



Meet the man behind Yanaguana Garden's blue panther

By Deborah Martin | July 31, 2018 | Updated: July 31, 2018 10:35am

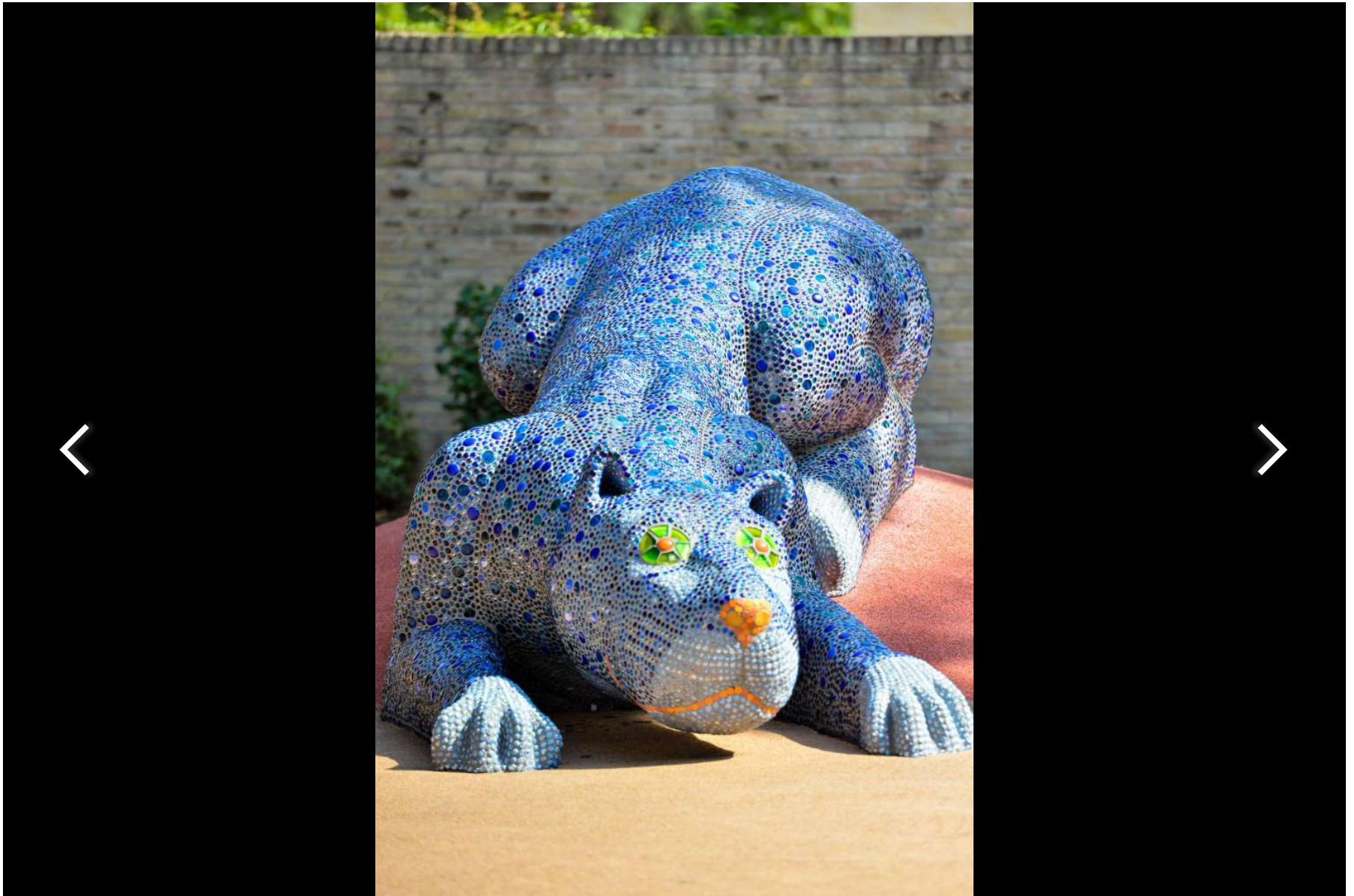


Photo: Robin Jerstad /Photo Correspondent

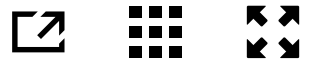


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The blue panther that artist Oscar Alvarado created for Yanaguana Garden at Hemisfair is among his best-known works.

A few years after earning a degree in business administration and finance from the University of Texas at San Antonio in 1984, Oscar Alvarado was earning big bucks as a salesman for a computer outfit in Los Angeles.

When his sales figures dipped, he said, “My boss takes me into his office and says, ‘You need to get serious about your work. You really slacked from the last month.’ He laid into me,” Alvarado, 56, recalled. “He was like, ‘Think about if this is really what you want to do with your life.’”

It wasn’t.

“The next day, I showed up - I didn’t shave, no suit. I said, ‘You know what? I’ve got this much money in the bank. I’m gonna go to Europe. I’m gonna figure it out,’” he said.

The journey included a stop in Belgium. Something clicked when he spotted some artists at work — that’s what he wanted to do. There was something about mosaic tile that had long attracted him — he had experimented with creating small works with found bits of broken tile even before he decided to switch career paths — and so that’s the medium he eventually pursued after he came home to San Antonio.

These days, his work can be found all over the city, much of it readily recognizable and highly visible. His best-known work might be the selfie catnip that is the blue panther he created for Yanaguana Garden

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Alvarado learned how to create his richly detailed work by studying art books he checked out of the library.



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“I paid more fines on the mosaic books, because I’d turn (one) in, and then I’d already need it again. Because I tried to reverse-engineer how they did it by staring at the images,” he said. “This is before we had scanners and computers and we could blow it up on our big screens. This is, I’m just staring with a magnifying glass at these mosaic images and I’m trying to figure out how it was laid out.”

He also learned by doing. His first project was a piece he talked his aunt into letting him create on the floor of her garage. His second was at the Esperanza Peace and Justice Center, where he added some mosaic elements to their bathrooms as part of a renovation.

Since then, he has focused his energies on public art projects: “I don’t show in galleries, I don’t know that game.”

“He’s really a very talented mosaic artist and he has work all over the city,” said Debbie Racca-Sittre, director of the city’s Department of Arts & Culture.

That includes a series of two-sided works at bus stops on South Zarzamora illustrating some of his own stories from 1968, when he lived in the area — one shows his parents dancing, another shows their ’57 Chevy flying toward the moon — as well as five graceful curved benches and a large piece titled “Rejuvenation” at the entrance to Elmendorf Lake Park.

Alvarado’s most recent contribution to the city’s public art landscape is “Windows to Our Heritage.” His elegant tile pieces swim, swirl and frame muralist David Blancas’ images of San Antonio people and places, illustrating neighborhood stories gathered by George Cisneros and Urban-15. The works can be seen on brightly painted pillars at the underpasses below U.S. 90 at Roosevelt, Steves, Presa and Mission.

Each of the sections is painted a different color, which was Alvarado’s suggestion, Racca-

Sittre said. The colors, she added, “coincide with the neighborhoods, and have different meanings for different entry points on the World Heritage Trail.”

The piece is part of the World Heritage Public Art Project, a collaboration between the Department of Arts & Culture, the World Heritage Office and community partners.

Alvarado’s studio is just a few yards from the Roosevelt installation, which was one reason he wanted to take part: “I told the people on the committee, ‘You gotta hire me; my studio’s right here, and I’m just gonna hate going to work every day if I don’t get this job.’”

“But also, my family has been here for 285 years. I’m a direct descendant of José Antonio Navarro. And so, I’m like, ‘I have roots here, and I have proven my ability in my medium. So just give me the opportunity to decorate my part of the city.’”

Neighbors seem to be taken with the end result: A reporter who was snapping images of the magenta pillars on Presa was encouraged by a passer-by to make sure to check out the pieces on Roosevelt, too.

“They’re very striking,” Racca-Sittre said. “They tell a story. I think they’re very interesting for the residents of that area, as well as people who might be visiting from other cities and countries.

“We’re trying to enhance the experience of folks driving from downtown or bicycling from downtown to the missions.”

Landscaping will be completed either later this year or early next year, she said.

His most recognized work may be three linked pieces — two of them incorporated into benches similar to those at Elmendorf Lake — at Yanaguana. They depict the Payaya creation story, which tells how an anhiga bird fleeing a blue panther soared high into the air and let fall a single bead of water. That drop creates the blue hole, which is the source of the San Antonio River.

In Alvarado’s work, the bird rises majestically above one of the benches, and the blue hole —

the artist's favorite part of the installation — swirls in the center of another. The panther is on its own — though often covered in youngsters who clamber all over the seemingly irresistible, larger-than-life creature.

The panther is so well-recognized that it was featured on the Hemisfair Conservancy's 2018 Fiesta Medal, wrapping one paw companionably around the Tower of the Americas.

“So many locals have a picture taken there that Oscar's work is literally the backdrop that now lives in many living rooms (in photographs),” said Andres Andjuar, CEO of the Hemisfair Park Area Redevelopment Corp. “It also gives us the wings to dream about what is possible in our future. When we see beautiful work — art or architecture, particularly — we are inspired, and those children in our community get their soul excited by this piece.”

Alvarado is between commissions right now, but that doesn't mean he's taking a break. He's spending some of his time on a long-term project inspired by an immersive art installation in Pennsylvania created by artist Isaiah Zagar over the course of more than a decade.

“I have an overall design,” Alvarado said. “It's like this stuff (at Yanaguana Garden) — it's going to be steel and concrete, covered in glass and tile.

“There's a place called Philadelphia's Magic Gardens, and the artist there went into an area where eventually they were going to put a freeway, and he stopped all that. And he started picking up tile and, in an empty lot next door, he started mosaicking all the walls. And now it's a preserved cultural place. And they teach arts to kids there, and so I'm hoping to make a statement like that.

“I'm just getting started.”

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