

Chicago Tribune

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A charro suit stands in an exhibit on the band Mariachi Potosino and its leader José Cruz Alba at the National Museum of Mexican Art on West 19th Street in Chicago. The suit was worn by Cruz Alba. **TERRENCE ANTONIO JAMES/CHICAGO TRIBUNE**

'A lot of history for such a small space'

National Museum of Mexican Art exhibit looks at the history of Mariachi Potosino and José Cruz Alba

By Christopher Borrelli
Chicago Tribune

José Cruz Alba occupied the center oval of a very small Venn diagram: He rubbed shoulders with both Richard Nixon and the Black Panther Party, Richard J. Daley and Jane Byrne. He led a band, Mariachi Potosino, which, for more than 60 years, played every nook and cranny of Chicago and beyond. They were cultural wallpaper to some (politicians) and a source of national pride to others (the Mexican community).

They played the openings of supermarkets and the closings of supermarkets. They played the blessings of small banks and led Mexican Independence Day parades and opened political rallies and, if you had the cash, they would appear outside your window to play the Mexican

birthday song, "Las Mañanitas," in charro regalia — short coat, tight pants.

The presence of six Mexicans in embroidered suits, carrying (toy) pistols in holsters, blasting trumpets, was not always welcome in some Chicago enclaves. They would be arrested, on occasion, for disturbing the peace. Once, said Amador Alba, son of José Cruz Alba and a former member of Mariachi Potosino, they played a party on Taylor Street:

"You could say we were not welcome on Taylor Street. This was the 1960s. Six of us get out of this station wagon, wearing the hats, wearing the whole outfits, and we cross the street to play a 25th wedding anniversary. This guy comes out of his apartment and tells us to get the hell out of here, then he pulls out this gun, so I step in front of my father, and the guy fires two or three shots, and I feel a burning sensation in my groin. And we're arrested. Cops are everywhere. The guy with the gun walks off. They take us to jail. We are talking to the police for like



Maria del Rosario Lazo, queen of the Mexican Independence Day festivities, is serenaded by Mariachi Potosino band on Sept. 17, 1966, at Soldier Field in Chicago. **RAY FOSTER/CHICAGO TRIBUNE**

an hour before someone shouts, 'Amador! Your pants!' There were like cigarette burns on my clothing — because the guy shot blanks."

Amador stood in the center of a small gallery at the National Museum of Mexican Art in Pilsen. He looked around the room, filled with family photos and artifacts of Mariachi Potosino, part of an exhibition on José Cruz Alba and his band, running through early November.

"A lot of history for such a small space," he smiled.

Virginia Alba, widow of José Cruz Alba, arrived, wheeled in by family members. She is 103. She wore a long red shawl embroidered with a Virgin Mary. She stopped before a mannequin wearing her late husband's tan sombrero, his black pants, his short coat fastened with a silver clasp depicting

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'A LOVE SUPREME'

Ode to Coltrane overflows, ecstatically, into Elmhurst



"A Love Supreme," a solo exhibition by Norman Teague inspired by jazz musician John Coltrane is at the Elmhurst Art Museum. **E. JASON WAMBSGANS/CHICAGO TRIBUNE**

By Hannah Edgar
For the Chicago Tribune

Signs will tell you "A Love Supreme," running through April 28 at the Elmhurst Art Museum, is designer Norman Teague's tribute to John Coltrane. And it is: Its four rooms, brightly appointed with modernist sculptures and wall installations, each correspond to a movement in the saxophonist's 1965 magnum opus.

But more than that, "A Love Supreme" is Teague's ode to himself. Not the Norman Teague of today — 55, bespectacled and be-capped, heralded for his offbeat furniture designs and installations, and whose latest clients are the Obamas. (As we spoke, his studio was putting the final touches on benches



Norman Teague at his design studio in Chicago in 2022. **ANTONIO PEREZ/CHICAGO TRIBUNE**

to be installed at the Presidential Center.) He's thinking of the Teague of several yesterdays ago: the grade-school Teague, the little kid from Back of the Yards who would go fishing in the Sherman

Park lagoon at the crack of dawn. Or the teenage Teague, who would stay out until the same wee hours dancing at the Music Box, an early house music haven.

"He was the coolest nerd ever — fly enough to be different and be comfortable with it, but who really enjoyed school," Teague remembers.

Teague hasn't gone fishing since, and his late-night clubbing days are mostly behind him. But those memories dovetail, majestically, in "A Love Supreme," his elegant, eye-popping solo debut at the suburban art museum.

Its centerpiece, "Roundhouse" (2024), unites 120 steam-bent wooden rods in a graceful gazebo, its fanned-out shape inspired by

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Videos play in an exhibit on the band Mariachi Potosino at the National Museum of Mexican Art. **TERRENCE ANTONIO JAMES/CHICAGO TRIBUNE PHOTOS**

Mariachi

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fighting roosters — his Mariachi Potosino suit. He died in 2002, several years after suffering a stroke. Now here he was.

She cried. The family, watching her closely — she stood a little too long — they cried, too. “Beautiful,” she said softly. Mariachi Potosino were so ubiquitous around Chicago for so many decades, it was not always clear, outside Chicago’s Mexican neighborhoods, if they were appreciated, never mind understood. They played the Palmer House, Comiskey Park and the Drake Hotel. They played a JFK rally in 1960, and they played for Robert Kennedy five years later — and, eight years after that, in 1973, they played the freezing inaugural parade of Richard Nixon. They played “Las Mañanitas” outside Richard J. Daley’s Bridgeport home, a few times. They played boxing matches at the International Amphitheater (torn down in 1999) and, as Mexican Americans on the West Side were being displaced by the construction of a campus for the University of Illinois at Chicago, they led the protests.

If nothing, José Cruz Alba was politically pragmatic. “He felt he had to play a role, I think,” said Roberto Vargas, a nephew of José Cruz Alba and co-curator of the exhibit. “If you wanted to make money, get people to hire you, you know people. He became the face of mariachi here, and he knew how to use that charisma.”

By the time he died in 2002, he’d befriended several of the city’s mayors and scores of aldermen. It wasn’t a bad thing for the Mexican American community to build those ties.

“You must remember,” said Rita Arias Jirasek, historian and co-curator, “the whole notion of being Mexican American was in its nascent stages as Mariachi Potosino was coming along in the 1960s. If someone needed Mexicans, they would think of music, which didn’t have the political connections then that we might think of now. It was also (for the band) a way of underlining, ‘We are here; we live here.’ So whether it was a politician’s campaign or the opening of a store, if someone needed any notion of Mexican culture for an event, Mariachi Potosino would be asked, and they would go.

“They would not necessarily be considered professional musicians by a lot of people. But they were. They were these blue-collar men so dedicated to this that they worked very hard jobs all week long, only to reinvent themselves as mariachis on weekends.”

For 30 years, José Cruz Alba — whose widow even now gets a regular pension check because of her husband’s membership in the Local 10-208, the Chicago Federation of Musicians — moved 55-gallon chemical drums all day at a factory. Initially, he was considered bracero, part of a program that allowed Mexicans to work temporarily in the United States. He planted corn and beans on his family farm in Mexico, then traveled to South Chicago and Gary, Indiana, to work for months in steel mills, then he

returned.

He was from a small town in the state of Durango, in Western Mexico. Mariachi itself was likely born in Western Mexico, though specifics get murky. The town was so small it was mostly a telegraph office, a warehouse and a railroad station. By the time he was born in 1918, Mexicans were already leaving for the United States, fleeing the revolution. By the time Alba was an adult, mariachi itself — a rural tradition for centuries — had become an urban genre, centered around Mexico City.

So Alba played in a big band in Mexico, mostly jazz, classical. When he moved for good to Chicago in 1956, there was a band named Mariachi Jalisco. He sat in with them, but the group dissolved. In 1958, he started Mariachi Potosino with a few other immigrants from his town. “I don’t want to call it exactly a ‘side hustle,’” said Tanya Cabrera, one of Alba’s granddaughters, “but it was that, as well as a way to remind themselves of where they came from. It was their way, in a sense, of leaving while still supporting their roots.”

Mariachi Potosino — at first a novelty in Chicago, his son Amador said — created a sizable following. They appeared on local television, “Eddie Korosa’s Polka Party” and “International Cafe.” They landed a minor regional radio hit with a boletero-tinged love song, “You Will Cry, You Will Cry.” Members came and went — nearly two dozen across 61 years. But José Cruz Alba was always the director, the face.

“It was very much a job,”



A portrait by Manuel B. Alamillo of José Cruz Alba in an exhibit on the band Mariachi Potosino and its leader Cruz Alba, is on view at the National Museum of Mexican Art on West 19th Street in Chicago.

Amador recalled. “My father made sure we all arrived at the same time, so we’d get in the same station wagon. Just imagine, all the instruments, the huge hats. We seemed like the only game in town for a while, mariachi-wise. We would arrive at a quinceañera or anniversary party and play two, three hours then someone would take us aside and ask us to just keep going, and so we would.” Mariachi Potosino even played Arias Jirasek’s wedding in 1972. The guests took up a collection, paid the DJ, sent him home and hired Mariachi Potosino to play all night long.

Roberto Vargas grew up in Ignacio Allende, the same small town that José Cruz Alba had left. “I had polio, and he realized my mother was there with 10 children, as a single widow, and so he would tell her to come to Chicago, to stay with him. I didn’t have a dad and he became like a father for me, but then Allende was also so small, he became like a father figure to that entire place.” As the mariachis made money, they would send back a chunk, rebuilding church towers in Allende and even constructing a new school.

A lot of this you wouldn’t know by going to the exhibit.

It’s a small show, but an affectionate, familial one, more like a memorial.

José Cruz Alba was a musician, but also a resource for Mexicans

moving to Chicago. He pointed you in the right direction. He was loved. He offered you his own home. When she was 10, Cabrera, his granddaughter, moved in after her father died. Today, she’s assistant vice chancellor for student inclusion at UIC, focused on undocumented students. Looking at the photo in the exhibit of her grandfather protesting that very campus, she considers having a T-shirt made with the photo on the front, as a reminder.

Amador, meanwhile, sizes up his father’s suit.

He left Mariachi Potosino when he left for Vietnam. He told his father that when he got back, he wouldn’t return to the band. He wanted to start a family, go to college. His father was sad, but Amador did start a family and go to college; he’s retired now from Caterpillar. “You know, those suits were expensive. My father had them made in Mexico. When I was drafted I told him that he could just keep my suit — just give it to whomever was going to replace me in the band. And now, of course, I wish I saved everything.”

“Mariachi Potosino: The Sound of Home” runs through Nov. 10 at the National Museum of Mexican Art, 1852 W. 19th St.; admission is free, 312-738-1503, nationalmuseumofmexicanart.org

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‘Love’

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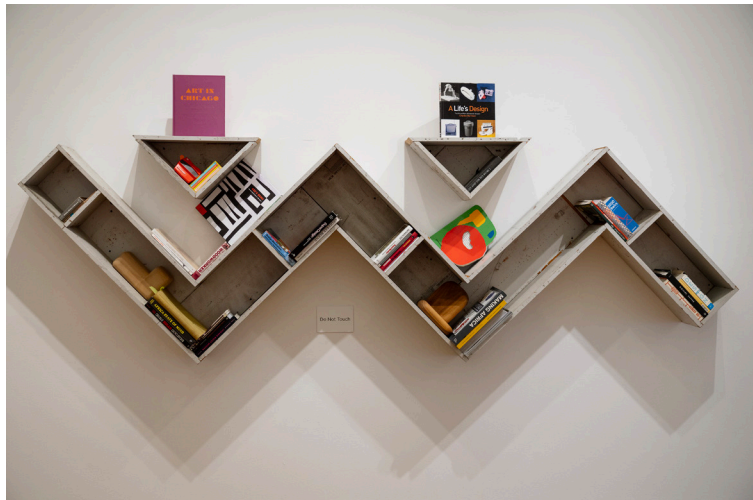
Queen Ramonda’s crown in the “Black Panther” movie. Each rod is strung with orange fishing line and fastened by a viola peg — “I’m kind of in love with the color orange,” Teague explains, grinning under the brim of a traffic-cone-hued baseball cap. If you plucked the fishing lines sequentially around “Roundhouse’s” circumference, you would hear the signature bass line kicking off Coltrane’s “A Love Supreme” — F, A-flat, F and B-flat — 30 times.

You’ll just have to trust Teague on this. A “Do Not Touch” sign wards off wannabe Jimmy Garrixons. So does the one next to “Jazz Minisita, AKA Jazz Cabinet” (2024), a speech-bubble-shaped wunderkammer encasing a pocket trumpet and euphonium. (“Jazz Minisita” is one of many bilingual Yoruba-English titles in the exhibition.) The first thing visitors see upon entering “A Love Supreme” is a set of organ pipes, salvaged from Christ Church Chicago in Woodlawn and bearing the words “CARE,” “RACE” and “ACRE” in white uppercase. They, too, are now silent, leaving visitors to imagine what they once sounded like.

When not working with instruments themselves, Teague incorporates porcelain casts of them into the small-scale sculptural works created especially for “A Love Supreme.” French horn bells are a favorite motif.

“My eagerness to use porcelain comes from its pureness. It’s this material that carries a sense of excellence; historically, it’s the stuff that you put behind the case,” he says. “These instruments, I think, also really exude preciousness — the history of jazz, the history of blues.”

As a furniture designer, Teague doesn’t usually indulge that kind of reverent distance. Older works on display unite form and function more closely, like his “Zigzag Bookshelf” (2017) and a couple of wastebaskets representing Teague’s recent forays into recycled plastic. But “A Love Supreme” comprises mostly new, purely decorative work created for the exhibition.



“Zig Zag Bookshelf,” in “A Love Supreme,” a solo exhibition by Norman Teague inspired by jazz musician John Coltrane at the Elmhurst Art Museum. **E. JASON WAMBSGANS/CHICAGO TRIBUNE PHOTOS**

“Norman is always busy. He’s got a million other things going on. But he thought this would be like the right time for him to present a new body of work,” says John McKinnon, the Elmhurst Art Museum’s executive director.

The benefit of mounting a solo show at the Elmhurst Art Museum means Teague also gets to romp in the adjoining McCormick House — one of just three residences designed by Ludwig Mies van der Rohe in 1951-1952 and owned by the museum since 1994. A sister exhibition in the house, “A Love Supreme: McCormick House Reimagined,” arranges pieces by 35 artists and designers of color in a semi-domestic staging.

“A show like this presents an opportunity for us to incorporate the McCormick House, not as a static object but as something that we can keep reinterpreting,” McKinnon says.

Teague and Milwaukee-based artist Rose Camara co-curated the show, in partnership with the Chipstone Foundation, also based in Milwaukee. Like the placards in Teague’s “A Love Supreme,” the exhibition booklet includes QR codes directing visitors to each artwork’s musical inspiration on Spotify. A secluded enclave hidden away in the back of the house — “the Listening Lounge” — offers a respite for visitors who want to take a seat (furniture in the rest of the house is for display only) and soak in some sounds.

“The biggest picture I had was

a swinging night of really great dance music inside the Mies van der Rohe house. That’s the young Norman in me,” Teague says. “I wanted to re-imagine this house from the 1950s, without any signs of Black people not being welcomed there.”

Teague and Camara’s prompt to participating artists was open-ended: “What is your Coltrane story? Who awakened you personally and artistically?” Nonetheless, a plurality still cited Coltrane as their works’ inspiration. Roger Carter’s “A Trane,” Krista Franklin’s “Psalm” and Andres L. Hernandez’s “Supreme A. (With the Love, Love) Score I and II” (all 2023) each incorporate vinyl records and “A Love Supreme’s” jacket design. Coltrane’s ballad “Naima” sparked the imaginations of artists Stephen Flemlister, Paul Branton, Suchi Reddy and Roger Noel. And multimedia artist Tony Smith contributed a photo he’d taken of saxophonist Ravi Coltrane, Coltrane’s son (“Kinda Blue,” 2010). It hangs near the front door, Coltrane’s legacy made flesh.

Teague’s own “A Love Supreme” story runs deep. He can’t exactly remember the first time he heard the album, though he’s since become struck by the parallels between his life and Coltrane’s. Both were raised in religious families. Both served in the military after high school — Coltrane in the Navy, Teague in



“Race Acre Care” is a set of organ pipes salvaged from Christ Church Chicago in Woodlawn in “A Love Supreme.”

the National Guard. Both struggled with, and overcame, drug addiction. Both became fathers.

“After partying and becoming a little more secure as a designer, in studio times, I’d find myself searching for the right song or a motivational silence. I started to look at how the two of us aligned, as Black men growing up in America and trying to pursue a creative practice. It became a theme song, almost,” Teague says. “It felt so appropriate when I thought about community, the

practice, the labor, the intellectual side of doing this kind of work together. And the love.”

“A Love Supreme: Norman Teague” and “A Love Supreme: McCormick House Reimagined” through April 28 at the Elmhurst Art Museum, 150 Cottage Hill Ave., Elmhurst; admission \$5-\$18, noon to 5 p.m. Wednesdays and Thursdays, 11 a.m. to 5 p.m. Fridays through Sundays, elmhurstartmuseum.org

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