

San Antonio Airport Parking Garage is a Spiritual Place for this Dancer on the Summer Solstice

By Deborah Martin
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Jun. 14—Every year, dancer and choreographer Catherine Cisneros knows exactly where she will be and what she will be wearing at around 2 p.m. on the summer solstice.

At that moment, Cisneros will be dressed all in white and will be dancing inside "Passing Light," artist Christopher Janney's installation in the long-term parking garage at the San Antonio International Airport.

"Passing Light" is designed with the solstice in mind. When the sun is at its highest point of the year, light streaming through multicolored panes in the canopy on the fifth floor sinks down one wall of the stairwell and briefly align with a grid etched into the first floor below, making it look a bit like an enormous paintbox. Sound and light from 54 bollards — short posts — placed throughout the stairwell become more intense as the solstice approaches.

While all that is going on, Cisneros dances across the grid.

"The most remarkable thing about the piece is seeing how fast the Earth is spinning," said Cisneros, co-founder and artistic director of Urban-15. "You see it with your eyes. At 1:30, the color blocks are on the side. By 1:55, they're almost lined up. At 2:00 they line up. By 2:30 they're already up the wall, and you're going, no way! The Earth can't be spinning that fast!"

For the 21st year in a row, Cisneros will be back at the airport on June 21, the summer solstice, starting at 1:55 p.m. Her performance can be viewed in person — Matt Evans, arts, culture and social media manager for the airport, recommends watching from the third or fourth floor of the garage. It also can be streamed from Urban-15's Facebook (@URBAN15) and Instagram (@urban_15) pages.

Over the years, Cisneros has danced in the heat and, on occasion, in the rain. She kept doing it after a hail storm damaged some of the panels in the canopy about seven years ago, even though that dulled the visual impact and meant the alignment wasn't as precise.

Happily, "Passing Light" was restored during the pandemic, a project that included replacing the broken panels as well as speaker and light components that had become worn with age. Last year was the first time in years that the piece worked precisely as it's supposed to.

"Even for folks who were passing through here five, six, seven years ago, if they didn't see it last year, they haven't seen it restored to its initial glory," said Evans, who has worked for the airport for nearly five years. "The colors were faded, some of the glass was cracked, the audio wasn't working as it should

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"If you didn't see it last year, it's really unlike anything that's been available for the last decade."

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Janney, who is based in Massachusetts, came to last year's performance. He said the dance underscores the spiritual significance of "Passing Light." And since people can watch it in person or via a live stream, it calls attention to the installation.

"Especially with public art, it's very easy for anything in a public space to just become wallpaper. I know its there, I'm not going to go today because it's always there," he said.

The idea behind "Passing Light," which was commissioned by the city's public art program and completed in 2001, is to create a bit of peace in the busyness of the airport, Janney said. The sound and light elements work year round, though they become more intense as the summer and winter solstice and the equinoxes approach.

When the piece was installed, the paseo below the canopy was the main path people took to get to the terminals, so foot traffic was much more intense than it is now.

"The intent was, this is slow. And the algorithmically triggered audio pieces are slow, and they're peaceful, and it was set in juxtaposition to what was then a busy walkway," Evans said. "But landscapes change, cities change, and this is a victim of that, but also, maybe it's a little bit more special, now that not everybody is familiar with it."

When Cisneros first started dancing in the parking garage on the solstice, it was something she did for herself, with no intent of doing it for an audience. That changed after 9-11, she said, because security ramped up, and she had to get permission to perform there. That drew attention, and some folks make it a point to come watch in person.

This year, she will be joined by a few Urban-15 dancers. It's the first time she won't be dancing by herself, she said.

The solstice and her performance marking it have a lot of significance, she said.

"Long before there was any western European civilization in this country or in South America, the brilliant scientists and observant philosophers realized that our earth and our planets and our sun and our stars are in alignment, and they marked it, so it's a very spiritual and meaningful day," she said. "When I'm dancing, I can feel the Earth. I can feel the planets, I can feel the problems the Earth is carrying for us. It just becomes almost prayerlike or me."

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