Augmenting Our Local History

Artist Ernesto Hernández debuts his augmented-reality mural *The Hands That Nurture Us* in Austin's historic Rosewood community.

By Meilee D. Bridges
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On a sweltering Thursday afternoon at the corner of Rosewood Avenue and East 11th Street in Austin, Texas, Southwestern University video coordinator and graphic designer Ernesto Hernández was sweating—literally and figuratively. He and several other members of his family were working furiously to get the LED lights functioning on a mural Hernández was minutes away from revealing to the public. Designed and proposed in 2018 and painted over the past several months, the mural was complete, but for some reason, the lights he had previously installed weren't working. At the last hour, Hernández had to rush to install and test a new set of LEDs.

It came down to the wire (and wiring), but to his great relief, Hernández finally succeeded in getting the lights to operate.

Devoting evenings, weekends, and even some late nights to the piece, Hernández completed the artwork with the help of his brother Gabriel; his sons, Rodrigo and Joaquin; his friend David Flores, a fellow artist from Juarez, Mexico; and Rosewood Restaurant co-owner Chas Spence. To celebrate their achievement, a mirthful crowd of friends, family, and Rosewood community members attended the unveiling on June 20, 2019, which was part of a fundraising event for Raasin in the Sun, a local nonprofit founded by Raasin McIntosh dedicated to serving local communities through beautification projects. Following a raffle and silent auction, the audience chanted an anticipatory countdown as the artist, his family, McIntosh, Spence, and several other participants removed the tarp to reveal the mural. The audience's whoops and "wow!"s were followed by ardent applause.

Hernández's *The Hands That Nurture Us* spans a 25' × 5' wall facing the Rosewood Restaurant, and it features a vibrant mix of colors, symbols, and black-and-white wood cut-out portraits of Thomas L. DeLashwah and Ulysses Young, two pioneering Black pharmacists who provided healthcare to East Austin community members from the 1910s to the 1970s. But what drew even more excitement from the crowd, which undulated eagerly forward to view the mural through their smartphones, is that the artwork incorporates augmented reality.
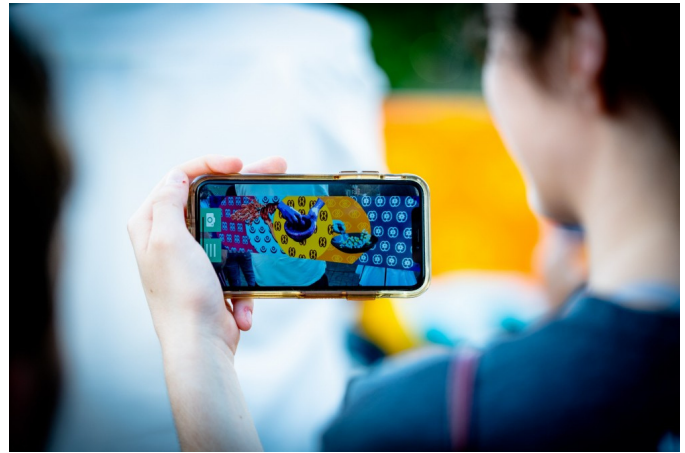
As opposed to virtual reality, which usually requires a special headset that projects images and audio that completely block out your surroundings, augmented reality simply enhances a targeted object with computer-generated elements. So by viewing Hernández's work through the app Augment El Paso, audience members could witness interactive elements seamlessly overlaying the mural, featuring pulsing animation, music, and narration that relayed information about elements of the artwork as well as historical details about Delashwah and Young.

The triumphant unveiling of the Rosewood mural is just the latest addition to Hernández's 21-year career of painting public artworks, many of which adorned spaces across the El Paso–Juarez region. A self-taught muralist, he attended the distinguished Rhode Island School of Design and the Savannah College of Art and Design, where he specialized in digital media and motion graphics but also studied furniture design, metal and wood fabrication, video and film production, art direction, and set-design installation. Given his passion for creating multimodal art and his interest in educating especially the young—he credits "having children" for understanding "how important new technology is to the next generations"—he has spent the past 10 years researching and practicing incorporating various materials and media into his murals.

Hernández's innovative approach is, understandably, in demand. This summer will also see the debut of Hernández's next augmented-reality painting: a mural honoring Richard Overton, an Austin icon who was the oldest verified World War II veteran in the U.S. until his death on December 28, 2018. That mobile installation is funded by Six Square, a local nonprofit that preserves and celebrates the cultural legacy of the African-American community in Central–East Austin. The artist will be installing the mural at the City of Austin's Box Bazaar project over the next several weeks and is looking forward to "a big unveiling and block party for the community" in coming months.

In addition, he was recently invited to be part of the Essex Modern City in San Antonio, a mixed-use urban infill project and social experiment that features enriching art enhanced by sustainable design and innovative technology. The complex contains more than 100 murals from artists around the world, and Hernández will debut another of his installations there during the second weekend in July.

He has also been commissioned by Forklift Danceworks, a local arts and storytelling collaborative that presents innovative performance projects to support diverse communities and informed civic dialogue, to create a new mural at Givens Pool. When Givens Pool was built in 1958, it was only the second pool to open in historically Black East Austin; this summer, a long-overdue renovation will close the pool and its surrounding park for three years. But Hernández, fellow artist Cindy Elizabeth, and Forklift Danceworks aim to share and celebrate the rich history of the pool and neighborhood through his augmented-reality painting, her photography, and the organization's dance and theater performance at the end of July 2019. "Segregation is still a huge issue in Austin," Hernández says. "These public works will create a bridge for the community so that they are hopeful and look forward to getting their pool back in three years."

These augmented-reality murals—not to mention the many other projects the artist has in the works—represent Hernández's commitment to fusing traditional and modern art with technology to "engage, uplift, and educate" viewers. He calls his "art + technology = education" equation Muralism 4D. And now, because of Hernández's innovative installations, East Side residents and visitors of all ages can now learn more about the local community in an interactive, engaging way—complete with fully functional LED backlighting.