

This October, The Bronx Museum of the Arts presents  
***Swagger and Tenderness: The South Bronx Portraits***  
by ***John Ahearn and Rigoberto Torres***



(NEW YORK, NY – AUGUST 1, 2022) – For over 40 years, Bronx-based **John Ahearn** and **Rigoberto Torres** have represented the Bronx internationally through their iconic figurative sculptures created by life-casting people in the community. From October 26, 2022 to April 30, 2023, **The Bronx Museum of the Arts** will present ***Swagger and Tenderness: The South Bronx Portraits by John Ahearn and Rigoberto Torres***, a survey exhibition foregrounding the people seen in these sculptural portraits, combining the artists' best-known works with rarely seen pieces alongside never-before-seen archival images and ephemera. This is the first exhibition to place equal weight on the presentation of both artists, and the first major survey of their work since 1991 (Contemporary Arts Museum, Houston), reuniting 65 of these artworks in the Bronx with the very people they represent. *Swagger and Tenderness* is co-organized by independent curator **Amy Rosenblum-Martín** and literary activist **Ron Kavanaugh**, alongside exhibition advisors from the community.

Working in communities historically marginalized by the artworld, John Ahearn and Rigoberto Torres intentionally collaborated with their neighbors, a process that resulted in dignified representations of people who art museums have long invisibilized or misrepresented. These depictions of their friends or people they encountered on the street were subsequently displayed in public on the very same Bronx streets—decorating apartment building facades, local offices, and commercial storefronts—as well as hung in people’s homes in the Bronx.

Unlike traditional presentations of their work in white cube galleries, *Swagger and Tenderness* takes a radically different approach to exhibition design and viewer enjoyment. Designed in collaboration with architect **Darío Nuñez-Ameni** (Acconci Studio) and Bronx-based architect **Jorge Plazas** (Sir David Adjaye’s collaborator), the Museum galleries will be transformed into elegant, cerulean blue spaces inspired by neoclassical details found in Bronx architecture and interior design. Playfully combining exterior and interior references, the architects create an immersive environment with postmodern twists that celebrate a distinctly Bronx aesthetic. The curators envision this pleasurable dreamscape representing luxury, dignity, ease, rest, and abundance as a welcoming power source for local visitors in these times of increased systemic violence toward Black and Brown communities. Seating areas with tables set up with intergenerational local games, like skelzies and dominoes, will invite the community to relax and play as part of the exhibition. The 100-page catalog will include new interviews with the artists and Bronx-based portrait sitters, poetry by Bronx authors, illustrated curatorial essays, and a graphic novel written by **Ron Kavanaugh** and illustrated by **Sole Rebel**, both Bronx natives. A series of community-focused events will take place throughout the duration of the exhibition, including an opening reception with Bronx food vendors, panel discussion, double dutch competition, salsa dance party, book discussion with Literary Freedom Project, and frequent curators’ tours for the public.

**Amy Rosenblum-Martín comments:** “These timeless artworks celebrate the swagger and tenderness of the Museum’s beautiful, innovative neighbors. There are levels of power and joy in the visibility the portrait sitters provide to the artists, and receive in return. Opacity and transparency are at play here. Through these sculptures, the people portrayed share their value with the world, not only their physical form, of course, but also their intelligence, creativity, spirit, and radical love that often go unrecognized by the artworld. With an anti-extractive spirit, Ron Kavanaugh and I aim to redirect the immense cultural capital of these sculptures back to the Bronx community that enabled their creation in the first place, while celebrating the artists’ visionary insistence on equity.”

**Ron Kavanaugh comments:** “As the only contemporary art space in the borough, The Bronx Museum has stayed committed to addressing the tension between its mission to both elevate and engage the community it serves. With the presentation of *Swagger and Tenderness: The South Bronx Portraits by John Ahearn and Rigoberto Torres*, we are dedicated to centering local residents as integral parts of the exhibition and continue to broaden access in the ways the Museum had previously with exhibitions such as *Urban Mythologies: The Bronx Represented Since the 1960s’* and *One Planet Under a Groove: Hip-Hop and Contemporary Art.*”

Since 1979, after first meeting at Fashion MODA—the legendary South Bronx storefront cultural center founded in 1978—Ahearn and Torres have made casts from resident-models in the Bronx. At the time of their meeting, seventeen-year-old Torres was working at his uncle’s statuary factory in the Bronx, the borough where the Puerto Rican artist was raised from a young age, while Ahearn, a

white man from upstate New York, aimed to earn the trust of the people in the Bronx to start a community-facing art practice there. Upon forming what would become a life-long collaboration, Torres suggested they expand their practice to specific Bronx neighborhoods where he lived. This led to the start of community casting workshops on the sidewalks of the South Bronx, and between 1981 and 1985 resulted in the creation of many portraits, public projects, and several permanent sculptural reliefs in the neighborhood, including *We Are Family* (1981-82), *Life on Dawson Street* (1982-83), *Back to School* (1985), and *Double Dutch* (1982)—a canonical work honoring four girls jumping double dutch. Drawing inspiration from these intimate collaborations with workshop participants, both artists have remained deeply committed to stewarding care and collaboration with their Bronx neighbors.

Notes Bronx-born author **Peter L'Official** in *Urban Legends* (2020), "Ahearn's ... partnership with the then seventeen-year-old high school student Torres was born out of the teen seeing Ahearn's work and recognizing a relationship with his uncle's Bronx statuary company, which produced religious figures for local botanica shops. Indeed, Ahearn's 'South Bronx Hall of Fame' show, whose audience featured many of the African American and Latinx subjects cast by the artist for his painted, lifelike *mascarilla* (or face mask) statuary, had the effect of transforming the storefront art space into a reliquary for still-living saints for all the community to see."<sup>1</sup>

This survey exhibition will feature 65 portraits from the Bronx Museum as well as other public and private collections. In addition, works from the artists' collections will be presented publicly for the first time, together with rarely seen Polaroids of South Bronx residents portrayed in the sculptures. Featuring their neighbors performing everyday activities, many portraits depict people embracing, exemplified by Ahearn's *Maria and Her Mother* (1987) and *Janelle and Audrey* (1983), two sisters with their arms held firmly around one another in statuesque togetherness; and local heroes illustrated by Torres's *Daze* (1998), a portrait of the renowned street artist Chris "Daze" Ellis, and *Ruth Fernández* (1991), a monument to the late singer-politician who remains a celebrity in the Puerto Rican community.

**Executive Director Claudio Rodriguez comments:** "The history of John Ahearn and Rigoberto Torres's practice mirrors that of The Bronx Museum, which was founded in the early 1970s at a time when New York City was in crisis. As a cultural institution dedicated to social justice, we want to dispel the myth that museums are only for certain people. Ahearn and Torres reflect our core mission through their decades-long practice that has championed our local heroes."

As always, the Museum is open to the public free of charge. *Swagger and Tenderness* extends beyond its walls with nearby public art installations by Ahearn and Torres: *Double Dutch* (1981-82), *Life on Dawson Street* (1982-83), and *Life on Fox Street* (1981). Maps are available at the museum for the public to visit these satellite exhibition sites.

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<sup>1</sup> Peter L'Official. *Urban Legends: The South Bronx in Representation and Ruin*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2020.

**Curatorial Credits:**

*Swagger and Tenderness* is organized by Amy Rosenblum-Martín and Ron Kavanaugh. Community advisors include Alveda Alston, Leenda Bonilla, Johnny Chavarria, Luís A. Pagán, and Moisés Rivera.

**Image Credit:**

John Ahearn & Rigoberto Torres, in situ photo of *Banana Kelly Double Dutch*, The Bronx, NYC, 1982. Pictured: Freeda Mincey, Javette Potts, Tawana Brown, and Staiice Seabrine. Photo © Martha Cooper.

**About The Bronx Museum of the Arts:**

The Bronx Museum is the only major contemporary art museum in NYC with free admission, making it a vital resource not just for residents in The Bronx, but thousands of residents from all five boroughs and tourists visiting annually. Now an internationally-recognized cultural destination, for the past five decades The Bronx Museum has presented hundreds of exhibitions featuring works by culturally diverse and under-represented artists. The Museum's permanent collection of 2,000+ works preserves and documents artists who are not typically represented within traditional museum collections by showcasing work by artists of African, Asian, and Latin American ancestry, as well as artists for whom the Bronx has been critical to their development. Now in its 50th year, the Bronx Museum continues to promote its mission of the arts accessible to all audiences.

Recent critically acclaimed exhibitions include *Jamel Shabazz: Eyes on the Streets* (2022); *Wardell Milan: Amerika. God Bless You If It's Good To You* (2021); *Born in Flames: Feminist Futures* (2021) Sanford Biggers: *Code Switch* (2020-2021); José Parlá: *It's Yours* (2020-2021); *The Life and Times of Alvin Baltrop* (2019-2020); *Henry Chalfant: Art vs. Transit, 1977-1987* (2019-2020); *Rochelle Feinstein: Image of an Image* (2018); *Diana Al-Hadid: Delirious Matter* (2018); *Eddie Martinez: White Outs* (2018); *Gordon Matta-Clark: Anarchitect* (2017); *Angel Otero: Elegies* (2017-2018); *Martin Wong: Human Instamatic* (2015-2016); *¡Presente! The Young Lords in New York* (2015); and *Sarah Sze: Triple Point (Planetarium)* (2014).

**VISIT THE MUSEUM:**

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