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# Fiery installation by Carlos Castro Arias turns up the heat in Artpace gallery in San Antonio



Deborah Martin | June 24, 2020



1 of 6 Carlos Castro Arias's exhibit at Artpace — titled "I came to set the world on fire, and I wish it were already rekindled — Luke 12:49" — includes a pair of works that involve fire. Photo: Tom Reel / Staff photographer

Every so often, Artpace building manager Charlie Kitchen heads upstairs and sets a couple of works of art on fire.

It's nothing personal.

Flames are key elements in “The Witness” and “Body,” two pieces in Carlos Castro Arias’ religion-themed exhibit “I came to set the world on fire, and I wish it were already kindled — Luke 12:49.”

“It brings it all together,” Kitchen said.

The burning works sit across the gallery from one another, each set on fire with propane. “The Witness” is a black figure hunched over a cell phone, watching video of a church burning. Flames erupt from the figure’s head. “Body” is a miniature church on a pedestal, flames shooting from its roof and its windows. Those who get close will feel heat from the fire.

To make sure that the exhibit is safe, large metal vents have been installed over each piece, drawing fumes out of the space. A fire extinguisher is at the ready as well, and when the works are ignited, Kitchen is in the space to make sure that no problems arise.

Castro, one of Artpace’s spring artists-in-residence, has worked with fire a bit in the past, including a small sculpture he made seven years ago that emanated flames. In addition to open flames, other materials he used for works in his Artpace exhibit include soot and burned wood.

“When I talked to the curator (for the Artpace residency) and she invited me to do this, I thought that maybe fire was the right material to convey this idea about religion, spirituality and pain,” he said in an interview in April.

Castro — who divides his time between San Diego, Tijuana and Bogotá — came to Texas for the first time for the residency. He said he was struck by the number of churches that dot the state. He also took note of how often places of worship are the targets of violence.

“This is a state that is very religious, but at the same time, there have been so many attacks on religion,” he said. “That’s the point of departure for my project.”

The exhibit was installed in March after stay-at-home orders were issued to try to stem the spread of COVID-19. While the exhibition space was shuttered to the public, the installation and those of Castro’s fellow spring artists-in-residence — Milagros de la Torre and Daniel Ramos— could only be seen in an online exhibition posted to [artpace.org](http://artpace.org) in April.

That changed this month, when the space reopened with new safety measures in place. Reservations have to be made online in advance, and everyone has to wear a mask. Temperature screenings are conducted at the front desk, as well.

The online display was a reasonable stopgap, but it made it difficult to view the exhibitions as the artists intended. Castro’s work in particular is an immersive experience. He wants visitors to be able to experience the heat and smell of the burning pieces. There’s a sound element, as well, a recording of a sermon referencing fire given by Houston pastor Joel Osteen.

Last Friday, Jill Petri Adams, 52, brought her 11-year-old twins Caroline and Camille to the exhibition space.

“We do a bucket list every summer, and this was one of our items on the bucket list, and, bonus, it was open,” said Petri Adams.

The girls approached “Body” gingerly, giving it a wide berth as they walked around the gallery.

The sisters both said they found the works on fire “scary.”

“I thought it was scary, but kind of cool because it had a lot of things to do with violence, I think — burning down stuff,” Camille said. “And I think the guy who was the statue, I think he had a phone so maybe that was (about) too much technology or something. It kind of was interesting.”

As they walked through the space, they talked about what the works were about.

“We said, there are things that do good in the world and those same things can also cause problems,” Petri Adams said. “And the reverse is true — things that cause problems may also help restore. So a fire, while you think oh, fire is terrible, it burns down a church or a home; but another time, it burns something down so that something new can present. So those were some of the things we talked about.”

Those are some of the ideas that Castro is trying to get across, though he always likes to hear how others read his work, he said.

“I try to create pieces piece that are open to interpretation, so for some people, they see those churches burning and see some type of destructive message, which, for me,

it's not," he said. "Maybe people can see a metaphor for enlightening in things on fire, so it's very open to interpretation."

*Carlos Castro Aria's exhibit "I came to set the world on fire, and I wish it were already kindled — Luke 12:49" — as well as Milagros de la Torre's "Systems and Constellations" and Daniel Ramos' "The Land of Illustrious Men" — can be seen through Aug. 23 at Artpace, 445 N. Main. Reservations can be made at [artpace.org/home/about/contact](http://artpace.org/home/about/contact).*

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Deborah Martin is an arts writer who came to work for the San Antonio Express-News in 1999. She writes primarily about theater – she sees around 100 shows annually -- and helps oversee the paper's coverage of the fine performing arts. Her first newspaper job was with the El Paso Herald-Post, where she worked as a general assignment reporter before becoming arts and entertainment editor. After the Herald-Post closed, she spent just over a year covering the arts for the Corpus Christi Caller-Times before coming to the Express-News. She has a degree in journalism from UT El Paso, and was a fellow in the NEA Arts Journalism Institute in Theater and Musical Theater at the University of Southern California in 2007.

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