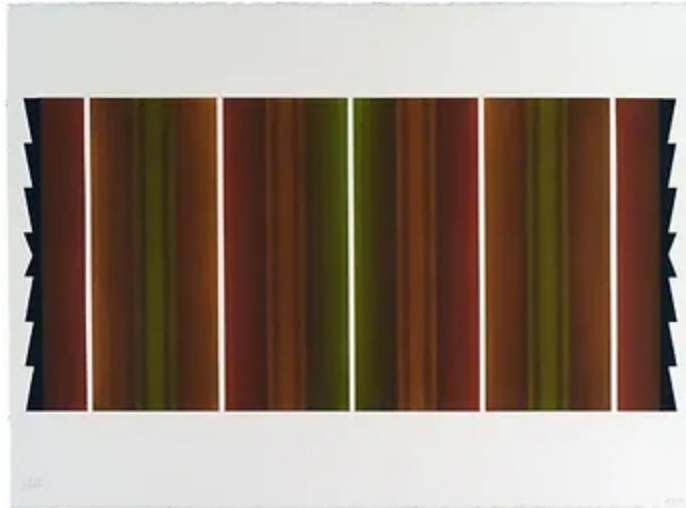


Review of “César A. Martínez: Smoke and Mirrors”

César A. Martínez has been a staple in the San Antonio art scene for decades. His current solo exhibition at Ruiz-Healy Art, *César A. Martínez: Smoke and Mirrors*, marks his third solo show at the gallery. My archival research with the Museum of Fine Arts-Houston in Spring and Summer 2024 included finding several documents on Martínez’s art. And thus, I was ecstatic to be invited by the gallery owner, Dr. Patricia Ruiz-Healy, to see the show in person. Martínez was brought up in Laredo, Texas, which is an overwhelmingly Mexican American community. He is the first American-born member of his immediate family. The artist came of adult age during the Chicano Movement of the 1960s, where numerous politically-engaged Mexican Americans protested against unfair treatment of their communities. His artwork, however, steps away from the overt political activism of the Chicano art found in California that focused on appropriation and reclamation of indigenous Mexican heritage. Instead, Martínez’s artwork reflects the Chicano experience and dynamic nature of life along the Texas-Mexico border.



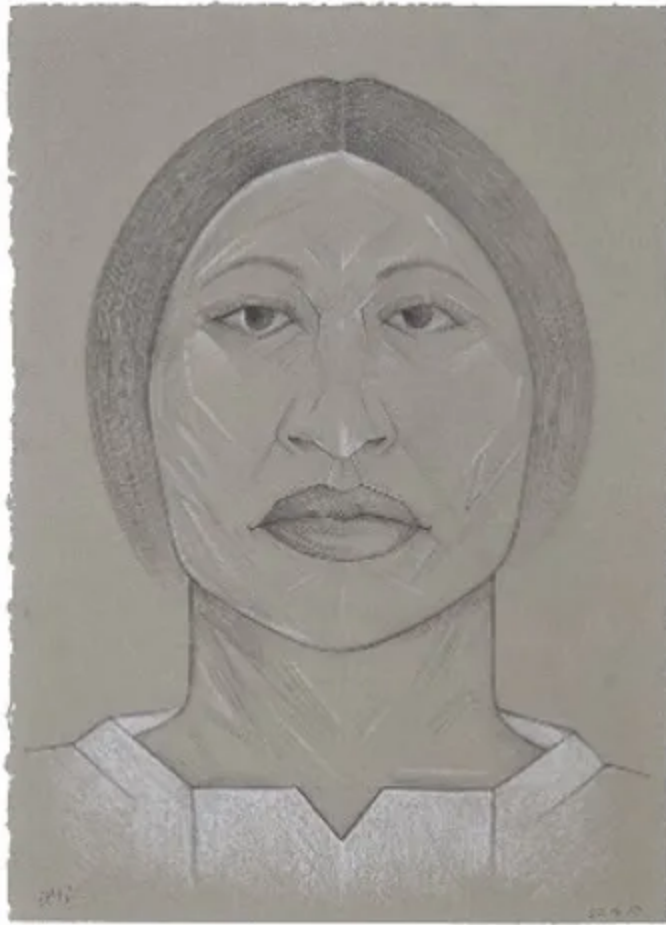
César A. Martínez, “Serape: Pirulí 28 IX 23 (2),” 2023, Signed lower left, dated lower right, Acrylic on Arches watercolor paper, 22.5 x 30 in. Courtesy the artist & Ruiz-Healy Art, New York | San Antonio.

Martínez’s serape-inspired paintings include patterns typical of the fabrics. Serapes (also called sarapes) are textiles with different possible origins that one can wear or even use as a blanket. Although their origins are disputed, serapes are especially popular in northern Mexico and among Native American communities in the U.S. Southwest, such as the Navajo. To create these pieces, Martínez uses tape to paint clean lines of juxtaposing colors. This process allows him to achieve the precise geometric patterns characteristic of traditional serapes.



César A. Martínez, "Bato Con Raincoat," 2024, Signed top left, signed, titled, dated and stamped on the reverse, Acrylic on canvas, 44 x 40 in, 111.8 x 101.6 cm. Courtesy the artist & Ruiz-Healy Art, New York | San Antonio.

Martínez receives much acclaim for his bato/pachuco portraits, such as *Bato Con Raincoat*. This piece is one of many representations of Mexican American men in his oeuvre. These portraits are composites of Chicanos created from the artist's recollections of people he has met and from blending figures found in magazines and his high school yearbook. The result of this internal and external search for imagery is a series of depictions that feel uniquely familiar to any Mexican American from the barrios.



César A. Martínez, “Malintzin Reimagined, 22 VIII 24, 2024,” Signed lower left, dated lower right, Graphite and chalk on Stonehenge paper, 15 x 11 in, 38.1 x 27.9 cm. Courtesy the artist & Ruiz-Healy Art, New York | San Antonio.

Martínez also explores other figures in the Chicano psyche, such as Malintzin, or La Malinche, a historical figure who translated for Hernán Cortés. While some view her as a survivor who adapted to her circumstances, others see her as a traitor to the indigenous Mexican people. Martínez lends Malintzin his characteristic style, giving her features reminiscent of the Olmec Colossal heads of pre-Columbian Mexico. The artist presents her with agency. Malintzin’s presence overwhelms the composition, as she takes up the majority of the sketches’ space. The icon stares directly at the viewer in this portrait.

Overall, *Smoke & Mirrors* presents Martínez’s deep appreciation for the Texas-Mexico border experience. Seeing this work in person serves as a powerful reminder of the strength and resilience of Mexican Americans. I encourage anyone in San Antonio to see this show and support such a talented and generous artist.

César A. Martínez: Smoke & Mirrors is on view at Ruiz-Healy Art gallery until November 30th, 2024.