

Leigh Anne Lester

No Necessary Time Axis on
Evolutionary Novelty

Ruiz-Healy Art

LEIGH ANNE
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LEIGH ANNE
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AT PLAY IN THE
FIELDS OF THE
C H T H U L U C E N E

"If a tree falls in the forest, you can't really ask the question that is usually asked --- because it's a forest, there is always someone there."

--- Theophrastus.2

Blind Contour is a way of drawing, of deepening perception, of schooling the hand. The method is simple --- look only at the subject of your drawing, not at the paper, as your pencil moves along the flat plane of paper while simultaneously following your eye around the edges of whatever is holding your gaze. Used by the San Antonio Spurs for tuning-up their no-look pass, artists sometimes employ the technique to unlock subconscious connections.

Life might be a blind contour. An attempt may be made to hone closer to an invisible line, a line that is defined again and again in a variety of forms, a variety as great as the population of the world. We throw out sticky pads in an attempt to cling to a concept of life that is altered daily by an ever-sharpening focus; and then we take days off or enter sleep, the quest forgotten momentarily, only to be shocked into awareness once again by the sun. It's probably bad science to talk about similarities between hemoglobin and chlorophyll, but the leaning into sunlight is inevitable. Just don't look at it. Because blind contour.

Leigh Anne Lester's use of the method reaches past its limits as a technique. For her it is an act of mimicry, one line according itself to another, but not just that --- she's also grafting to her work the random possibilities inherent in Genetic Modification, the white whale that has preoccupied her for a couple of decades. This is a natural focus --- recombinant DNA technology was born in northern California in the early seventies at the moment when the artist as a child was on her belly in Toledo Bend, Louisiana, discovering the joys of intimate encounters with plant life while exploring the blooming tree tops of lichen forests, miniature realms made fantastic by her up close eyes.

Her processes, commanded by a hand sure with blade and pencil, mime those of bio-engineering --- copying, splicing, combining, a sort of parallel bricolage of descent down a rabbit hole of one thing leading to another, each new fusion absorbing its precedents while simultaneously obscuring them in an advance of stacked images, transparencies and modifications.

And one mitigation deserves another --- some stages of her work are filtered in Photoshop. This sleight of hand, in which it is the hand that disappears, introduces some good twists in an ever-widening plot, as if a page of algorithmically generated sentences follows a handwritten page in the story.

Language, the Spoken Word version of genetics, is key. The artist's panoply of tumbling forms and squirming contours, a vernacular she's been developing from the word go, unfolds colloquially within the context of the place defined by her images. They spread about the gallery, some like protected specimens, some adorning surfaces as if growing there, snaking their way, writing their peculiar hieroglyphs of transformation. The space appears taken over by a pandemic of replication, teeming with the Metaphase aggregate of Greg Bear's *Blood Music*, or a rune generating tendril in Area X from Jeff VanderMeer's *Southern Reach*, though Leigh Anne's position is more one of obsessed fascination than apocalyptic alarm.

The same obsession serves as precedent and influence. Historically, the beginning of botanical illustration in the west is attributed to the *De Materia Medica*, which came out of Greece about 2000 years ago. After that, plenty was happening in Asia, but for the next 1500 years botanical art in Europe was caught somewhere between listening to grass grow and watching paint dry.

Even so, across that long stretch of time an adaptation was occurring as the hand kept working while the printing press was yearning to materialize. The form began to really come together in Leonhart Fuchs' *New Herbal of 1543* and Theodorus Clutius' *Painted Herbarium*, 1600. These major botanicals set the criteria for what was to follow and by the 18th and 19th centuries the form was fully established and continuing with a number of major figures, including Maria Sibylla Merian, Pierre-Joseph Redouté, Franz Bauer, Anne Pratt, Marianne North and Ernst Haeckel.

Volumes by some of these sit on Leigh Anne's shelves and certainly she would count Margaret Mee as an inspiration. Mee was an English artist known for her work in the Amazon over a thirty-year span, beginning in the nineteen fifties. Her final trip there was to search for and paint the night blooming Moonflower in the Igapo Forest in Brazil. Upon returning to England, she was killed in a car accident a few days after the publication of her *In Search of Flowers of The Amazon Forests* (1988). Mees' remark to a journalist, a few months

before her death that her “life was safer in the jungle than in the city,” possesses a foreshadowing so tragic that it seems scripted, yet it could not have been.



Mutant Generate

graphite and color pencil on two layers of drafting film, 2013, 35 x 43 inches

Unforeseen possibility, as implied by anything to do with genetic modification, is a scenario frequently employed in Science Fiction. *Mutant Spectre* and *Mutant Generate*, Leigh Anne's twin 2010 and 2013 series, speak to this and seem like a fit in that Sci-Fi influenced epoch in the making, the Chthulucene. Proposed by Donna Haraway as the name of the next age following the Holocene, now at about 11,000 years, the Chthulucene is conceived as a time of multispecies cooperation on a damaged planet. These *Mutant* series are baseline works and serve as a platform for lines of investigation and modes of image building that are the foundation of the current show at Ruiz-Healy.

In these and subsequent works Leigh Anne has piled up images of specific plants taken from books, photographed in the wild, drawn from life on site and in the studio or invented on the spot. With each layer interacting with and/or ghosting those under it and each stratum true to the researched attributes of her target plants, the effect moves from mutation to molecular breakdown in a symphonic display of spiky incongruence joined to bursting bloom. Subtler than a straight up dystopian narrative, her whispered story is suggestive of hopeful fusions and of tragedies lying in wait in an invisible realm where karma and the haphazard vicissitudes of mutation cross at

an intersection of roads paved with good intentions. For the viewer of these images, the signpost reading Singularity Ahead is ignored in favor of surrender to beauty, or even majesty... the affliction with a taste as sweet as any cordial comfort --- as Shakespeare's Leontes has it upon realizing that his long lost Hermione seems to be captured as an eerily realistic statue in *The Winter's Tale*, a text favored by the artist and well known as a hybrid in its own right.

Leigh Anne's literary alliances run toward Goethe too. His concept of the Urpflanze, or the primordial plant from which all other plants come, is so compelling that he spent time looking for an actual example of it before finally coming to the conclusion that the Urpflanze is mutable form, not a particular individual --- though it is thought nowadays that a certain type of bacteria could have in the deep past gained access to the cytoplasm of a primordial plant and shared information. Perhaps it is the Urpflanze that has informed Leigh Anne's layered approach to building images, though if so, the search seems to be happening in reverse, filling the field of view, in accordance with the notion that increasing the number of observations also increases the potential for mutation.

The title of her show, *No Necessary Time Axis on Evolutionary Novelty*, suggests a compression of time, an intervention in the normal flow of things. It reads like a headline; a workplace safety poster in a genetic modification lab; or even the blasé statement made by a burned out worker ironically quoting the company line. The matter of fact tone suggests that Rome is more kudzu-engulfed than burning.

This compression is not exclusive to the domain of evolutionary novelty, or rather evolutionary novelty is not exclusive to genetic modification. The axis of time cuts through the center of everything, even when it is missing. According to Dual Inheritance Theory, biological evolution and cultural evolution whirl in a never ending loop of influence where each new façade of certainty is quickly covered by the vines of uncertain feedback, which in turn seek stasis as the new novelty emerges in some other part of nature or the culture. Hence the tendency of stories in these territories to lean toward the cautionary. Maybe it's all those extra observers hanging around these loci of change that suggest the possibility of unintended consequences.

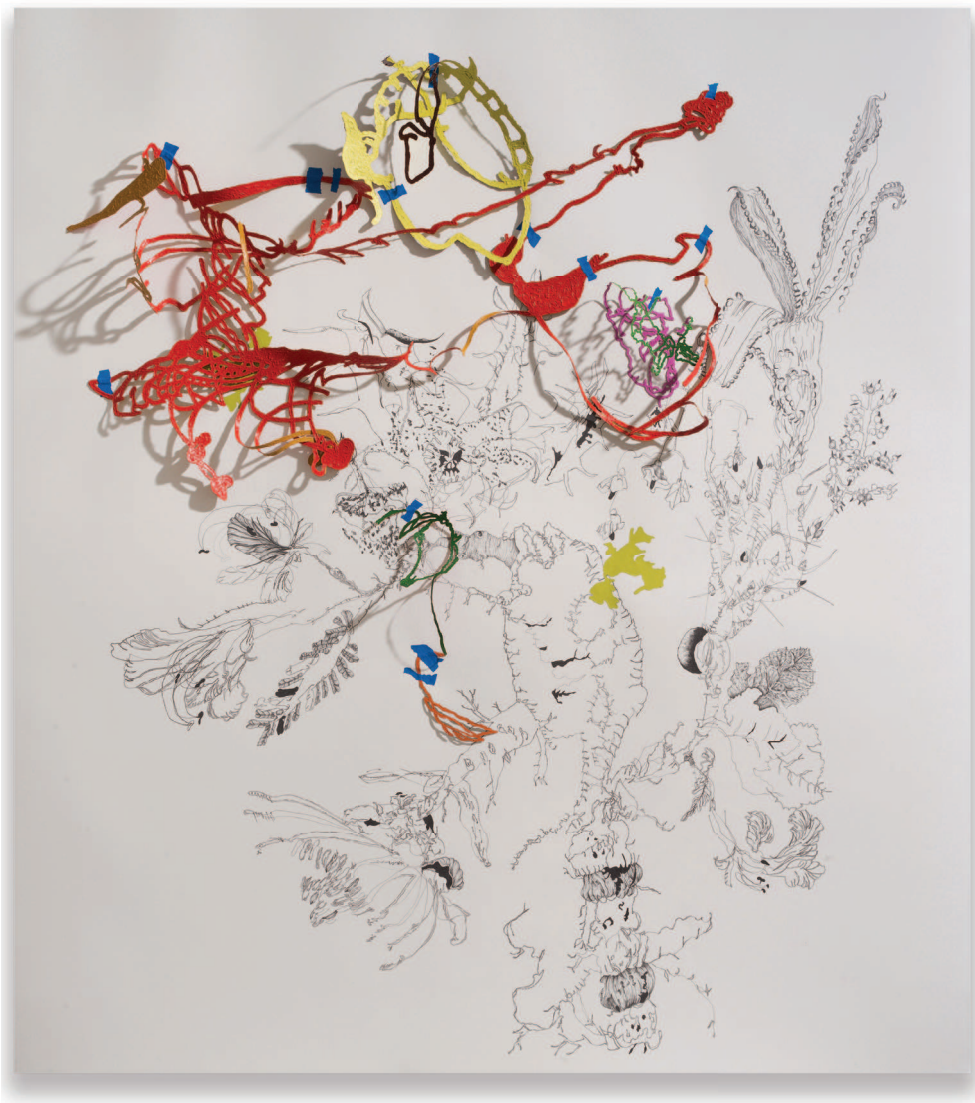
Adjacent Impression 1 and *Adjacent Impression 2*, both found in the

scatter on the east side of the gallery, begin to mime animal forms, with limbs and heads completed by shadows. All the components are hand cut, the lacy grisaille intermingling with a range of color from tree toad green to fungal yellow. They appear as something growing in a wood and discovered early in the day.

The 64 X 58-inch *Blind Trajectory*, the anchor of the show, is almost figurative. It's as if the images are beginning to appropriate their maker. Human body scale, it maintains a dynamic, centrally coiled vitality even as its constituents seem to fly apart. Movement gathers about a form something like mandrake root or ginseng, though the artist maintains it is neither. This torso-like shape is supported by columns, which are interrupted by protuberances that call to mind the puffy shoulder rolls of an Elizabethan costume. Brightly colored blind contours, drawn on drafting film, then cut out and painted, swoop a feigned filigree across the composition with an energy as fleet as thought. They send a blaze-red foray into the right upper quarter of the piece and are balanced by a delicately drawn, but formidable *Aechmea tocantina*, which seems to gesture in your direction. A total of nine different plants, some from which the cut-outs are derived, are expansively detailed in black and white, setting up interplay between a number of dualities that drive the twirl and fling of the composition, which fairly bubbles with transformational vigor. These strings and nets, held in place by strips of film made to resemble torn bits of blue painter's tape, cast shadows, allowing their status as fake outlines to mingle with the very real marks of the drawing. The blue faux strips are made to the specs of actual torn pieces of tape, simulating an activity that was formerly authentic. The spiky *Opuntia ficus-indica* and the graceful *Heterostemon mimosoides*, all the other shoots and tangles and brambles, freely found shadows and fastidiously made props, are transformed into a gesture that glides into view on something cosmic, like the statue of Hermione come to life.

Meanwhile, the manifold array of Leigh Anne's project continues in vignettes, close-ups, movements and tracers, some preserved in frames, others escaping that convenience, some breaching the confines of the gallery as they move out into the world via you, their recently acquired hosts. And just like that, the number of observers increases.

--- Hills Snyder



Blind Trajectory

graphite on paper, acrylic paint, drafting film, and linen tape, 2018-19, 64 x 57.5 x 6 inches



Cellular Riot
graphite, color pencil, hand cut drafting film, and acrylic
paint on drafting film, 2018, 36 x 17 x 5 inches



Generational Formulate
graphite, color pencil, acrylic paint, hand cut paper, drafting film,
2019, 28.5 x 32.5 x 4 inches



Adjacent Impressions

hand cut drafting film, graphite, color pencil, acrylic paint,
wood, plexi-glass, 2019





Adjacent Impression 1.1
hand cut drafting film, graphite, color pencil, acrylic paint, wood,
plexi-glass, 2019, 43 x 26 x 7 inches



Adjacent Impression 1.2
hand cut drafting film, graphite, color pencil, acrylic paint, wood,
plexi-glass, 2019, 42 x 26 x 15 inches



Adjacent Impression 1.3
hand cut drafting film, graphite, color pencil, acrylic paint, wood,
plexi-glass, 2019, 58 x 45 x 10 inches



Flexible Foundations

hand cut drafting film, color pencil, acrylic paint,
wood, map flags, 2016





Flexible Foundation 1.1
hand cut drafting film, color pencil, acrylic paint, wood,
map flags, 2016, 30 x 24 x 12 inches



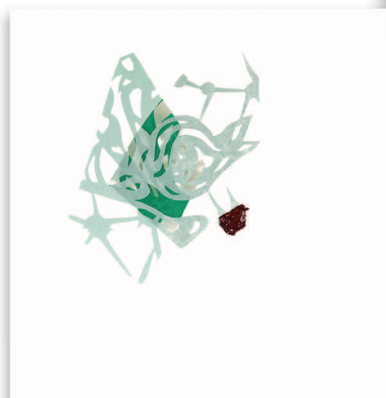
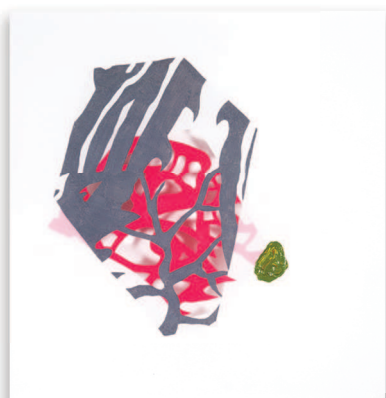
Flexible Foundation 1.2
hand cut drafting film, color pencil, acrylic paint, wood,
map flags, 2016, 66 x 63 x 37 inches



Sidle Splice

hand cut paper, color pencil, acrylic paint, 2015, 10 x 10 inches







Obscure Impressions

color pencil, acrylic paint, hand cut drafting film, 2019, 10.75 x 8.75 inches









cellsmakeshadows

plexi-glass, wood, enamel, and spary paint, 2016







Installation view, No Necessary Time Axis on Evolutionary Novelties,
Ruiz-Healy Art, 2019





Installation view, No Necessary Time Axis on Evolutionary Novelties,
Ruiz-Healy Art, 2019



Installation view, No Necessary Time Axis on Evolutionary Novelties, Ruiz-Healy Art, 2019



Installation view, No Necessary Time Axis on Evolutionary Novelty,
Ruiz-Healy Art, 2019





Slowside
hand cut drafting film, light, shadow, magnets,
Installation at the Southwest School of Art, San Antonio, Texas, 2011





Cultivated Divergence 1.3
hand cut drafting film, paint colors for GMO corporations, shadow,
magnets, 108 x 160 x 1 inches
Installation at the Guadalupe Cultural Arts Center, San Antonio, Texas, 2014



Cultivated Divergence (exterior in daytime)
Hand cut drafting film, plexiglass, hand cut vinyl, magnets, light,
and shadow, 32 x 8 x 15 feet
Installation at Artpace, San Antonio, Texas, 2013

AT&T LOBBY





A Variety of Forms Recovering from Transubstantiated Clarity
Hand cut drafting film, vinyl, color pencil, wood, plexi-glass, paint, light, shadow,
magnets, 300 x 189 x 5 inches
Installation at the McNay Art Museum, San Antonio, Texas, 2016



C.V



EDUCATION

1993 Bachelor of Fine Arts, Painting, University of Texas at San Antonio, TX

SELECTED SOLO & TWO PERSON EXHIBITIONS

- 2019 *No Necessary Time Axis on Evolutionary Novelties*, Ruiz-Healy Art, San Antonio, TX (catalogue)
- 2017 *Leigh Anne Lester: A Variety of Forms Recovering from Transubstantiated Clarity*, AT&T Lobby, McNay Art Museum San Antonio; TX; curator René Paul Barilleaux
Flexible Foundation, Blue Star Art Museum, San Antonio, TX
- 2016 *Natural Order*, Muriel Guepin Gallery, New York, NY
- 2015 *UnNatural Selection*, The Gallery at Vaudeville, Fredericksburg, TX; curator: Mary Parker
Infinite Horizons, Ruiz-Healy Art, San Antonio, TX (catalogue)
- 2014 *Venomous Cabbage and other demands satisfied*, grayDUCK Gallery, Austin, TX
- 2013 *Cultivated Divergence*, Artpace, San Antonio, TX
- 2012 *Seed Pod*, Site-specific/temporary land art on San Antonio River sponsored by the San Antonio River Foundation, San Antonio, TX
- 2011 *Beautiful Freaks/Nature's Bastards*, Houston Art Alliance, Houston, TX
- 2010 *Beautiful Freaks/Nature's Bastards*, The Southwest School of Art, San Antonio, TX
Intelligent Design, Institute of Texan Cultures, San Antonio, TX
- 2006 *Artificial Arrangement*, Conduit Gallery, Dallas, TX
Artificial Arrangement, Lawndale Arts Center, Houston, TX
Untitled, The McNay Art Museum, San Antonio, TX
- 2005 *Family Portraits*, International Museum of Surgical Science, Chicago, IL
Artificial Arrangement, Sala Diaz, San Antonio, TX
- 2001 *ROCK*, New Works Space, The McKinney Avenue Contemporary, Dallas, TX
- 2000 *ROCK*, Project Room, San Antonio, TX

SELECTED GROUP EXHIBITIONS

- 2017 *Drawn From*, Sam Houston State University, Huntsville, TX
Jesse Amado, Cecilia Biagini, and Leigh Anne Lester, Overland Partners Art Program, San Antonio, TX
- 2016 *You Have No Choice*, FL!GHTGallery, San Antonio, TX
- 2015 *Nature on the Edge: Mutation and Hybridity in 21st Century Art*, BihlHaus Arts, San Antonio, Texas; curator: David S. Rubin
Eastbound and down, Good Children Gallery, New Orleans, LA
Running down the road, Terminal 136, San Antonio, TX
Six Artists celebrate the McNay's 60th Anniversary, The McNay Art Museum, San Antonio, TX; curator: Rene Barilleaux
- 2014 *Flatland*, Museo Guadalupe, San Antonio, TX; curator: Patty Ortiz
Crossing the Line, Centro Cultural Border, Mexico City, Mexico; curator: Michele Monseau
Aesthetic Encounters, Ruiz-Healy Art, San Antonio, TX
Outside/In, K.Imperial Gallery, San Francisco, CA
- 2013 *The Drawing Room*, Part 2, Galveston Center of Art, Galveston, TX
- 2012 *Prelude: Beginning a Conversation*, David Shelton Gallery, Houston, TX
The State of Drawing, The University of Texas at Arlington, Arlington, TX; curator: Benito Huerta

- 2011 *Wild Things*, Texas State University, San Marcos, TX
Rock, Paper, Carbon, grayDUCK gallery, Austin, TX
San Antonio Draws, The McNay Art Museum, San Antonio, TX
- 2010 *Ucross: Twenty-Seven Years of Visual Artist Residency*,
 Nicolaysen Art Museum, Casper, WY; curator: Lisa Hatchadoorian
Palimpsest, The McKinney Avenue Contemporary, Dallas, TX
- 2009 *Texas National*, Cole Art Center; juror: Mel Chin, Nacogdoches, TX
- 2008 *Transitions*, Cantanker Magazine, Issue #6, Big Medium, Austin, TX; curator:
 Leona Skull-Hons
Biennial Southwest, Albuquerque Museum of Art, Albuquerque, NM; curator:
 Dr. Stephanie Hanor
- 2007 *Beneath the Skin*, LIMN Gallery, San Francisco, CA
Naturally Inclined, College of Mainland Gallery, Texas City, TX
- 2006 *Utopia*, Kohler Arts Center, Sheboygan, WI
"Show – Offs", Unit B, San Antonio, TX
- 2005 *Stitch in Time*, Women and their Work, Austin, TX; curator: Joan Davidow
- 2004 *Cross Stitch: Craft Medium Redefined*, The Bank, Kansas City, MO
100 Drawings, Haggerty Gallery, University of Dallas, Irving, TX
H2O: Considering the Hydrosphere, The Southwest School of Art, San Antonio,
 TX
Piece Work, Dallas Center for the Contemporary Arts, Dallas, TX
- 2002 *10x3*, San Antonio Museum of Art, San Antonio, TX
- 2001 *Here/There*, Blue Star Art Space, San Antonio, TX
Ulterior, Haggerty Gallery, University of Dallas, Dallas, TX
- 2000 *Fibrous*, Southwest Texas State University, San Marcos, TX
Critics Choice 2000, Dallas Visual Arts Center, Dallas, TX, Jurors: Carla Stellweg,
 Chris Cowden, Sara Kellner

SELECTED BIBLIOGRAPHY

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- Atwell, Wendy. "Interview: Leigh Anne Lester, might be good." *The Tangible and the Ethereal*, Iss. 170, May 27, 2011.
- Baker, Kenneth. "The man works wonders with, yes, paint rollers." *San Francisco Chronicle*, June 16, 2007.
- Bennett, Steve. "Artist is growing mutants in Artpace windows." *San Antonio Express News*, February 23, 2013.
- Brenner, Wayne Allen. "Rock, Paper, Carbon." *Austin Chronicle*, June 10, 2011.
- De la Rocha, Haydee. "Review: Cultivated Divergence by Leigh Anne Lester." *Art Magazine SA*, January 2013.
- Fee, Brian. "Color Pollination: Leigh Anne Lester at grayDUCK Gallery." *New American Painting*, May 16, 2014.
- Fisch, Sarah. "Escena San Antonio: Leigh Anne Lester rocks on, Cruz Ortiz as auteur, a visit from Houston curators." *Glasstire Texas Visual Art Online*, June 17, 2011.
- . "Strange Fruit and Odd Vegetables." *Plaza de Armas San Antonio*, December 10, 2010.
- Goddard, Dan. "Leigh Anne Lester @ Institute of Texan Cultures." *Artlies*, Iss. 63, Fall 2009.
- Krieger, Deborah Anne. "In with the new! Recent gifts on paper." *Artes Magazine*, May 1, 2014.
- Rindfuss, Bryan. "A Look Inside the Weird World of Leigh Anne Lester's Mutant Botanicals." *San Antonio Current*, May 3, 2017.
- Schwaiger, Seth Orion. "Venomous Cabbage and Other Demands Satisfied." *Glasstire Texas Visual Art Online*, May 31, 2014.

Silva, Elda. "Exquisite art leaves you wondering." *San Antonio Express News*, January 16, 2011.

---. "Nature in the Hands of the Artist." *San Antonio Express News*, August 9, 2009.

Wolff, Elaine. "Growth Spurt." *San Antonio Current*, July 22- 28, 2009.

AWARDS

2011 Hunting Art Prize Winner

2007 Visual Art Award, Artist Foundation of San Antonio, San Antonio, TX

RESIDENCY

2015 The Berlin Residency Program, Blue Star Contemporary Art Museum in partnership with Künstlerhaus Bethanien, Berlin, Germany

1998 Ucross Foundation, Clearmont, WY

PROFESSIONAL EXPERIENCE

2008 Creative Capital Workshop, San Antonio, TX

1993 Manager, San Angel Folk Art, Inc. Blue Star Arts Complex, San Antonio, TX

1993-2012 Co-founder, co-owner, co-curator, Cactus Bra Space, an alternative exhibition space for new artist, Blue Star Complex, San Antonio, TX

SELECTED ART COLLECTIONS

Dell Children's Medical Center of Central Texas, Austin, TX

McNay Art Museum, San Antonio, TX

Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts, Philadelphia, PA

The Woman's Hospital of Texas, Houston, TX

The University of Texas in San Antonio, TX

University Health System, San Antonio, TX

