



Julian Moreno

Teen artist Julian Moreno, who is part of Blue Star Contemporary's Mosaic program, is working from home while the arts organization is shuttered.

By Deborah Martin
STAFF WRITER

At least two times a week for more than a year, teen artist Zeandra Menjares has spent time in the Mosaic studio at Blue Star Contemporary, honing her skills. Menjares, a junior at Harmony Science Academy, is still part of the youth arts program, which has shifted to virtual connections because of shutdown orders issued to try to stem the spread of COVID-19.

Since Blue Star closed its doors in March, Menjares and the 21 other teens in Mosaic have checked in with each other and artist-in-residence Alex Rubio in weekly sessions over Zoom. They also have received feedback from Rubio in one-on-one sessions, as well as via text, email and notes jotted onto digital images of their work.

Menjares is grateful for all of that, but it's not quite the same, she said.

"When I went to Blue Star, it was for a certain amount of time, and all we were doing was art, but when I'm at home, I start whenever, and sometimes I'll get off track," said Menjares, 17, who is working toward a career as an art teacher. "That's what was good about Blue Star — all I did was art."

Julian Moreno, who has been in the program for a year and a half, has missed the camaraderie and energy that comes from working in the same space with fellow artists.

"When we're in the studio, we have each other to kind of inspire one another," said Moreno, 18, a senior at the International School of the Americas at LEE High School. "You can see your peer working on a magnificent painting, that inspires you, and it goes back and forth, and also Rubio's there."

"Now that we're stuck at home, I think now it's even more important that we communicate — the whole community, I'm talking about — and inspire each other, because it's really easy now to lose your inspiration because you're just at home. So if we can inspire each other and keep San Antonio's art alive, I think now is the time to really push for that."

Moreno, who isn't sure what he wants to pursue professionally, believes that the folks at Blue Star have done the best job possible to re-create the program online.

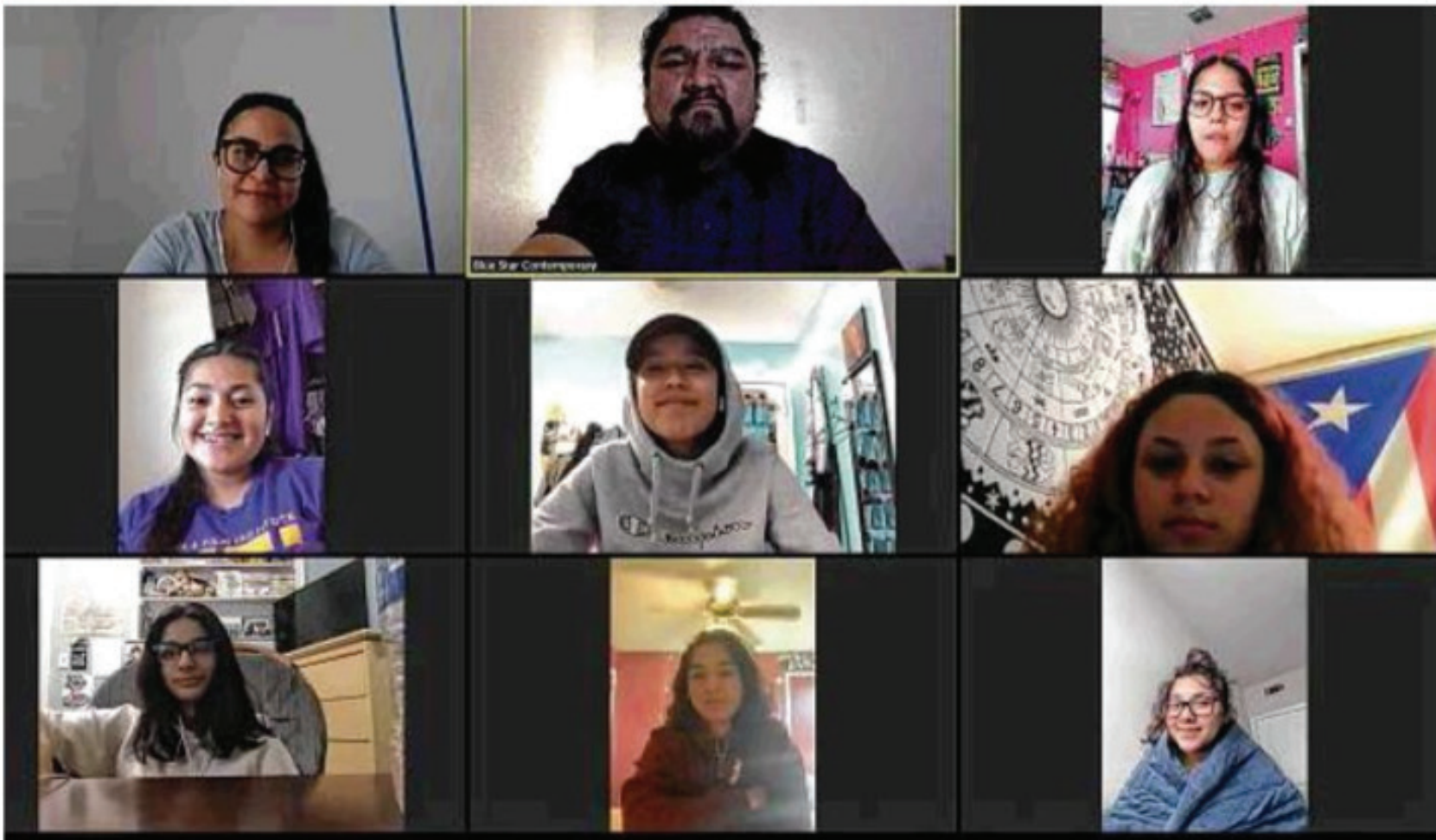
That was the goal. And, two months in, although a lot has been done, it remains a work in progress, said education manager Mari Hernández.

"I think that we're still trying to work through this process so that we can offer the students more opportunities to connect in different ways," Hernández said.

That includes a new series of virtual visits to artists' studios. The first was with Jimmy Le-

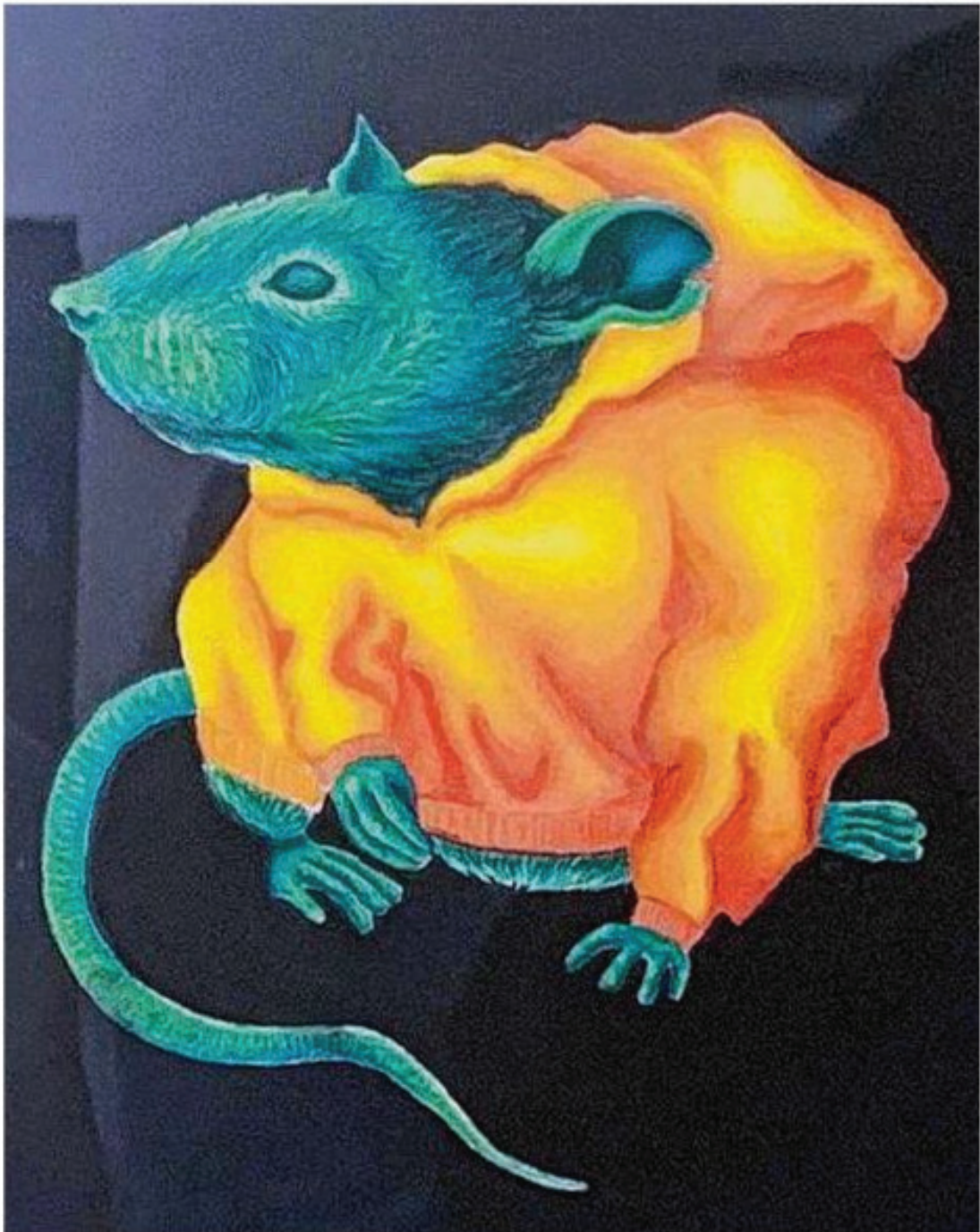
DEAR 'QUARANTINE DIARIES'

Young artists turn to Zoom to keep project going



Blue Star Contemporary

Young artists in Blue Star Contemporary's Mosaic program have been meeting over Zoom with artist-in-residence Alex Rubio, center top.



Zeandra Menjares

Teen artist Zeandra Menjares' work includes "La Rata."

Flore, who showed where he works, as well as his current series of work.

"It's made out of found materials, so the project was really relevant in terms of showing the students that they can be cre-

ative without needing to be in a studio and to have access to all different kinds of materials," Hernández said.

Finding ways to keep the program going was important, said Mary Heathcott, executive direc-



Zeandra Menjares

Menjares has been working on a piece for "The Quarantine Diaries" series exploring the isolation caused by shelter-in-place orders, which have "kind of made me almost live in my head."

tor of Blue Star Contemporary. Students are recruited in their freshman or sophomore years with the hope they'll participate all the way through graduation.

"They spend most of their year, after school and in the summer, too, here so that we really become a part of their support networks," Heathcott said. "We want to support them not only as artists but their future development as professionals and as human beings."

It isn't clear how long Mosaic will remain online, Hernández said. The organization's top priority in terms of its physical spaces is to get the galleries open to the public. Once all the complexities of doing that safely have been worked out, she said, they'll focus more energy on how to bring the Mosaic students back into the studio.

The students have continued

projects they started in the studio and also are contributing to a group series titled "The Quarantine Diaries," pieces that deal directly with what's going on now. Images of the pieces will be posted on Blue Star's social media platforms as they develop, giving the public a sense of the young artists' process. The finished works will be posted, too.

"Diaries" is a visual documentation of the students' works, their thoughts, their interests and their personal feelings during these challenging times," Rubio said.

A lot of the work deals with isolation, as well as with socio-political issues, Rubio said.

Menjares has been working on a self-portrait.

"There's kind of like a door in my head and stairs leading down," she said. "It's just kind of about how being isolated has kind of made me almost live in my head."

Moreno is in the middle of his own take on the chimera, the mythological beast with the head of a lion, the body of a goat and the tail of a serpent. He sees it as a representation of the struggle at the federal level to come up with cohesive plans to address the pandemic, something he believes has been handled much better at the local level in San Antonio. In the piece, each head represents a branch of the federal government.

"I can't even truly understand what they're doing, but it doesn't seem very like they have a plan, and each side is just butting heads," he said.

The young artists' own struggles with trying to make work in this strange time has been made a bit better by the knowledge that professional artists are having a tough time, too, something Rubio tries to convey.

"I'm always bringing up stories of how this period is affecting my work," he said. "I think that that really helps, that I'm in this with our students. I'm one of these artists that is in this place and that may have feelings of that kind of separation and isolation, and I relay stories to the students reminding them that I'm sheltering in my studio as well."

"As an artist, I have to continue to make a living, and that means creating art. I have to continue to be creative and inspired. Sometimes, these times may be affecting students very sensitively, and I think that it takes a working artist to remind the community out there that we're still here and we're still working."

Moreno and Menjares are both looking forward to returning to the Mosaic studio.

"Sometimes creating by yourself is fun, but for three months, you get lonely without that sense of community," Moreno said.

dmartin@express-news.net |
Twitter: @DeborahMartinEN