

ALERT TOP STORY EDITOR'S PICK TOPICAL

RAM's new exhibit highlights lowrider culture

Caroline Neal Aug 3, 2024 0



Hector Salinas, Jr.'s work, titled "Money Maker," is a custom 1996 collectible aircraft pedal plane. Caroline Neal



Caroline Neal

RACINE — When René Amado was a teenager in the 1990s, he started taking point-and-shoot photos at car shows. Now, more than 20 years later, Amado's work highlighting lowrider culture is on display at the Racine Art Museum.

As of Friday, anyone walking past RAM down Fifth Street can view "Low: René Amado." The exhibit, which will be on display until July 19, 2025, features Amado's photography as well as lowrider bikes built by Amado and other builders in the Racine community.



René Amado's bike, titled "La Redención," is displayed in the windows of the Racine Art Museum. Amado says lowriders are "ever-evolving pieces." Caroline Neal

"Low: René Amado" is one of the exhibits funded by a grant RAM received from United Way of Racine County, which helps support equity-based programming.

RAM is using this grant to highlight Mexican American artists such as Amado and Milwaukee-based Nicole Acosta, whose work will be in RAM's Charles A. Wustum Museum in late August.

The idea for this exhibit stemmed from Director of Exhibitions Lena Vigna's own interest in lowriders.

"I thought those could be really interesting to have in a museum context for a variety of reasons, including that I'm just interested in how you can be creative regardless of the media you choose. So things that people don't always consider 'art,' why not?" said Vigna, citing tattoos and the hot rods her husband builds.

Despite this idea, Vigna didn't know anyone who built bikes.

After Amado received RAM's 2020-21 Emerging Artist Fellowship for his photographs showcasing car culture, Vigna asked if he was interested in creating an exhibition with his photography and lowrider bikes.

"Right away, my eyes lit up at the idea of this. I thought it was an amazing idea," Amado said.

But he recognized some potential issues: Some builders might not want to leave their bikes in a display for a year or understand the vision of the exhibit.

Francisco Rubio is an artist who understood the idea.

For Rubio, participating in this exhibit was "an opportunity for the mass public to see it" and "show the hard work and the beauty behind what Chicano culture is."

When he had all the parts, Rubio spent six hours putting together his bike; however, it took him about two years to come up with the concept and buy all the parts.

"If you ask any real lowrider, a lowrider is never finished," Amado said. "You just hit the point where it's like, 'This is good now. This is ready for me to take out and roll.' But a year from now, you're gonna want to 'Let's change this, let's change the rims, let's redo this.' They're ever-evolving pieces."

For Amado and Rubio, the bikes and vehicles go beyond being just objects. Both consider them works of art.

"These are rolling pieces of art. These are as individual as our outfits, our haircuts, as an artist's style," Amado said.



Francisco Rubio's bike, "La Trucha," is featured in RAM's new exhibit "Low: René Amado." Caroline Neal

The exhibition combines the bicycles and vehicles built by Rubio, Amado and others with Amado's photography.

Amado said when approaching the photography aspect of the exhibition, he focused on showcasing the people and personalities behind these bikes and vehicles.

"You see the vehicles, but you don't always see what goes into them. You don't always see the person with it. I think a lot of times, the people that are driving these vehicles or own them or work on them, they're looked down upon in a lot of ways," he said.

Amado said that in addition to the negative opinions of the community, he thinks people also view the vehicles in a negative light.

"To me, we could put all these shiny, beautiful art pieces in the windows, but who's the people behind them? What goes into this and where does this come from?" he said.

The exhibit also includes a video featuring interviews Amado conducted, including with a veteran of the community and a woman who models in the community.

"I wanted to also get their perspectives, because there's a lot that goes into this whole world of things that goes beyond just the shiny, pretty vehicles and not everybody sees that," Amado said.

The exhibit is featured in the window display of RAM, meaning anyone can see the works at any time.

Recognizing that some people may have negative opinions of museums, Vigna said presenting the exhibit in the window space allows the works to be "front and center" for everyone.

"Their work is included in a museum exhibition, but it's also being presented in a way where you're literally breaking down some of the walls that sometimes people have when they think about a museum," said Vigna, adding that this setup might encourage people to see art and creative expression in a less traditional way, such as bicycles.

Amado said he hopes this exhibit will inspire kids who are like him when he was 13 to "feel like they could do something as cool as this one day" and to build a bike.

He also said he wants this exhibit to encourage people already in the lowrider community to look for more opportunities to display their work, rather than just on social media.

"There's so much more. That's one of my big things. I want other people to feel like they can do more. They can go bigger. They can go higher," he said. "I want people to see this culture and see the people behind it and see what goes into it and respect it a little more than what some people do."

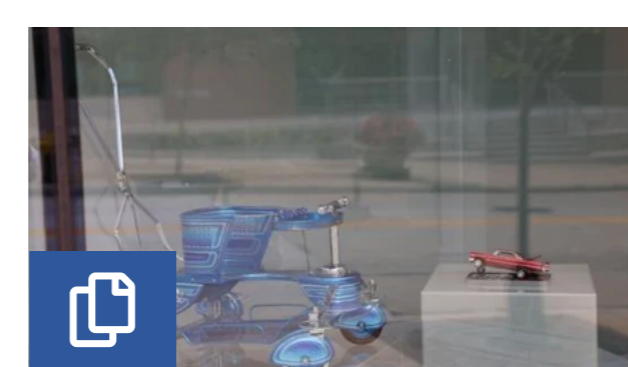
By Caroline Neal

Follow Caroline Neal

Related to this story



A 360° view of the Racine Art Museum's 2023 Peeps Art Exhibition



Low: René Amado