As an artist, San Antonio-based Alejandro Augustine Padilla uses painting, drawing, and sculpture as vehicles for working through anxieties over emotional and physical well being. For a young man still in his thirties, Padilla has had to grapple with more than his share of health issues. Although he does not consider himself to be bipolar, he has suffered from depression most of his life and, in 2008, his wife was diagnosed with cancer. She has since had one of her lungs removed and is currently in remission and doing well.

Although Padilla’s art and process share affinities with classic surrealism, his impetus stems from real life situations rather than from dreams. In the tradition of the Surrealists, he succeeds brilliantly at conjuring up visually engaging macabre imagery where, in Padilla’s case, beauty tends to triumph over what in lesser artistic hands might be considered shocking or abhorrent.

A number of his recent sculptures and small paintings can be viewed in the exhibition “Dreamers and Realists,” which opens Thursday, June 23 at Ruiz-Healy Art.
Padilla was introduced to surrealist art as a student at John Jay High School, where his teacher Jorge Garza showed him a book on Salvador Dali. In his earliest paintings, Padilla took up Dali’s practice of applying paint directly over paper cut-outs collaged to canvas.

In Capillaries (2000), the painted-over element depicts a man contemplating the great beyond in a manner that recalls the imagery of the 19th century German Romantic painter Caspar David Friedrich. As was common in paintings by Dali and other Surrealists such as Rene Magritte, Padilla’s figure is in a state of organic transformation, with branches growing from his back that reminded the artist of capillaries.

In paintings completed between 2001-07, Padilla’s imagery can be directly connected to his battles with depression, while his style occupies a middle ground between the rampant fluidity of Dali’s paintings and the stark stillness of those by Magritte.

For Faces of Hunger (2001), Padilla created a personal iconography to explore the subject of a child’s need for parental love and attention. The idea of a family tree is represented by collaged vintage photos of a man and a woman attached to a tree branch. Suspended curtains that look like red velvet represent his parents. The central image, female breasts that sprout tiny flowers and are attached to an umbilical cord, signifies dependence upon parental nurturing and sustenance.
In *Down the Hatch* (2006), the focus is on antidepressants, a subject that is coincidentally examined in a recent body of works by Jesse Amado, who is curator and one of the artists of the “Dreamers and Realists” exhibition. In Padilla’s painting about drug dependency, the artist’s pet puffer fish watches from above as a group of pills plummets into the wide-open mouth of a hungry shark. Symbolic references include sperm-shaped fungi that could refer to psychedelic mushrooms or some physical mutation brought on by the pills, and logograms that originated in Padilla’s automatic writings, inscribed in ribbons along the bottom and functioning as some secret code—a medical prescription perhaps?

In 2012, Padilla produced a number of monochromatic red paintings that are extremely alluring to the eyes, and which are in actuality emotional responses to his wife’s bout with cancer. Originally conceived to be painted in esh tones, the paintings in the Paroxysm series initially didn’t seem bloody enough to Padilla, so he glazed them with oils in the color of blood. Abstractions of damaged tissue and cells, the imagery refers to paroxysms, unforeseen recurrences or intensifications of a disease. At the time he painted the series, the artist’s wife had recently experienced a post-surgery pulmonary embolism, a sudden blockage of an artery that prevents oxygen from properly entering the lungs. While serving as caretaker during her recovery, Padilla was himself having episodes of depersonalization disorder, waking up in the middle of the night disoriented and confused for periods of 5-10 minutes.

In Paroxysm X (Open Sore), Padilla presents an up-close view of a bulbous tumor, enveloped by a circle of white lines representing pulsating throbs of pain.
As a counterpoint to his paintings about illness and suffering, Padilla’s painting *Nourish, Then Sustain* is about recuperation and healthy living. Painted two years after the *Paroxysm* series, the imagery is of a sexually aroused devilish monkey offering an artichoke, a symbol of good health, to a female personage whose body is made up of ripe fruit and whose breast emits a stream of milk. Padilla recalls that the idea that “even the devil gets nourished” derives from lyrics sung by the band Why?, which are: “But I’d be O.K., cool as a rail, If they just let us have health food in Hell.”

Padilla credits artist **Albert Alvarez** with influencing his decision to focus on drawing around 2014, when the two shared a studio together. Alvarez, who has received critical attention for his gritty obsessive drawings about today’s social ills, is known to spend hours immersed in the concentrated act of drawing. Working alongside Alvarez, Padilla experienced a true synergy, as well as a competitive urge to outdraw his studio mate. With his automatic drawings, Padilla does indeed prove his mastery of the spontaneous drawing practice that was codified in the 1920s by the Surrealists. As in his paintings, Padilla’s drawn imagery has less to do with dreams or fantasies than with real world problems.

In *Breeding the Swine* (2014) and *Biological Crowdsourcing* (2015), he calls attention to disease, mutation, and biotechnology by combining an array of human and animal body parts that intertwine and appear to morph from one thing to the next. The latter work is particularly haunting in the way it brings to mind the unsettling doll imagery of the Surrealist **Hans Bellmer**, as well as the decadent dancers from the Broadway musical *Cabaret*.
Equally provocative are Padilla’s drawings of human faces, in which the artist seems to have effectively conjured up the ghost of Giuseppe Arcimboldo, the 16th century Italian painter known for making portrait heads from plants, flowers, fruits, and vegetables.

In *Agoraphobia* (2014), this stylistic syntax effectively becomes a metaphor for the fear of crowds. In *Flesh Object V, Hog, Bird, Egg, Paw* (2014), Padilla’s beastly creature appears to have sprouted tumors, the only colored elements in the otherwise black-and-white drawing. Additionally, it is shown causing the death of a bird by crushing it’s neck. Padilla compares the latter feature to the *Wizard of Oz* moment where Auntie Em’s house falls on and kills the Wicked Witch of the East.

In the current exhibition at Ruiz-Healy, viewers will see the latest development in Padilla’s oeuvre, a series of small-scale found-object sculptures that use a ghoulish vernacular to muse on the meaning of life with a sardonic sense humor.

*Cu.*, for example, is a fetishistic object that resembles a gothic looking gravesite with a heart-shaped offering. Constructed from copper wire and electrical equipment and embellished with touches of copper paint, the sculpture reminds us that copper is one of the essential elements necessary for our well being, as copper deficiency can lead to a number of neurological problems.
Particularly charming, provocative, and aesthetically forceful are Padilla’s tiny figurative sculptures. For *Bye Bye Blackbird*, Padilla replaced the head from a Christ figurine with that of a bird, an homage to the Jazz musician Albert Ayler, who recorded an instrumental version of “Bye Bye Blackbird” and died of an apparent suicide in 1970. Holding a monstrous creature made of sprayed foam painted gold on its lap, this ominous looking bird/Christ figure has eyes of gold. Perhaps it is a soothsayer for our times.

Another sculpture, *Le Chocolat Assemblage*, was inspired by a photograph of the Surrealist poet Benjamin Péret swearing at a priest. In assembling together found statuettes of a Magi gure and a lamb with a bone from a dead cat, and painting them pink with black drips that simulate liquid chocolate, Padilla satirically questions the authority of organized religion. In light of the current practices of religious zealots who are dominating the news with their hateful rhetoric, this small scale sculpture strikes a timely, large-scale punch.