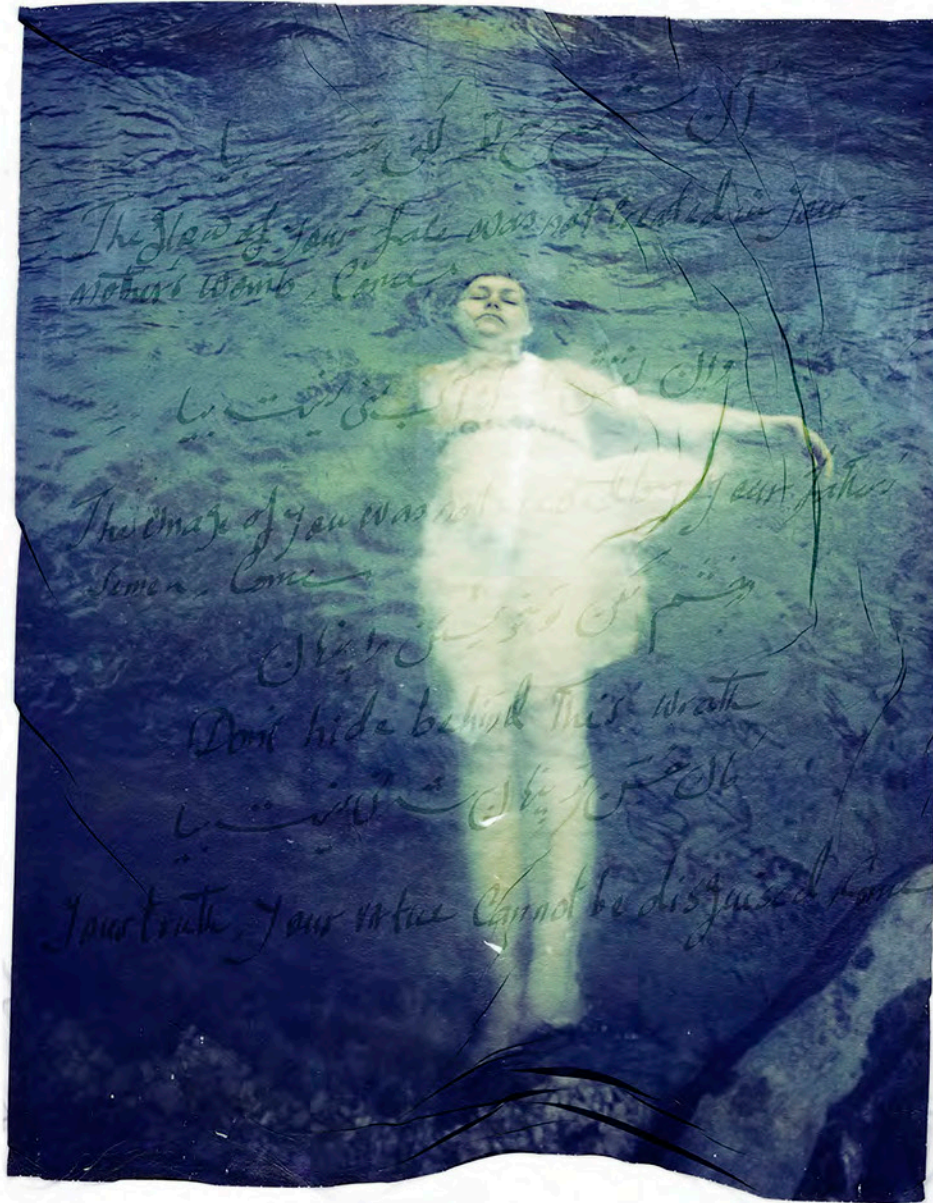


# RETROSPECTIVE

Ramin Samandari



Exhibition Catalogue

Artist of the Year

September 24 to November 4 2023

## **Note from the Committee Chair**

The official name of the Artist of the Year Committee is actually the Artist of the Year *Recommendation* Committee: the committee does not make the final selection of the artist to be so honored. The committee is comprised of the SAAL&M President, the Committee Chair (or 3<sup>rd</sup> Vice President), and five at-large SAAL&M members. This committee of seven nominates artists for consideration; the Chair solicits portfolios from the candidates; the committee meets to review portfolios; and after review, each committee member anonymously ranks the field. The portfolios of the three top-ranking artists are then forwarded to an outside jury of three arts professionals (e.g., artists, curators, museum directors, critics, arts educators, etc.), one of whom may be a former Artist of the Year. The committee recommends, but the panel of arts professionals makes the final judgment in an attempt to assure that the most deserving artist is selected.

The Artist of the Year is an Art League tradition going back to 1946, when Alice Naylor was recognized, through last year when the exhibition featured the work of Sylvia Benitez. Even during the pandemic shutdown of 2020, Ansen Seale graciously mounted a stunning retrospective and gave a gallery tour over Zoom. Artists have included Harding Black, Cecil Casebier, Danville Chadbourne, Philip Evett, Charles Field, Billy L. Keen, Marilyn Lanfear, Leslie Larson, Keith McIntyre, and Margaret Pace, among many others. The Art League feels especially privileged that photographer Ramin Samandari will be joining this distinguished roster with the 2023 Artist of the Year exhibition.

Nancy Kempf

## President's Introduction

Seven years ago, I sat in Ramin's Magical Realism Studio at Blue Star waiting to have my portrait made for the Faces of Art Project. All the other artists I knew loved and respected Ramin's work, and it was exciting to have him take photos of us as individual parts of a larger creative community. "Close your eyes," he said to me as he held the camera. "Try to find your strongest emotion, your deepest feeling, your connection to the moment." I tried, lost in darkness. Then Ramin said gently, "Now . . . open your eyes."

I am thinking of that moment as I look through his body of work in this catalog and at the photographs in this remarkable exhibition. His words and images compel every one of us to open our eyes to the miraculous nuances of emotion and connection. Ramin is a visual poet who combines lyrical photographic ephemera, an intuitive seer who edits complex vistas down to their elemental bones.

Ramin writes, "A photograph can illuminate events otherwise unseen and can even bring about change in human condition." As you look at his work, remember that it comes from a place of Magical Realism, a place that depicts the real world as having an undercurrent of magic or fantasy. This undercurrent keeps us hopeful and enchanted and allows us to imagine a kinder reality.

Thank you, Ramin, for making work that opens our eyes. We are so lucky that you have found a forever home here in San Antonio. And we are so fortunate to be able to honor you as our Artist of the Year for 2023.

Lyn Belisle Kurtin

President,  
San Antonio Art League & Museum

September, 2023

**Essay for Glasstire, written by David S. Rubin, former Contemporary Art curator at the San Antonio Museum of Art.**

Iranian-born photographer Ramin Samandari arrived in Odessa, Texas in 1978 at age 17, sent there by his parents to avoid mandatory inscription into the military, which would have happened when he turned 18. All on his own, having left behind his family and a culture of revolution, martial law, and regime change, Samandari thought he might return to his homeland in a few years, but then the Iran-Iraq War broke out, so he renewed his U.S. visa, eventually got a green card, and in 1990 he became a U.S. citizen.

A resident of San Antonio since 1988, Samandari decided in the early '90s to pursue photojournalism, so he took some courses at San Antonio College and started freelancing for local news publications. Although he was enjoying the assignments, a problem kept emerging when he presented his photos to his editors—they were just too artful for the daily press. So, he shifted focus and has practiced fine art photography for over fifteen years. Throughout the '90s, Samandari exhibited mostly in theater lobbies and at restaurants in San Antonio and Austin. In 2001, he had solo exhibitions at the University of Incarnate Word's Center for Spirituality, the Guadalupe Cultural Arts Center, and the San Antonio Museum of Art. He has been a stalwart of the San Antonio art scene ever since. Currently he is exhibiting his *San Antonio Faces of Art* project in Artpace's window space and, on July 7, he will open a more expansive version at the Department of Cultural and Creative Development's new Plaza de Armas Gallery.



**Sorrow, 2000, digital print, 30 x 22 in.; Untitled, 2000, digital print, 22 x 30 in.**

Many of Samandari's photographs incorporate passages of poetry by the 13th century Persian poet Rumi, whose wisdom has often guided the artist when coping with deeply personal issues. Following a trip to Iran in 2000, Samandari brought back old family photos. As he questioned the disparities between his distant past and his life in San Antonio, he took digital photos of the vintage snapshots set against various backdrops around the city and reworked them in Photoshop, adding in scanned passages from Rumi's poems that he wrote by hand in Farsi. For *Sorrow* (2000), a photo of Samandari as an infant was photographed set against a sad looking sculpture that he came across at an old home, and then merged with Rumi's poetry advising that sorrow is our one supreme and loyal

friend. In a related untitled work, a photo of the artist's father as a young man interacts with green grass and text which instructs that our true essence does not come from our parents.



***Boy and Girl Sledding, 2005, digital print, 20 x 14 in.; Chess Game in the Park, 2005, digital print, 20 x 14 in.***

For an exhibition at Blue Star Contemporary Art Museum in 2005, Samandari exhibited 100 photographs documenting everyday life in Iran. Using street photographs that he shot during a 2003 visit, Samandari's objective was to point out that there is more to Iran than just the media portrayal of protests, riots, and militaristic activity. Using digital technology, he converted his photos to black-and-white, but repeated and shifted sections highlighted in full color to bring sharper focus to the joyful or pleasant nature of common pastimes, such as riding a sled through the snow or playing a leisurely game of chess.

In 2007, Samandari returned to Rumi's poetry as a source for "In Search of the Beloved," a series he exhibited at Bihl Haus Arts. In the poems, the term 'beloved' refers to both nature and God, so Samandari created images that use a soft atmospheric haze to suggest a divine presence in nature. To begin, he took photographs of women in outdoor settings using an old 4 x 5 in. Polaroid camera. He then made small transfer and emulsion lift prints, which he scanned and enlarged while adding in Rumi's texts, seen faintly in the backgrounds and this time written in both Farsi and English, a conscious acknowledgment of Samandari's dual citizenship.

Samandari next turned to plants and clouds as subjects. In his "Revelations in the Landscape" series, exhibited in 2010 at the UTSA downtown gallery, he coupled jarring images of prickly plants with scanned handwritten excerpts from Charles Baudelaire's "The Flowers of Evil" (1857), a collection of poems on eroticism, decadence, and the darker side of 19th century French society. By contrast, an uplifting tone dominates Samandari's "Veils of Nephele" series, which debuted in 2011 at the Southwest School of Art. Viewing these as "cloud portraits" and considering clouds to be timeless, the artist superimposed cloud imagery over scans of aged looking texts, and titled each photograph using phrases from *The Book of Tao*, which shares Rumi's interpretation of nature as something eternal.

Samandari's interest in portraiture took root in 2014, when he became motivated to search for his inner soul by creating a daily self-portrait for a period of about a month. While physical features

such as clothing and hairstyle vary from one image to the next, all the self-portraits share sharp lighting and a directness of Samandari's gaze that seems to have intensified as the series progressed.

As friends visited Samandari's weekly open studio and saw his new direction, the idea emerged of photographing them as well. Because many of his friends are artists, Samandari became interested in devoting a new series to artists' faces. Eschewing the common approach of photographing his subjects in their own environments, where they might feel too much at home to express inner emotion, he opted for sittings in his studio, with the goal of shooting each portrait in a single take. Although prep time varied from being very brief to more extended conversations with Samandari, each subject was at some point asked to close their eyes and then open them, at which time the picture was taken. As many of the subjects began posting their portraits on Facebook, the project really took off, expanding beyond being limited to artists with the inclusion of curators, writers, arts administrators, collectors, and gallerists—the larger San Antonio visual art community. His goal, of course, is to bring to light our community spirit, aka our collective soul.



***Faces of Artpace*, 2016, installation at Artpace Window Works**

For his window installation *Faces of Artpace*, Samandari presented his photographs of artists who have exhibited at Artpace over the years, along with images of staff and artists who have been independent contractors. Portraits of residents and exhibiting artists occupy the main space, suspended from the ceiling, with resident's portraits being larger in scale. The smallest images, which are of support staff and contractors, are arranged in groupings on the walls to either side. Experienced from either the street or inside the space, the installation has an inviting sculptural presence, and it can be navigated bit by bit.

At the Plaza de Armas Gallery, Samandari is exhibiting 165 prints from *San Antonio Faces of Art* (disclosure: I am honored to be among the subjects), accompanied by a slide show of the same images plus an additional 123. Collectively, the sepia toned portraits reveal the San Antonio art community to be racially and ethnically diverse. Individually, each subject is framed at just the right proportions for a postage stamp. With faces bathed in soft lighting, the quietly expressive portraits seem aesthetically antithetical to those by the pioneering German photographer August Sander, who in the 1920s set out to photograph every type of human physiognomy using a more objective documentary style. Rather than inventory outward appearances as Sander did, what Samandari documents as he and his subjects are joined together in moments of concentrated stillness is the universal sensation of being alive.

Iranian-born photographer, I arrived in Odessa, Texas in 1978 at age 17, sent there by my parents in the midst of the Iranian revolution. At the time I thought I might return to my homeland in a few years with a medical degree, but then the Iran-Iraq War broke out, so I renewed my U.S. visa, eventually got a green card, and in 1990 became a U.S. citizen.

A resident of San Antonio since 1988, I decided in the early '90s to pursue my life long passion of photography. Throughout the '90s, I exhibited mostly in non traditional venues in San Antonio and Austin.

Between 2000 and 2001, I had several solo exhibitions at the University of Incamate Word's Center for Spirituality, the Guadalupe Cultural Arts Center, Carver Cultural Art Center and the San Antonio Museum of Art.

My work has been exhibited at The Blue Star Contemporary Art Museum, UTSA gallery, Southwest School of Art, Artpace, City of San Antonio Department of Culture and Creative Development and many private galleries.

My work is in the permanent collection at San Antonio Museum of Art, University of Texas at San Antonio, The Tobin Center for the Performing Art and Institute of Texan Cultures.



I approach the making of images as a means to document my philosophical, artistic and personal examinations of life.

Photography communicates beauty, ugliness, desire, longing, hope and fear. A photograph can illuminate events otherwise unseen and can even bring about change in human condition.

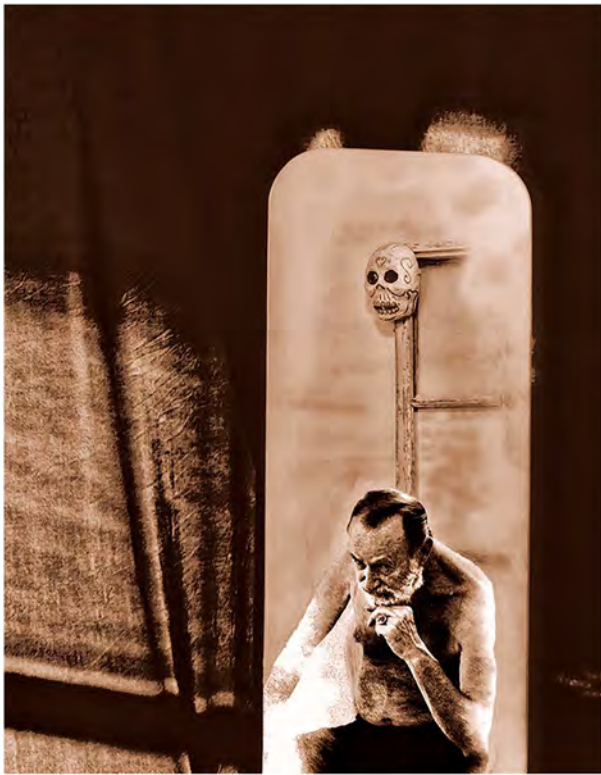
The camera sees things that are real and tangible, yet it also captures things beyond the realistic realm.

By capturing an event or an emotion in an instant, it takes the viewer beyond the perceived reality.

In order to make an impact on the viewer, photographer must look past the surface to convey the emotional aspects of the subjects.

As someone who was uprooted from home and country at an early age, I often feel a sense of isolation and an outsider. This feeling of -not quite belonging- becomes evident in my images.

My concerns are human's search for individuality, the meaning of one's life, the means the world employs to deprive the self of its freedom in all spheres of action and expression and the means by which the self can recover this freedom.



"Homage to Don" 2/5 24"x30" \$700.00



"Le Femme" 2/5 24"x30" \$700.00



“In Search of the Beloved” was a series I did between 2005-2007. The photos in this series were done using a large format camera and Polaroid film which was then transferred to another medium. This was then scanned and enlarged, where I incorporated the poems of the 12<sup>th</sup> century Persian poet, Rumi.

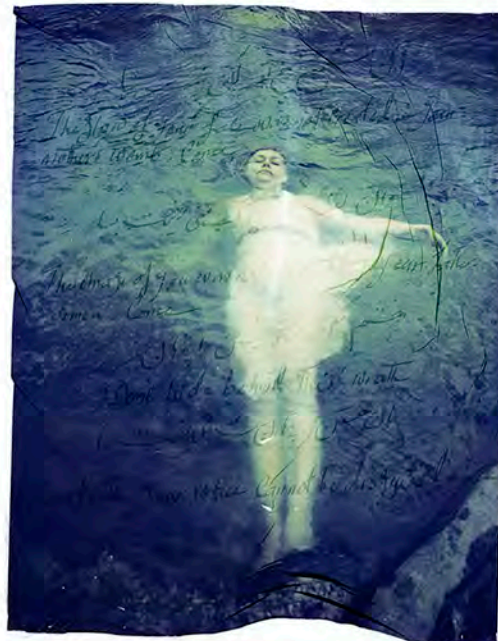
The poems are written in Farsi with English translations.

This series of 15 images was exhibited in 2007 at The Bihl Haus Arts Gallery.

These are a selection from the series.



“There is a life force within your soul. seek that life” 32”x40” \$1250.00



“The Glow of your face” 3/5 32”x40” \$1250.00



“O’ You alone in the sky like the Sun. Come” 32”x40” \$1250.00



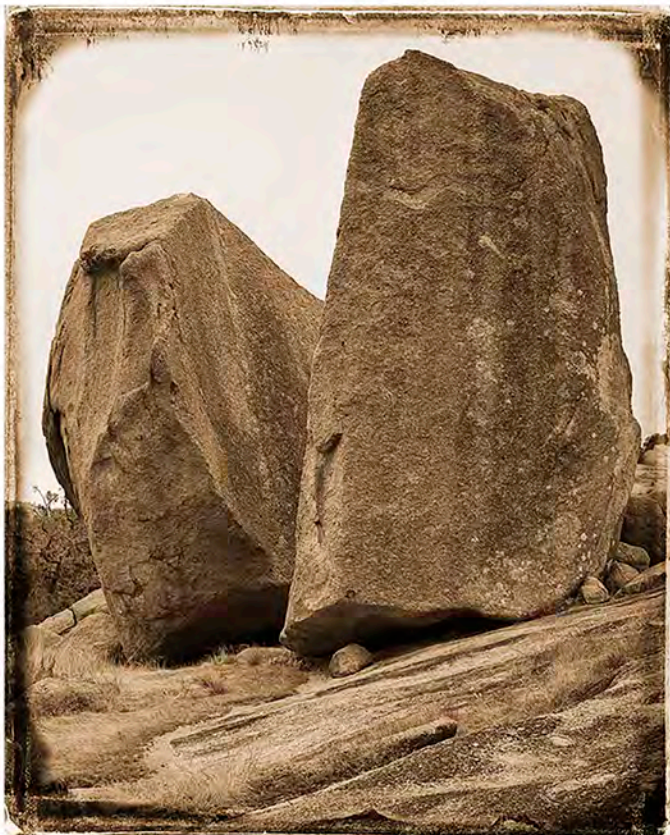
“I am the mirror and I am the face” 2/5 32”x40” \$1250.00



"Free from life, body and soul, is the Dervish" 2/5 32"x40" \$1250.00



"Lost in rapture, dancing in ecstasy" 2/5 32"x40" \$1250.00



"Twins" 2/5 24"x30" \$700.00



"State of Balance" 2/5 24"x30" \$700.00

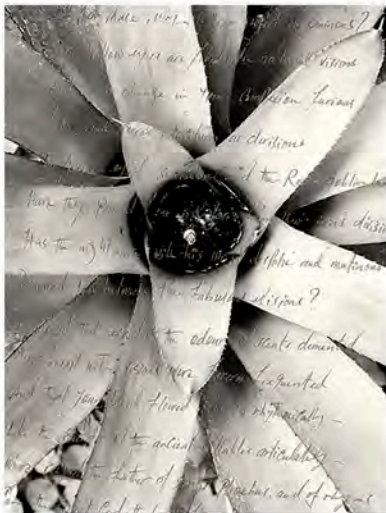
# Revelations in the Landscape

Concerns about the natural world as well as deeper questions regarding the nature of the human heart inspire this photographic series

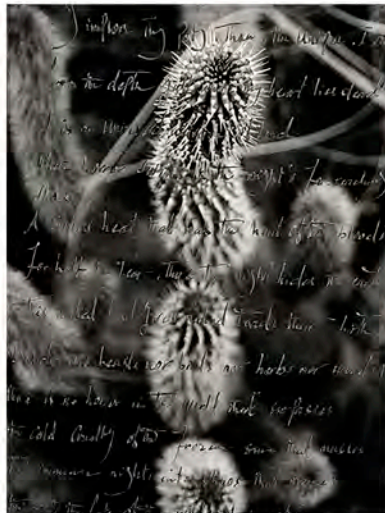
I've created surreal, ethereal images inspired by Charles Baudelaire's book of dark poetry and prose titled Les Fleurs Du Mal (Flowers of Evil).

Excerpts from Baudelaire's poetry have been superimposed onto these otherworldly photographs of exotic plant forms.

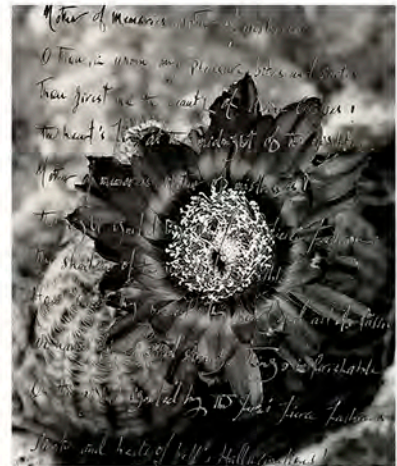
These images do not simply represent real world phenomena but rather seek to represent esoteric affinities with primordial ideals.



"your hollow eyes are filled with nocturnal visions" 2/5 20"x24" \$600.00



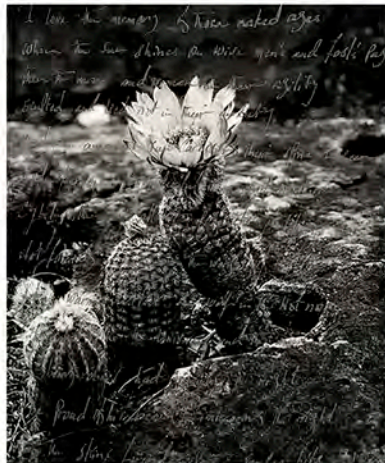
"Where horror swims in the night's far reaching shore" 2/5 20"x24" \$600.00



"The shadow of the unveiled, invisible" 2/5 20"x24" \$600.00



"The mystic nourishment of the magician's art" 2/5 20"x24" \$600.00



"The amorous Sun caressing their spine, unseen" 2/5 20"x24" \$600.00



"Strange expression of things infinite" 2/5 20"x24" \$600.00



"Divine healing of our impurities" 2/5 20"x24" \$600.00



"Burning with odious revelations" 2/5 20"x24" \$600.00



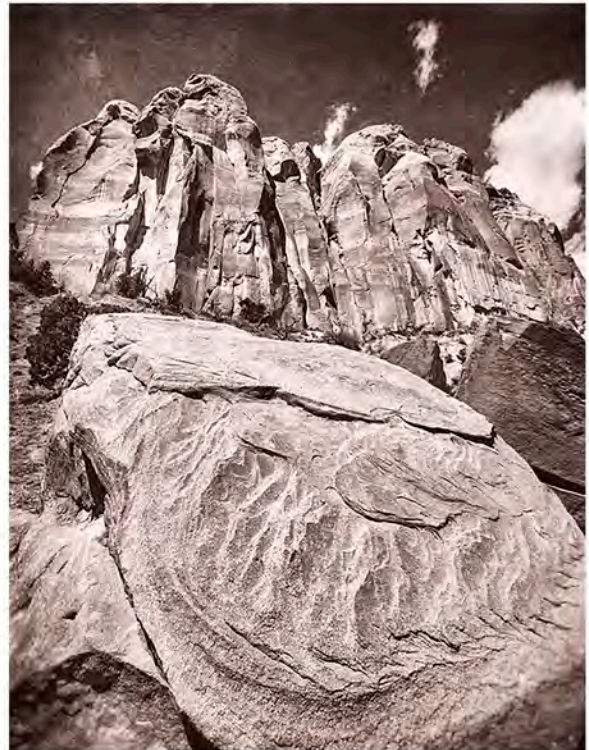
"Beyond the Sun's and the Moon's mad mysteries" 2/5 20"x24" \$600.00



"Perfumes of some flower unfurling" 2/5 20"x24" \$600.00



"Replenisher" 2/5 32"x40" \$1250.00



"Ghost Ranch-Camposanto" 24"x30" \$700.00



"Pedernales River"

24" x 30"

\$700.00



"Pedernales River"

24" x 30"

\$700.00



"Pedernales River"

24" x 30"

\$700.00



"Guadalupe River"

24" x 30"

\$700.00



"Guadalupe River"

24" x 30"

\$700.00



"Guadalupe River"

24" x 30"

\$700.00

In 2013, I started a project to archive San Antonio's art community. I called it "San Antonio Faces of Art".

In the following 2 years, I had photographed about 280, mostly visual artists, which in 2016 culminated in an exhibition at the newly opened City of San Antonio Department of Arts and Culture's Plaza De Armas.

Since 2021, I've resumed the project to continue the archive of not only visual artists but also poets, writers and performance artists as well.

For this retrospective, I've selected these images of artists who are no longer with us.



"S.T. Shimi"  
2/5 16" x 20" \$400.00



"Richard Conn"  
2/5 16" x 20" \$400.00



"Ramon Vasquez Y' Sanchez"  
2/5 16" x 20" \$400.00



"Melanie Rush Davis"  
2/5 16" x 20" \$400.00



"Marilyn Lanfear"  
2/5 16" x 20" \$400.00



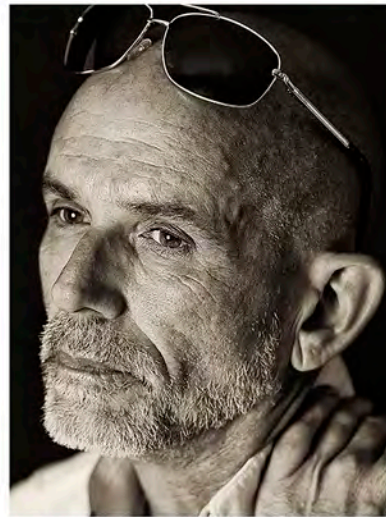
"Magda Chellet"  
2/5 16" x 20" \$400.00



"Katie Pell" 2/5 16"x20" \$400.00



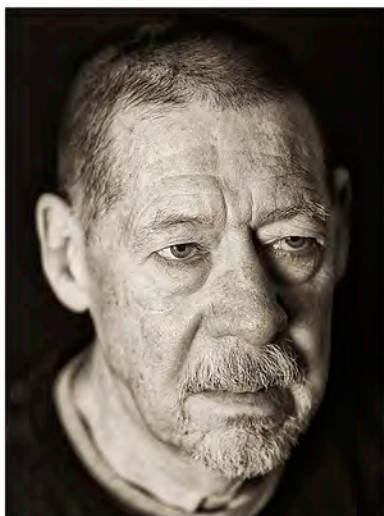
"Jose Esquivel" 2/5 16"x20" \$400.00



"Gregorio Mannino" 2/5 16"x20" \$400.00



"Gene Elder" 2/5 16"x20" \$400.00



"Brad Braune" 2/5 16"x20" \$400.00



"Beck Whitehead" 2/5 16"x20" \$400.00



"Angel Rodriguez Diaz" 2/5 16"x20" \$400.00

## “Huddled Masses, Who We Are”

I began to think about this project in late 2016, then felt an incredible urge to do it after the presidential elections.

I am an immigrant to the US. I came here in 1978 and have been a naturalized citizen since 1990. When I started hearing the fever pitched anti-immigrant rhetoric coming from the highest office in the land, it stirred something in me that I hadn't felt before.

I started the project by inviting people to my studio and asking them to participate by writing on a small white board something of their immigration story. If they were a first generation immigrant they could write where they came from and if they were descendant of immigrants, they could write about that. Participants were free to write any kind of statement, so long as it could fit on the small board. Then I made a photo of the participant with their statement.

In 2019, with a grant from the Institute of Texan Cultures, I was able to make this project a reality.

This project, made up of 300 portraits is in the permanent collections at the Institute of Art and Culture.





## “Bisti/De-Na-Zin”

A 45,000-acre wilderness area located in San Juan County in New Mexico, established in 1984, the Wilderness is a desolate area of steeply eroded Badlands managed by the Bureau of Land Management.

Translated from the Navajo, word Bistahí, Bisti means "among the adobe formations, De-Na-Zin, from Navajo Dééł Náázíní, translates as "Standing Crane".

The landscape seemed completely otherworldly, it almost looked man made! Except it was made by millions of years of erosion by water and wind. It took me some time to get my bearings and to absorb the look and feel of the place. Being pummeled by gale-force winds and fine sand particles in my face and eyes didn't help the matter!

It's impossible to convey the majesty of such a landscape in photos. I've tried to express my impression of the landscape.



Bisti-De-Na-Zin

24" x 30"

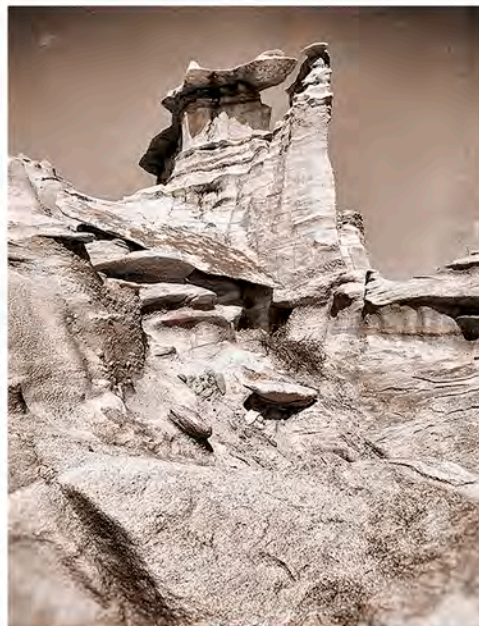
\$700.00



Bisti-De-Na-Zin

24" x 30"

\$700.00



Bisti-De-Na-Zin

24" x 30"

\$700.00



Bisti-De-Na-Zin

24" x 30"

\$700.00



Bisti-De-Na-Zin

24" x 30"

\$700.00



During the winter freeze of 2021, thousands of Palm trees in San Antonio died. One such Palm tree, right across the street from my studio, seemed to have had a particularly harder time.

After it suffered the freeze, it was subsequently set ablaze! For almost a whole year, the tree kept it's leaves mostly intact. It took one especially windy day in January 2022 to dislodge all the dead leaves and scatter them all over the ground.

The next morning I saw all the leaves scattered all across the street. So, naturally I had to bring some in the studio and photograph them!

These images are printed on Archival Canvas using Archival inks.



"Palm Leaf #8" 31" x 42" \$1250.00



"Palm Leaf #6" 31" x 42" \$1250.00



"Palm Leaf #4" 31"x42" \$1250.00



"Palm Leaf #1" 31"x42" \$1250.00

*All images are copyright.2023. Ramin Samandari*

## Ramin Samandari

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San Antonio, TX. 78204  
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magicalrealismstudio@gmail.com

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### Selected One Person Exhibits

*Faces of Islam (a microcosm of the Muslim community in San Antonio) -*  
Dock Space Gallery Annex. San Antonio, TX. September 2022.

*Huddled Masses, Who We Are -* UTSA Institute of Texan Cultures, San Antonio, Texas.  
September 2019.

*Body and Mind -* Dock Space Gallery (Lone Star Art District), San Antonio, Texas.  
September 2017

*San Antonio Faces of Art -* Department of Culture and Creative Development, Plaza de Armas.  
San Antonio, Texas. July 2016

*Faces of Artpace -* Artpace San Antonio (Taylor Bates, curator). June 2016

*Earthly Bodies -* Gallery Nord (Carina Gorz, curator) San Antonio, Texas. September 2011

*Veils of Nephelē -* Southwest School of Art (Kathy Armstrong, curator) San Antonio,  
Texas. September 2010.

*Revelations in the Landscape -* Two-person show. UTSA downtown gallery. (Arturo Almeida,  
curator) San Antonio, TX. Sept. 2007.

*In Search of the Beloved -* Bihl Haus Arts (Deborah Keller-Rihn, curator) San Antonio, Texas. July  
2007.

*Fragments of Memories: A personal Glimpse into Modern day Iran -* Blue Star Contemporary Art Center  
(Bernice Williams, curator) - San Antonio, TX. September 2005

*Reflections of Islam -* San Antonio Museum of Art (Rose Demir, curator) - San Antonio, TX, 2001.

*The Immaculate Conception -* Carver Cultural Center (Marcia Wesser and Diann Green, curators) - San  
Antonio, TX, 2000.

*Suspended Effect of a Presence -* Guadalupe Cultural Arts Center (Kathy Vargas, curator) - San Antonio,  
TX, 2000.

### Selected Group Exhibits

*“Red Dot”* - Contemporary at Blue Star. San Antonio, TX. 2022.

*“Common Currents”* - Group invitational exhibit, part of San Antonio Tricentennial. Artpace, San Antonio, TX. 2018

*“50 at 50”*-group invitational exhibit, Southwest School of Art, San Antonio, TX . (Kathy Armstrong, curator). 2015

*“Vigils and Protests”*- Three-person exhibit. Joan Grona Gallery, San Antonio, TX. Sept. 2009

*“Lady of Guadalupe Exhibition”* - Group invitational show. Centro Cultural Aztlan. San Antonio, TX. Dec. 2008.

*“Presente!” (Photography and art of the present moment)* - Group invitational show. Centro Cultural Aztlan. San Antonio, Texas. October 2008.

*“Local Loteria” - Invitational group exhibition* - Southwest School of Art (Kathy Armstrong, curator) San Antonio, Texas, 2006.

*“Spirituality and Creativity”* - Southwest School of Art (Kathy Armstrong, curator) - San Antonio, TX, 2001.

*“ART 2K PASA” : A Millennial Survey by San Antonio Artists* - Airport Art Space, San Antonio International Airport (Michael Mehl, curator) - San Antonio, TX, 2000.

### **Collections**

UTSA Institute of Texan Cultures  
San Antonio Museum of Art.  
University of Texas at San Antonio.  
Tobin Center for the Performing Art.

### **Grants**

City of San Antonio Department of Arts and Culture. Individual project grant. 2022-2023  
New York Foundation for the Arts Individual grant. 2022

### **Publications**

*“Wildflower. Stone.”* Poems by Marian Haddad. Published by Pecan Grove Press. 2010.  
*“Art at our Doorstep”*; San Antonio Writers + Artists. Published by Trinity University press. Edited by Nan Cuba and Riley Robinson. 2008  
*“The Garden of Milk and Wine”*. A collection of short stories by Mo H. Saidi. Published by Word Design Studio. 2011.  
*“Fotoseptiembre Internacional”*. 1996, 1998, 2000.



