvas or sheet of paper. His use of masking became increasingly elaborate. Many of Rodríguez-Díaz’s later paintings utilize African masks, or masks from the African diaspora and invoke nature and magic.

As Rodríguez-Díaz puts it: “My artistic journey is one of experimentation, of using different means to find myself and to find a way to deliver my message. I’m always open to new imagery and new materials.”

This painting was abandoned in a very early state of completion. Rodríguez-Díaz took slides of himself in a leather jacket with the mask of the Mexican wrestler Rey Misterio (Mysterious King) on his head. He utilized one of these slides to sketch this figure on the canvas (note the little crown on Rey Misterio’s forehead) over a golden ground. Then he applied a very light horizontal ochre wash. But after taking these steps, he abandoned the painting. Why and when did this happen? Fortunately, we have another canvas, *Rey Misterio ... Who Are You? Come Out* from 2005 that shares the same figure of Rey Misterio, but in a much wider, more elaborate composition. Therefore it is reasonable to assume that Rodríguez-Díaz abandoned this painting because he got the idea to do *Rey Misterio*: he needed more horizontal space to imprison himself (as Rey Misterio) in a mirror and more room on the side of the canvas to include the red curtain and the hand bearing the note. This is a unique example of a canvas left in such an early state of completion. It was extremely rare for Rodríguez-Díaz to fail to complete a painting.



Untitled [Frances, Double Portrait]
c. 2006-7
oil on canvas
60 ¼ x 50 inches
collection of the artist

Frances Treviño Santos recalls that Rodríguez-Díaz asked her to pose for a painting he wanted to make of her. He took slides at her home around 2006 with an antique Baroque mirror that her grandmother had custom made in Monterrey, Mexico. She recalls that Rodríguez-Díaz planned to make the painting within a year. The curator of this exhibition saw this painting in its present state in 2007. The palette is very restrained: mostly browns and some green. It is not signed or dated, though Rodríguez-Díaz says he considers it to be finished.

Rodríguez-Díaz depicted Frances seated in a chair, with her hands on her head, as if she were looking at her reflection in the rear of the mirror. We also see the front of the mirror, with its elaborately carved wooden scrollwork. Paradoxically, we see a very different image of the sitter that emanates from the

front of the mirror. They almost seem like portrayals of two different people. The first Frances seems absorbed in her reflection, which is impossible, since she is looking at the back of the mirror. The second Frances seems to look at us with a skeptical or appraising regard from within the mirror itself. Is this a backwards looking glass that magically reveals the true feelings of whomever peers into it? Or another example of dualism, with two selves divided by a mirror? More broadly, we might consider the canvas itself to be a magic mirror, wherein the artist is sovereign, and everything bends to his will. The artist says that the first Frances is “trying to be fabulous,” whereas the reflected Frances “is more subdued, perhaps because she *knows* she is fabulous.”

We have already seen two earlier Rodríguez-Díaz paintings that feature paradoxical reflections in mirrors: *Babilonia* (1985) and *Mirrored Mirror* (1990). We can add two other paintings with paradoxical reflections by masters Rodríguez-Díaz reveres that arguably influenced this painting.

Old Masters often employed mirrors to provide another view of the goddess Venus, the incarnation of human beauty. Diego Velázquez, however, adds a twist in his *Toilet of Venus* (c. 1647-51): he depicts the recumbent goddess from the rear and has her son Cupid use a mirror to capture her otherwise unseen face—but her face is so blurred that we have little sense of her beauty.* Francis Bacon’s ambiguous *Head IV (Man with a Monkey)* of 1949 has a human figure that seems to be looking in a mirror that reflects the image of a monkey.

* “Diego Velázquez, *The Toilet of Venus* (‘The Rokeby Venus’), c. 1647-51,” National Gallery of Art website. <https://www.nationalgalleryimages.co.uk/imagedetails.aspx?q=NG2057&ng=NG2057&frm=1>

In this painting Rodríguez-Díaz is looking into a hand mirror, which remains green, the color of the under-painting of the artist’s body. We can presume that Rodríguez-Díaz intended to render a self-portrait in the hand mirror, but considering that the large mirror on the wall casts no reflection, we



Untitled [Self-Portrait with Two Mirrors]
c. 1998
acrylic and oil on canvas
40 ½ x 40 inches
collection of the artist

cannot be entirely certain. The large mirror appears to reflect a separate reality, since it bears no trace of the artist and it reflects blue wallpaper rather than red wallpaper. In this respect, it is similar to the mirror in *The Spirit of the Head* (2006).

This is an excellent painting that was brought to a high stage of completion. Rodríguez-Díaz typically completed a painting in four or five weeks, and rarely worked on more than one painting at a time. So why and when did he abandon it? Presumably, it would only have been abandoned for a large project that had pressing time constraints, and the most logical candidate is the Artpace installation of 1998. The artist’s age, beard, and hairstyle in this self-representation are consistent with that date. The blue wallpaper that is reflected in the mirror also provides a compelling parallel in *El Chupacabra* (1998), the

sole painting in the ArtPace installation. Both this painting and *El Chupacabra* combine snakeskin patterns with small spheres. Finally, why was this work not brought to completion? Rodríguez-Díaz had many commissions after the Artpace project, and when he did return to making large-scale self-portraits in the early 2000s, his emphasis was on self-depictions as Mexican masked wrestlers.

Several earlier paintings by Rodríguez-Díaz suggest that the mirror could be a door to another realm, and *Reunion* removes any doubt from this suspicion. A hawk stands on the mirror frame, traversing the threshold between two worlds. The hawk “brings the unknown, though it is not meant to be foreboding,” explains the artist. This scenario began with a mariachi singing a serenade to the night. The birds have materialized from the dark realm of the mirror to partake in a musical reunion, though not all of the singers, such as the crane, are known for their musical abilities. Having summoned this irregular band, the Mariachi gives a knowing wink, for he has already been playing with nature.



Reunion
February 2008
oil and acrylic on canvas
36 x 48 inches
collection of the artist



The Mirage September 2006 acrylic and oil on canvas
36 x 48 inches collection of the artist

Rodríguez-Díaz has depicted himself inside a mirror with a tropical backdrop. On the other side of the mirror three owls gather around an African sculpture that depicts the head of a woman. The artist sees owls and African masks as objects invested with the “mystique” of wisdom. His African figures reference his African heritage and religious beliefs that are closely allied to nature. The plants evoke a non-specific tropical setting, while the palm trees in the background stand for the Caribbean.

The title of the painting calls into question the reality of this scene. Perhaps the artist is looking into a mirror and imagining or reflecting upon his African ancestors and their hazardous journey to Puerto Rico in the galleys of a slave ship. Thus the mirror image could reflect his thoughts, rather than a magical reality that is distinct from the room with orange wallpaper that we see on the right of the mirror’s gilded frame.

Rey Misterio (Mysterious King) is the name of a Mexican wrestler, identifiable here by the pink crown emblem on his mask. Rodríguez-Díaz has engaged with paradoxical reflections in masterpieces by Manet and Velázquez, beginning with his *Babilonia* (1985) and *Mirrored Mirror* (1990). This painting’s conceit (which it shares with some other late self-portraits) is that the man in the mirror is *not a reflection* of someone standing before the mirror, but is rather a being that *inhabits* the mirror. The artist has depicted himself as simultaneously *inside* and *outside* of the mirror: he is inside as Rey Misterio, and he is outside as the arm holding the note. The sumptuous red curtain evokes royal associations, and the folded paper that beseeches Rey Misterio to “come out” is modeled on Spanish Baroque paintings that use similar papers for artist signatures. Thus we can imagine this king wrestler as a distant relative of Phillip IV, the sovereign reflected in Velázquez’s *Las Meninas*, who has been a captive of a magically painted mirror since 1656.



Rey Misterio ... Who Are You? Come Out
2005
oil and acrylic on canvas
64 x 55 inches
private collection, Chicago. (Exhibited in reproduction.)



* Ángel Rodríguez-Díaz A Retrospective 1982-2014

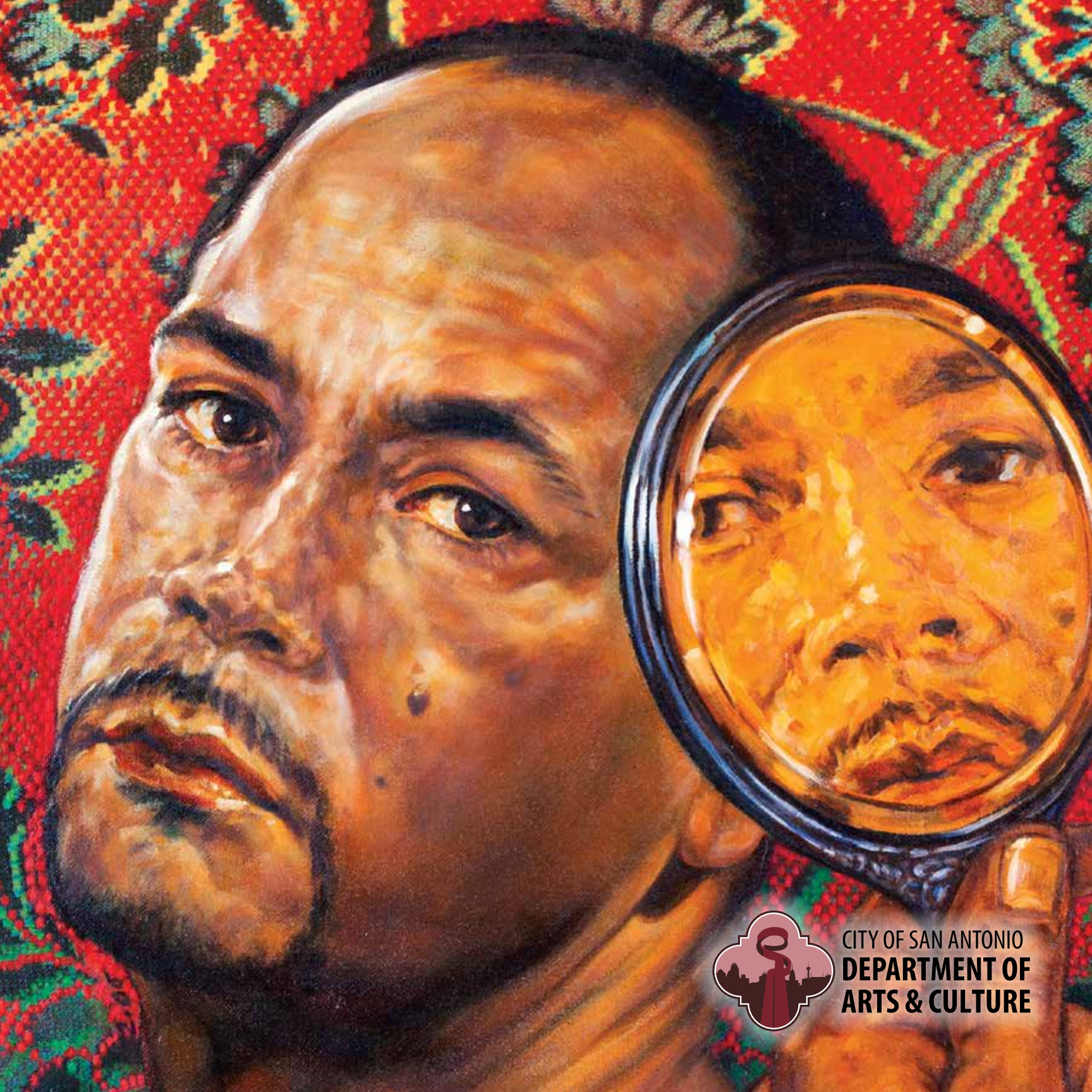
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