

Mural Gracing Facade of The '68 Embraces History of Hemisfair Art

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Artist Ruben Sánchez stands in front of his nearly finished mural at The '68 in Hemisfair.

Hemisfair has a grand history of melding art and architecture as seen in a centerpiece mural by Mexican artist Juan O’Gorman gracing the upper façade of what is now the [Lila Cockrell Theatre](#), and a mosaic mural by Guatemalan artist Carlos Merida inside the Convention Center’s main entrance.

Both murals were originally commissioned for the 1968 World’s Fair. Now, the Hemisfair mural tradition continues with a new eight-story painting by Barcelona artist [Ruben Sánchez](#) on the south face of the new, aptly named “The ’68” apartment building.

The connection between past and present was deliberate, said Luis Miguel Martinez, development director for [Area Real Estate](#), developer of The ’68 in conjunction with [Lake/Flato Architects](#), the [Hemisfair Park Area Redevelopment Corporation](#) (HPARC), and [WGW Architects](#) of Houston.

“I started going back to what still is in the park that people keep looking at, over years and years and years,” Martinez said, citing the two popular murals. He initiated a search for a muralist to cover the blank gray concrete sidewall of the parking structure attached to the apartments, which overlooks the Yanaguana Garden children’s play area, the splash pad, and Commonwealth Coffee’s patio.

Martinez and David Adelman, founder of Area Real Estate, felt an international artist would best represent the history of Hemisfair. Local artists will be featured in the common areas of The ’68’s interior spaces.

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The trio of Hemisfair murals now tells a powerful story of each time and place, “what the future [holds] and what they had in mind back then,” Martinez said.

In conversations and preliminary research, Sánchez keyed on the prominent sense of community evident in San Antonio, which aligns with his main artistic theme of connectivity.

“It’s all based on human connections, and how we communicate,” Sánchez said. “How we help each other, how we fight each other, how we interact. That’s something that is hard to explain, and I find a lot of questions there ... this is not an answer, it’s just messages.”



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A detail of Ruben Sánchez's mural.

The painting, titled *CommUNITY*, employs a mix of high-key colors in figurative and abstract shapes, with a layering technique Sánchez learned from early Photoshop experiments. Limbs of multiple figures intersect in a vertical composition running up the 90-foot height of the wall, with influences of other Spanish artists such as Picasso, Juan Gris, and Joan Miró visible, particularly in the Miró-esque star form winking in the top right corner of the wall.

Of the four figures, one is reading, one pours water, one is playing guitar, and a reclining figure delicately holds a bowl of fruit. Each represents a facet of the city and Hemisfair: education and knowledge, nature and environment, culture and the visual arts, and balance.

The last facet is one of his primary questions, Sánchez said. “Can society live in balance? ... I think this is cool, to try to understand each other, and trying to find the balance.”

Martinez gave Sánchez the total artistic freedom he asks for when making work, and both are pleased with the result. Martinez appreciates how the turquoise blues, pale yellows, bold oranges, and fuchsia pink hues reflect the culture of San Antonio, and as Sánchez regarded his work from the Commonwealth patio, he said, “I’m very, very happy with this work. And it’s very rare that I’m completely happy.”



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Artist Ruben Sánchez inspects the mural.

Sánchez estimates the new mural is his “30th or 40th,” having made others in such far-flung locations as Dubai, Turkey, Greece, France, and other cities around the U.S. Still, he said he learned something new working on *CommUNITY*, a technique that allows the plain color of the bare concrete wall to come through in several places. The idea greatly complicated his painting, which has taken a few days longer than expected, but is well worth it, he said.

Friday visitors to the Hemisfair grounds just might catch a glimpse of Sánchez up in the nest of his cherry-picker, finishing the last panel of the mural on the sidewall just above the parking structure. Otherwise, as Martinez would have it, all will enjoy Sánchez’s work for generations to come.