

Cesar Martinez's Art Acquired By New York Museum of Modern Art



RICARDO ROMO, PH.D

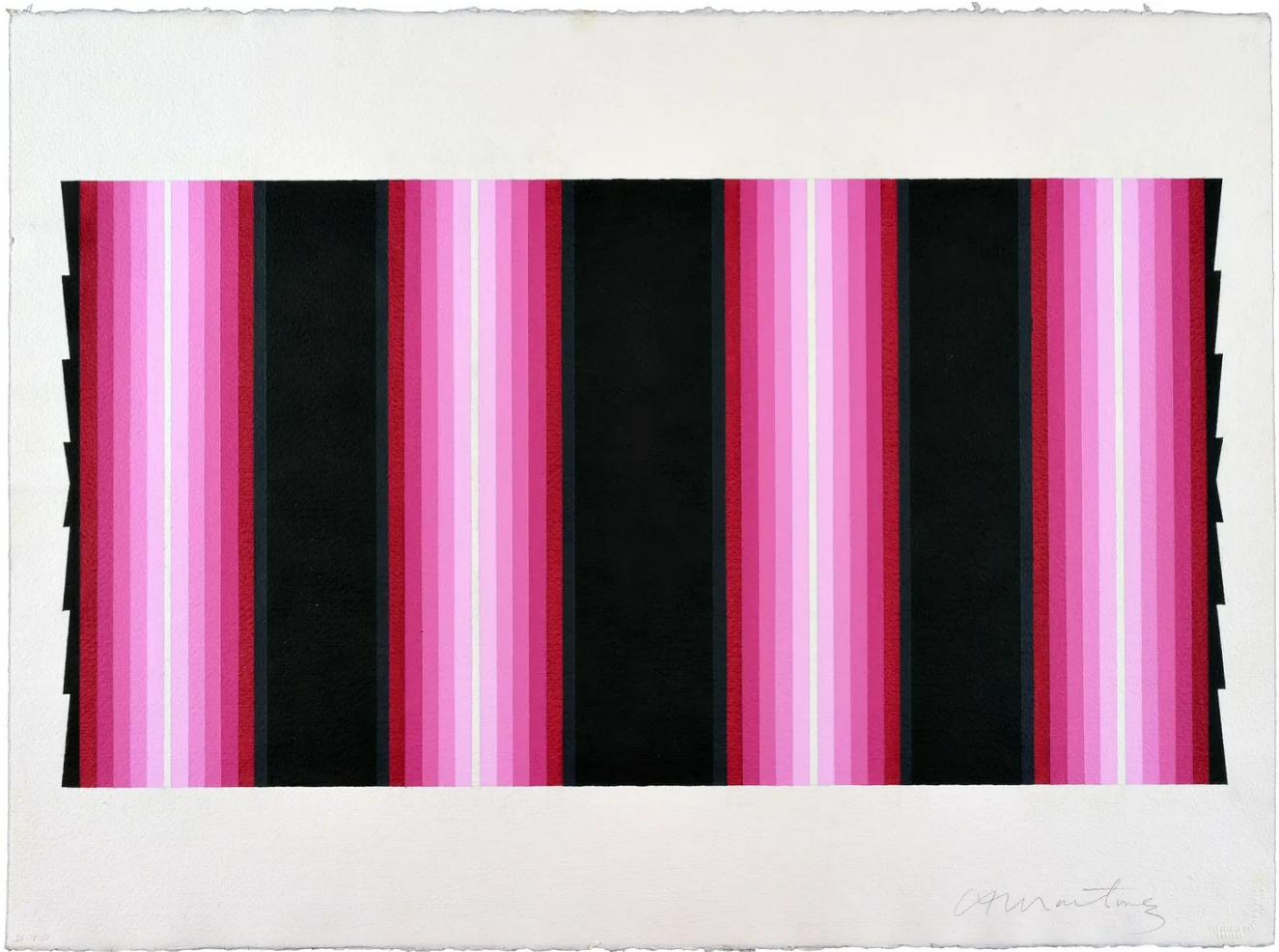
MAY 24, 2023

The prestigious Museum of Modern Art [MOMA] in New York City, in conjunction with the Ruiz-Healy Art Gallery of New York and San Antonio, recently announced the purchase of three paintings by San Antonio artist Cesar Martinez. Patricia Ruiz-Healy noted that the MOMA acquisition was made possible through the Edward John Noble Foundation. Ruiz-Healy commented that museum curators had taken an interest in Martinez's work upon seeing several of his "Serape" paintings in a November 2021 Solo Exhibit at her New York gallery.



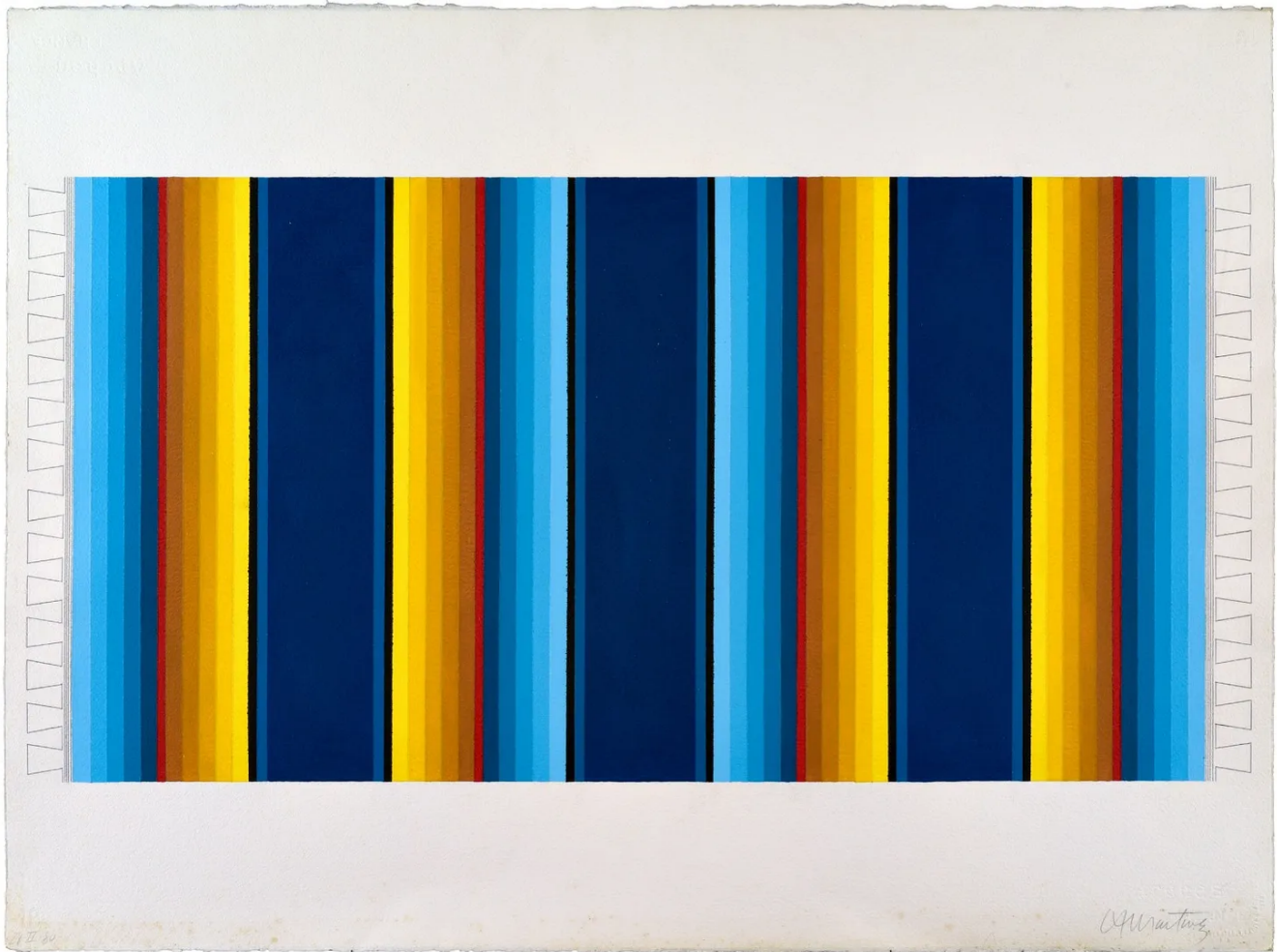
Cesar Martinez, Serape Series. Courtesy of Ruiz-Healy Galleries, New York.

There are very few Mexican American/Chicano artists included in MOMA, and perhaps Martinez is the first Chicano from Texas to join this world-class collection. Martinez has served as a cultural interpreter of the U.S.-Mexico Borderlands for over 50 years. As one of the founding members of the Chicano art movement, Martinez has consistently demonstrated creativity in painting, printing, and construction art. He draws upon historical imagery to explain cultural traditions while also developing new artistic concepts about the vast and diverse U.S.-Mexico border. Martinez's artistic efforts over the past five decades have contributed to lifting Borderland, Chicano, and Latino art to new and brilliant heights.



Cesar Martinez, Serape Series. Courtesy of Ruiz-Healy Galleries, New York.

In the Texas Borderlands there is a special meaning included in the term “El Otro Lado,” the other side of the border. Martinez’s extended family never really left Mexico emotionally or culturally. Mexico was always nearby. Although Martinez’s mother, grandmother, and an aunt and uncle came to Laredo from a Mexican ranch 60 miles south of the border, they returned to the homeland on a weekly basis. The family initially crossed into the United States when the Sabinas River near their ranch began to dry up in the late 1930s. Once in the United States, the family returned often to the ranch, and on most weekends they went shopping across the border in Nuevo Laredo, a short distance from the Martinez residence in the U.S.



Cesar Martinez, Serape Series. Courtesy of Ruiz-Healy Galleries, New York.

As a young teen, Martinez crossed the border often to watch the bullfights at the Nuevo Laredo Plaza de Toros. He loved the atmosphere filled with horses, bulls, and *matadores*. In high school, Martinez decided to become a *matador*. He notes in his website that he trained with “professional *toreros* in Nuevo Laredo, Mexico, but the ambition would never be fulfilled.” His fascination with bulls, however, never left him. Several of his paintings portray bulls as representations of the Spaniards from the “old world.” The jaguar, which is found in Mexico and South Texas, also represents the Indigenous native warrior. In a well-known self-portrait, Martinez painted his facial features divided with one-half of his features those of a jaguar and the opposite half of his face representing a bull.



Cesar Martinez, Bullfighter series. Exhibit at Galeria Sin Fronteras, Austin, 1987. Photo by Ricardo Romo.

Mexico or “El Otra Lado” may have well influenced Martinez’s appreciation of bright colors and geometric forms. Much like Rufino Tamayo’s watermelons that were influenced by Oaxacan market scenes and Francisco Toledo’s inspiration from the natural environment of the same region, the Martinez *Serape* series has the appearance of merchandise sold at the famous *Mercado Maclovio Herrera* in Nuevo Laredo (an open market that dated back to the 19th century).

The Rio Grande River is 150 miles from Martinez’s adopted home of San Antonio, so his visits across the border are less frequent. Today, Martinez must draw heavily on his memory of years past. He served in the U.S. military, documented Chicano culture and politics in photography and paintings, and contributed to an imaginative evolution in Chicano art.



Cesar Martinez in his studio, 2010. Photo by Ricardo Romo.

The U.S. Army drafted Martinez a year following his graduation from Texas A&M Kingsville in 1969 and sent him to basic training in El Paso. With the exception of two soldiers, everyone who trained with him at Basic Camp was sent to Vietnam—Martinez was one of those lucky two. The Army deployed Martinez to South Korea where he specialized in radio communication. After an 18 month tour of military duty, he set his sights on San Antonio.

Carlos Guerra, a college friend who lived in San Antonio, introduced him to local artist Jesus “Chista” Cantu. Cantu took time to connect Martinez to a cohort of artists who had recently mounted a new art movement known as Chicano Art. In the early seventies, Martinez was involved in forming the famed *Con Safos* art group. *Con Safos* is widely considered one of the first Chicano art organizations in the U.S. As the Chicano art movement grew, Martinez developed photography skills as his preferred artistic medium. In the mid-1970s, Martinez turned to painting, drawing, and construction of art from found pieces.



Cesar Martinez with new works. Photo by Ricardo Romo, May 18, 2023.

Martinez is a prime interpreter of what it means to live in a society strongly influenced by Mexican, American, and Borderland culture. His well-known paintings include portraits of South Texas faith healer Pedro Jaramillo, bullfighters, and the Virgen de Guadalupe. Art historian George Vargas wrote in his book *Contemporary Chicano Art* that Cesar Martinez also “paints funky portraits of neighborhood inhabitants, not pictures of society’s rich and elite.”

Martinez is probably best known for his “Bato” or “Pachuco” series. In the “El Pantalón Rosa” (1984) Martinez captures the essence of an iconic figure from his barrio in Laredo at a time when “Pachuquismo” was in vogue in many Borderland barrios. The community had several names for these stylish youth, including “Cholos,” “Batos,” and “Chucos.” The latter term was a shortening of “Pachuco” and seemed to originate in El Paso. Martinez explained to me that the source of many of these visual images of barrio men and women come from dusty high school yearbooks of the 1940s and 50s and even the obituary pages of his hometown Laredo.



Cesar Martinez in his home. Photo by Ricardo Romo, 2010.

In 1997, the newly established Artpace organization chose Martinez as one of their Residency Artists. He was one of the first artists awarded a residency. The Artpace newsletter noted that Martinez is “widely recognized for his figurative works, including his Bato/Pachuco/Ruca series, a group of imaginary portraits grounded in real life. His images of “Cropped, solitary sitters set against vibrant color fields gaze at us from each of these portraits.”

Martinez works with paper, canvas, wood, and metal, and although he mostly paints with oils and acrylics, he has done numerous watercolors, pastels, and ink drawings. Several of his wood construction pieces have been included in museum exhibitions in San Antonio. The University of Houston Downtown Campus recently included several of his prints and watercolors in an exhibit of Latino art.

Martinez considers himself a Chicano artist, but also a Mestizo, which is a blend of Indian and European cultures, an identity commonly accepted by many Mexicans. Several of Martinez's well-known portraits were included in the Cheech Marin *Chicano Visions* exhibition that traveled to numerous major cities in the United States a decade ago. Recently, at the request of The Smithsonian American Art Museum, my wife Harriett and I donated one of Martinez's "Blue Bato with Sunglasses" lithographs for their Latino print collection.



Cesar Martinez with *La Malinche* drawing. Photo by Ricardo Romo, May 18, 2023.

Martinez's solo exhibition at the McNay Art Museum of San Antonio in 1999 was the first ever solo exhibit by a Latino at that museum. He was included in *Chicano Art: Resistance and Affirmation, 1965-1985* [CARA] organized by the Smithsonian Institute, and in *Hispanic Art in the United States*, an exhibition at The Museum of Fine Arts, Houston. He has also shown his work at the Mexican Fine Arts Museum, Chicago; Museo de Arte Moderno, Mexico City; and the Contemporary Arts Museum, Houston. "Blue Bato with Sunglasses," a work on paper completed by Martinez in 1985 [printed by UT Austin art professor Ken Hale] is currently on exhibit at the Delaware Art Museum in Wilmington, Delaware as part of the traveling exhibit *Estampas de La Raza/Prints for the People: The Romo Collection*, which will open at the Crocker Art Museum in Sacramento on June 25, 2023, and will go on to the Oglethorpe University Museum of Art in Atlanta, Georgia on November 1, 2023.
