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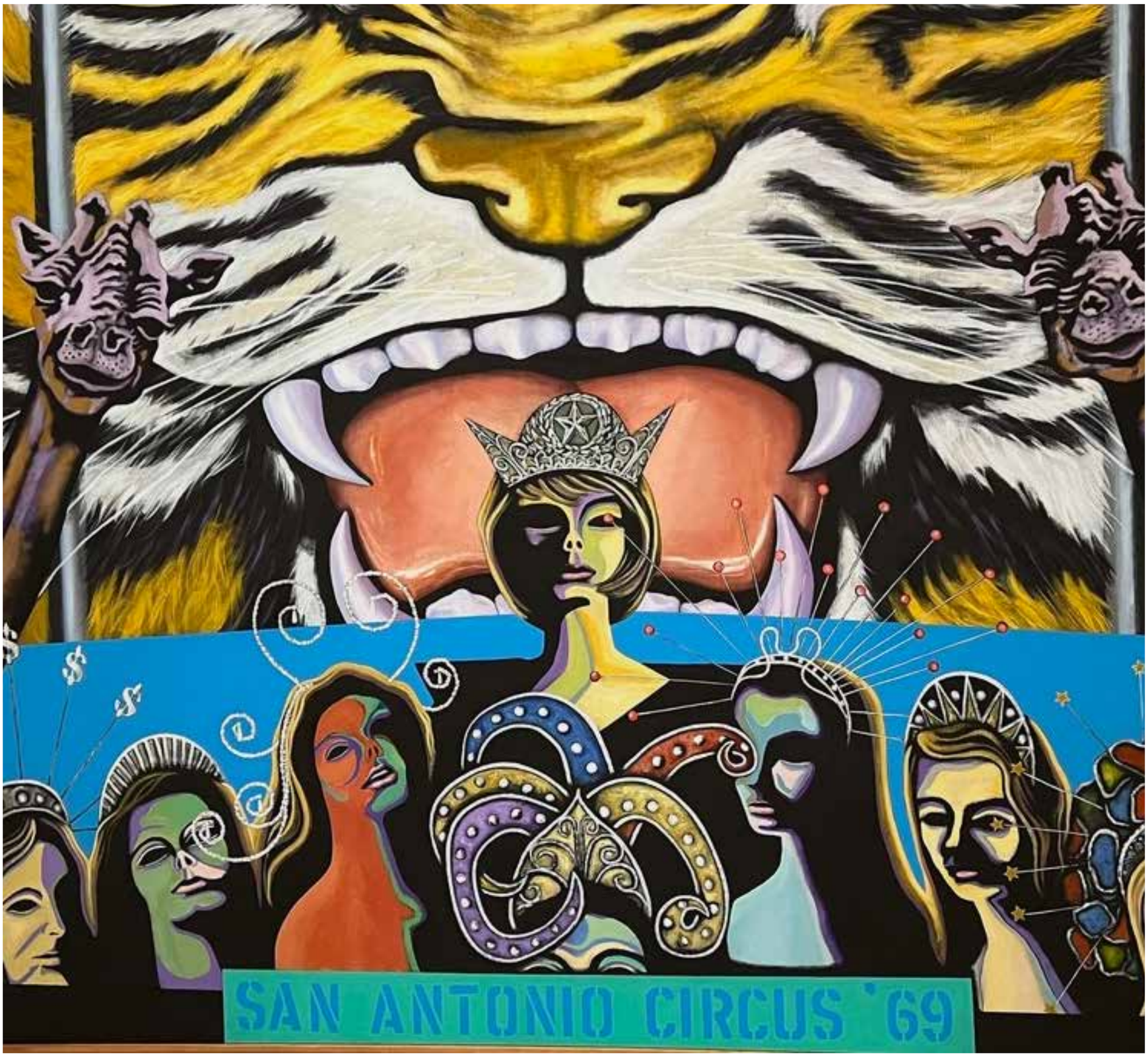


About the Cover Artist: Mel Casas

By Dr Ricardo Romo

Special Thanks to Patricia Ruiz Healy for the Cover Art

Mel Casas (1929–2014), a pioneering Chicano artist and influential educator, was born in El Paso's Segundo Barrio during the Great Depression. Raised in the city's poorest neighborhood, Casas began drawing as a teenager while attending El Paso High School. Although the school offered strong academics, he encountered discrimination because of his accent and skin color—an experience that shaped his later critiques of cultural identity, race, and representation in the United States.

After high school, Casas took a job with the Pacific Fruit Express railroad before being drafted into the U.S. Army in 1950. He served in the Korean War, where he was wounded in combat and awarded the Purple Heart. Returning to El Paso, he used his G.I. Bill benefits to attend Texas Western College (now the University of Texas at El Paso), completing his bachelor's degree before pursuing graduate studies in Mexico. He earned his MFA from the University of the Americas in Mexico City in 1958.

Casas began his teaching career at El Paso's Bowie High School, where he mentored students including Gaspar Enriquez, who went on to become a prominent Chicano artist. In 1961 Casas accepted a teaching position at San Antonio College, where he remained for more than fifty years. While he initially worked in abstract expressionism, by 1965 he shifted direction and embarked on his celebrated Humanscapes series. Over the next two decades, Casas produced 150 large-scale works, roughly six by eight feet, along with hundreds of additional paintings characterized by wit, cinematic imagery, and sharp cultural commentary.

The Humanscapes challenged viewers to recognize how media, particularly film and advertising, shaped ideals of beauty, sexuality, and race. Many canvases featured the white female figure—the "Barbie Doll Ideal"—as a critique of American popular culture's narrow representations of gender and race. His biting social observations, often conveyed with humor, became a hallmark of his work.

During this period, Casas also played a central role in the emerging Chicano art movement. He was a founding member of the San Antonio collective Con Safo, active in the late 1960s and early 1970s. The group sought to assert the legitimacy of Chicano art as a distinct form of American art rooted in community struggles and cultural identity. Con Safo gave Chicano artists visibility in an art world that had excluded them, while also promoting social justice through visual expression.

Casas's influence extended far beyond his paintings. As a teacher, he shaped generations of artists and inspired wider recognition for Latino art. His career as both artist and educator was marked by a commitment to questioning cultural assumptions, elevating underrepresented voices, and placing Chicano experience at the center of American art history.

By the time of his death in 2014, Casas had created more than 750 works and was recognized as one of the preeminent voices of Chicano art. His legacy continues through his art, his students, and the movement he helped define.

Mel Casas Challenged Latino Stereotypes and Promoted Chicano Art

Mel Casas, "Texas Fantasy" and "Texano." Photo by Ricardo Romo.

Mel Casas, "Brownies of the Southwest." [Humanscape #62]. Photo by Ricardo Romo.

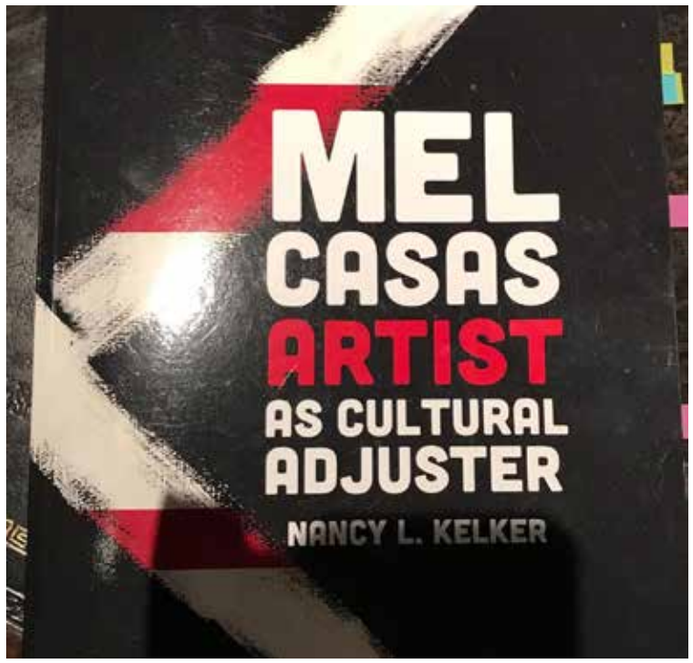
By Dr. Ricardo Romo

Mel Casas, a native of El Paso, moved to San Antonio in 1961 to teach art at San Antonio College. Over the next fifty years, Casas established himself as one of the nation's preeminent Chicano artists. His celebrated "Humanscapes" series, which spans 150 works produced between 1965 and 1989 and an additional 600 paintings, is remarkable in its complexities, wit, and incisive cultural examination. He was also a prominent educator and a key figure in the Chicano art movement, as well as a founding member of the artist collective Con Safo, which advocated for visibility and empowerment for Chicano artists during the late 1960s and early 1970s.

Casas was born during the start of the Great Depression in 1929 in Segundo Barrio, blocks away from the Rio Grande and El Paso's poorest neighborhood. He began drawing as a young teen and attended El Paso High School, a predominantly Anglo school. It was in high school that he first experienced discrimination based on his skin color and Spanish accent. Although he had access to excellent academic programs, these formative years were marked by social exclusion and discrimination, which later influenced his critical perspective on cultural identity and social justice.

Following high school graduation, he worked for the Pacific Fruit Express, a railroad company, as an iceman. In 1950, at the age of 21, he was drafted by the U.S. Army and fought in the Korean War. He was wounded in battle and was awarded a Purple Heart for bravery. He returned to El Paso and used his G.I. Benefits to enroll at Texas Western [now known as UT El Paso]. After earning his Bachelor's degree, Casas enrolled in graduate school in Mexico and received an MFA from the University of the Americas in Mexico City in 1958.

When Casas returned to El Paso after graduate school in Mexico City, he found a job teaching art at El Paso's Bowie High School. One of his prized students was Gaspar Enriquez, now a prominent Latino artist who also grew up in El Paso's Segundo Barrio and attended UT El Paso. Enriquez followed



Mel Casas, "Humans" [Humanscape Series]. Photo by Ricardo Romo.

Casas to teach art at Bowie High School, where he remained for 33 years. Enriquez now lives and paints in San Elizario, Texas, a historic town just southeast of El Paso, plays a prominent role in the El Paso art community, and exhibits his own work in his gallery. Casas taught high school for a short period, but left El Paso for a college teaching post in San Antonio in 1961.

Casas, who died in 2014, is one of the pioneering artists credited with the early creation and subsequent evolution of Chicano art. While producing his own work and teaching at San Antonio College in the early 1970s, he was also instrumental in founding the art collective Con Safos. During

Mel Casas, Left. [Humanscape Series]. From a donation by Harriett and Ricardo Romo to the McNay Museum of Art. Photo by Ricardo Romo.

Mel Casas, "Bird Watching Art." [Humanscape Series]. Photo by Ricardo Romo.

this time, several Chicano artists from South Texas and San Antonio began reflecting on how their art differed from the artistic styles they had studied in college. The group recognized the need to name the art they were creating, as it represented a new form of American art. They chose to call it Chicano Art. This era signified a new Latino art focused on social justice issues. They created murals that told community stories and images that often included references to indigenous heritage.

In the early 1960s, while teaching art classes at San Antonio College, Casas focused largely on abstract expressionism. In 1965, however, he began his Humanscape series, a shift that Smithsonian Curator for Latino Art E. Carmen Ramos suggested "coincided with his interest in psychology and popular media culture, especially film." The Humanscape paintings were large (roughly 6 x 8 feet) and often included cinematic images.

Ramos noted that initially the series "explored how the media shapes our standards of beauty and sexual desires." In many of these Casas paintings, Ramos noted, the white female figure is prevalent, or what he calls the "Barbie Doll Ideal." Art critics, including Ramos, suggested that Casas was interested in elevating race as a dominant component in American popular culture.

In Casas's best-known painting of the series, "Brownies of the Southwest" [1970], he delivers an incisive satirical critique of how Mexican American and Indigenous cultures were trivialized in American mass media and advertising during the mid-20th century. Carlos Jackson, art history professor, described the painting, which was included in a Patricia Ruiz-Healy Gallery catalogue, as addressing "Chicanos' relations to U.S. culture (a young Chicana eating brownies and participating in the Girl Scouts), Chicano political identity (becoming a Brown Beret), and Chicano historical identity (acknowledging Mexican and indigenous roots). Additionally, the painting relates Chicano art to the wave of U.S. pop art."

The Smithsonian American Art Museum [SAAM] purchased Casas's "Brownies of the Southwest" Humanscape 62 in 2012. The curators described the work as a satire related to the "trivialization of Mexican and Indigenous cultures in American mass media and advertising." The visual images are all set on a large canvas. The iconography is a reference, according to SAAM, to "brownness" and Mesoamerican heritage."

Casas also wanted to address the issue of the stereotyping of Latinos by the media. He was quietly involved in the campaign to eradicate the Frito Bandito TV ad, which, according to SAAM curators, was "the sombrero-totting stereotypical mascot for Frito-Lay corn chips." Casas, Ramos explained, created "Brownies of the Southwest" amidst this debate "to both

Mel Casas, "Kitchen Spanish." [Humanscape Series]. Photo by Ricardo Romo.

document the Frito Bandito's existence and embody the public outrage around it." Ultimately, community efforts were successful. In 1971, Frito-Lay retired the Frito Bandito.

At the time he created "Brownies of the Southwest," Casas was deeply immersed in his Humanscape series. The large central image in each Humanscape painting—Casas numbered the paintings in the series consecutively—suggests a TV or movie screen populated with everyday life imagery. It should be noted that only a small number of his Humanescape paintings dealt with Chicano topics.

Casas's "Kitchen Spanish" is perhaps one of the other better-known pieces from the Humanscape series. Over the past fifty years, a steady flow of workers from Mexico has come to the U.S. to labor on American farms, in industries, and in homes. Household workers are prevalent in Texas, and Casas did not miss the opportunity to make a social comment about their employment in many middle and upper-class homes as well as in many restaurant kitchens.

Many Latina household workers clean homes, care for children, and cook for employers who do not speak Spanish. The language barrier is often an issue, as most recent immigrants are not fluent in English. Thus, employers attempt to learn a few words in Spanish to communicate to the workers what needs to be done. What makes "Kitchen Spanish" unusual—and perhaps reveals Casas's unique brand of satire—is the way the housekeeper expresses the Spanish words in the painting. Is the housekeeper teaching the family Spanish? It seems so, but she must essentially say "Sí" (yes) to everyone: the children, the woman who hired her, and even the dog and cat. She is responsible for serving everyone.

"Kitchen Spanish" reminds viewers that Texas, like many other states, relies heavily on Mexican workers, many of whom are undocumented. These workers are responsible for numerous unpleasant and dirty chores that homeowners would rather avoid. This is a timeless theme about labor and those who perform it, one that resonates even more strongly today, given ongoing debates about immigration, who should do what work, and the current construction of a border wall between the U.S. and Mexico. The artwork of Mel Casas enhances an understanding of Latino culture and also addresses the pressing political issues of our time.