

ARTS & ENTERTAINMENT

Chicano art pioneer Cesar A. Martínez showing new work at Ruiz-Healy

By **Deborah Martin**, Staff writer

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Artist César A. Martínez stands in front of his artwork, including drawings and a multi-media piece, at Ruiz-Healy Art. The work is part of César A. Martínez: Smoke & Mirrors," which is on view until Nov. 30, 2024.

Sam Owens/San Antonio Express-News

César A. Martínez says he does not have a natural ability as an artist.

"I was never a prodigy or anything. I liked to paint and draw when I was a kid, but was I good at it? No," said Martínez, 80. "So I've had to invent for myself my own version of talent. What I have always had, the thing that made me say, 'I think I can do it,' is that I had good ideas, I think."

He continues to have those good ideas.

“César A. Martínez: Smoke and Mirrors,” a powerful exhibition on display through Nov. 30 at [Ruiz-Healy Art](#), includes several new works. One corner features a handful of striking large-scale new additions to his Pachucho series. The portraits are inspired by real-life people he has encountered as well as photographs he’s collected from obituaries in the Express-News, yearbooks and other sources.

“I like the older guys, you know, jowly, because I remember them,” he said. “They look kind of sinister, but they were not sinister people. I used to judge people by appearances but I learned my lesson. I don’t do that any more.”

The show also includes pieces from his South Texas, Mestizo and Serape series. Older works include the 1980 abstract painting “Papalote”; the 1992 mixed-media work “The Scream in South Texas: La llorona”; and the shimmering 2013 gold collage “Cabeza de Vaca Stele.”



Artist César A. Martínez sits inside Ruiz-Healy Art gallery in front of two of his latest paintings. They are part of the new exhibit "César A. Martínez: Smoke and Mirrors," which is on view through Nov. 30.
Sam Owens/San Antonio Express-News

"That's what strikes me the most," said gallery owner Patricia Ruiz-Healy, who has worked formally with Martínez for about 10 years. "It's two columns of his career, the portraits and the more abstract works."

The way the works are hung in the exhibit encourages viewers to compare and contrast those approaches, she noted.

Ruiz-Healy also has shown Martínez's work at her New York gallery, which sold three of his Serape paintings to the Museum of Modern Art last year.

His work also is in the collections of the Whitney Museum of American Art, Smithsonian American Art Museum and the San Antonio Museum of Art.

The McNay Art Museum has a lot of his work in its collection, too, which is particularly meaningful, Martínez said, because it was the first museum he ever visited.

A table in the middle of Ruiz-Healy Art is covered with catalogs and other books that feature his work.

He was one of the founders of the Chicano art movement and has had solo exhibitions across the country. His work also has been included in several seminal exhibitions, including “Dale Gas: Chicano Art of Texas,” the first major museum exhibit of Chicano art in the state, which was exhibited at the Contemporary Arts

Museum in Houston in 1977; and “Chicano Visions: American Painters on the Verge,” a massive survey drawn from the collection of Cheech Marin

Santos Martinez Jr., who curated “Dale Gas,” has written an essay about Martínez’s work that will be included in an exhibition catalog Ruiz-Healy is publishing.

When the artist looks at his older work, he zeroes in on how much he has evolved. He is much more precise now, he said. Small imperfections that he let go when he was younger because he saw them as part of the process he now makes it a point to fix.

“For somebody as old as I am, I think it’s hard to keep everything fresh,” he said, noting that’s something he has always put at the forefront of his work. “I’m kind of glad that I was never fixated on one particular thing.

"I can name a whole bunch of artists, my peers, who are amazing painters. If I had been an amazing painter, maybe I would be doing just painting. But over the years, I've done construction and paintings, And then there's the drawing, which is totally hands-on. You're responsible for every mark. That's what's scary about it."

The Ruiz-Healy exhibit includes a handful of recent graphite drawings. Drawing is part of his process, but he never concentrated on it as an art form in itself.

“When you are a friend of Luis Jiménez, you are afraid of drawing,” he said with a chuckle. “He was amazing.”

In 2019, he said, he decided to confront his fear. He also studied some of Jiménez' work to try to figure out how his late friend did what he did. “It doesn’t seem like he erased,” he said. “He would be refining and refining and refining and refining — that’s why there’s a lot of lines. But that gave it a dynamic quality. My work is not dynamic, it’s not meant to be. It’s very deadpan. But regardless, drawing is drawing. And so, the drawings that I do, I do erase. But that’s my way.”

As he’s gotten older, he has felt an urgency driving him in the studio.

“I have been working very consciously with legacy in mind because you never know when I’m going to go,” he said. “At my age, it has become important. I’ve come to realize that I’ve accomplished a lot. I have been taken into consideration by people who like art.

“I think I am in my best moment right now because I’ve always been evolving and learning new techniques.”

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