

ART

In San Antonio, a Chicano Painter Who Paired Pop Art with Pointed Politics

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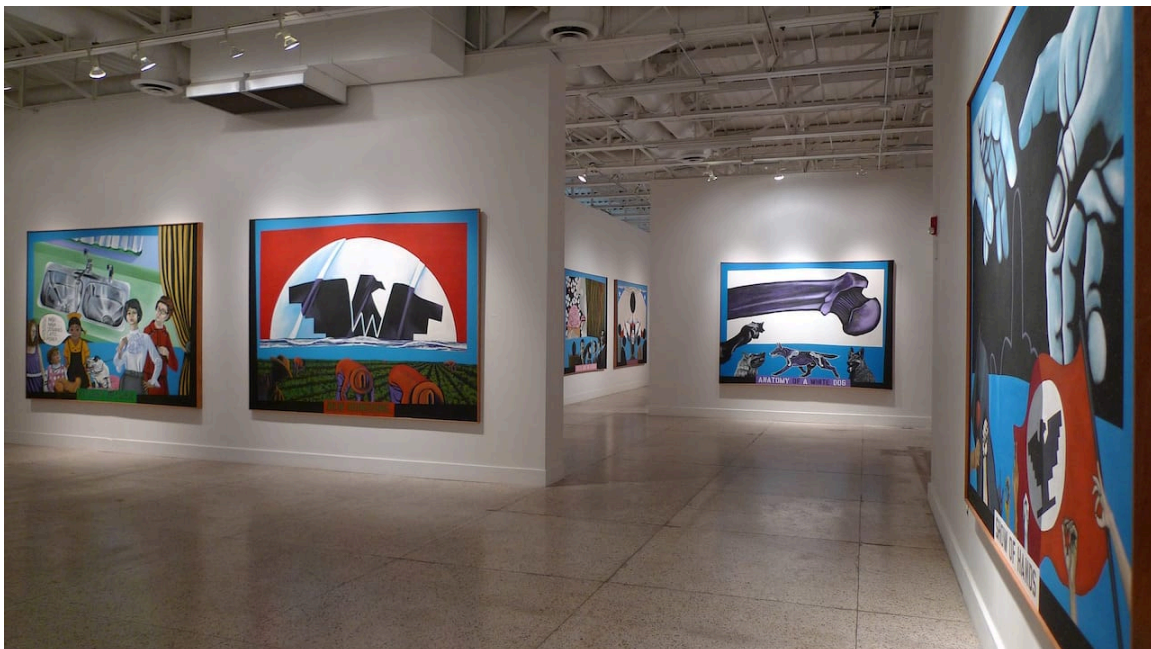
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Mel Casas, "Humanscape 47 (Still Life)" (1968), 72" x 96", acrylic/canvas (images courtesy of the Casas family unless noted)

SAN ANTONIO, Texas — Over the course of 20 years, Mel Casas (1929–2014) painted 150 *Humanscapes*, massive compositions that evoke drive-in movie theaters, Western landscape painting, and classical still lifes. While the San Antonio–based Chicano painter and cofounder of the Con Safos group was highly regarded by local artists, he was relatively underrecognized by art institutions. Although he was included in the 1975 Whitney Biennial, followed by a 1976 solo exhibition at the Contemporary Arts Museum Houston, during his lifetime Casas never had a major retrospective in San Antonio or anywhere else. By the end of his career he had become somewhat disillusioned with the art world, leaving behind five decades of work that was infrequently seen by the public. The majority of his paintings remain in his family's collection, with a few notable exceptions having gone to the Smithsonian American Art Museum and the San Antonio Museum of Art. This summer, curator and art historian Ruben Cordova organized an unprecedented four-part exhibition of Casas's work, *Humanscape*, illustrating the singularity of the *Humanscapes* series and asserting Casas's critical role as a Chicano Pop artist.

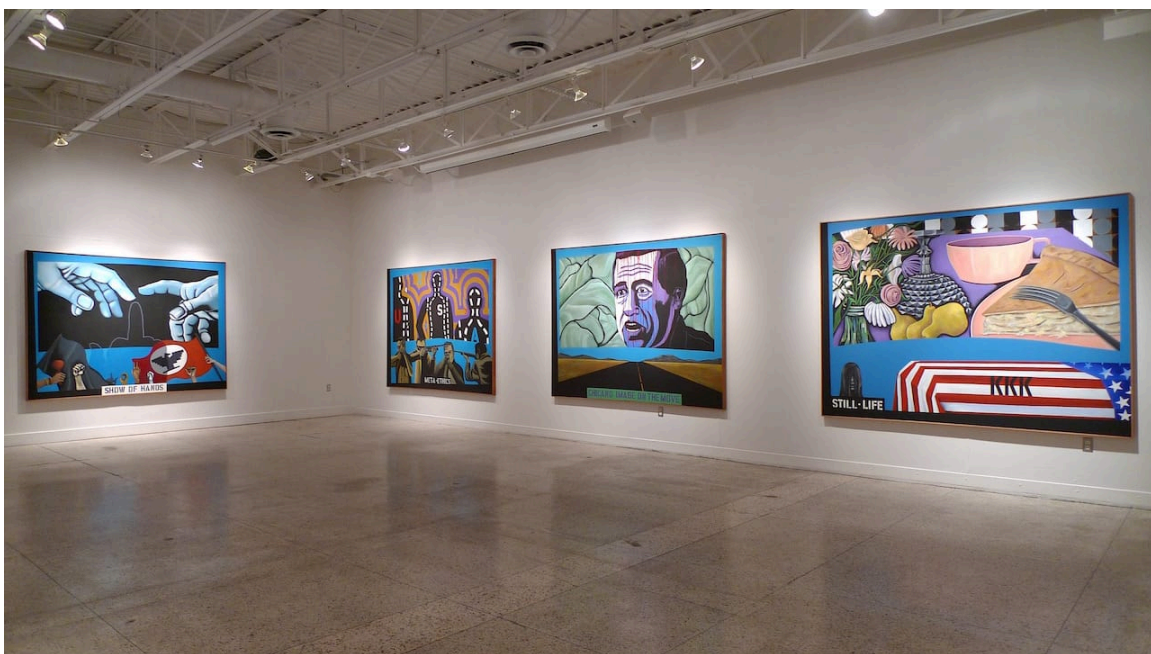


The exhibitions were organized thematically and chronologically, reflecting the development of Casas's practice and his incorporation of cultural and personal influences. Fl!ght Gallery, an artist-run space at the Blue Star Art Complex, hosted *Sex and Cinema with Mel Casas, 1965–1968*, presenting some of Casas's earliest *Humanscapes*. The artist created the first of these works after serendipitously observing a woman projected on a drive-in movie screen that was obscured by trees, noting the surreal image created by the accidental juxtaposition. His first *Humanscapes* relied on a heavily grayscale palette that echoed the experience of watching a film in the dark. Casas utilized the rectangular shape of the canvas to reinforce the cinematic structure, and eventually created witty subtitles that narrated the image purportedly on the screen. In many works, Casas utilizes the foreground to illustrate spectators and embracing lovers, alluding to the sexual possibility of the drive-in experience. As the series progressed, sexual allusions became more overt, replete with female nudes and suggestively phallic metaphors like hot dogs and lipstick.



Installation view, Fl!ght Gallery (photo by Ruben Cordova)

Unlike many of the canonical American Pop artists, Casas did not shy away from political content in his paintings. In the midst of the 1960s Civil Rights movement, Casas was an undergraduate art major at Texas Western University, now the University of Texas at El Paso. He had fought in the Korean War and worked before entering college, and he was greatly influenced by the sense of heritage instilled by his parents. Raised in El Paso, bordering Juarez, Mexico, Casas had firsthand knowledge of the blurred cultural and political borders between South Texas and Northern Mexico. After moving to San Antonio after college, he cofounded Con Safos, a politically active Chicano artist group that set out to “destroy stereotypes and demolish visual clichés,” as Jacinto Quirarte put it in his book *Mexican American Artists*. The grassroots community activism that Con Safos members generated within the San Antonio arts community contributed to the founding of one of the first Chicano cultural organizations, the Guadalupe Cultural Arts Center. Fittingly, the Guadalupe is the venue for [this exhibition](#).



Installation view, Guadalupe Cultural Arts Center (photo by Ruben Cordova)

Casas's politically oriented *Humanscapes* were created between February 1968 and May 1977. By that period he had arrived at a consistent 6' x 8' format, with a subtitle stenciled on the bottom of the canvas. These paintings establish Casas's distinct perspective as an American artist who worked within the Chicano movement, taking on topics such as identity politics, the war in Vietnam, the United Farm Workers movement, and other national issues. In the 1968 work "Humanscape 41 (Yield)," Casas addresses the conscription of men to the United States Armed Forces. The painting depicts a group of women holding children with numbers on their backs; the background text reads "War is profitable, invest your sons." That same year, Casas painted "Humanscape 47 (Still Life)," infusing the art historical tradition of the vanitas painting with a poignant sense of memorial. The piece was created as an homage to Robert F. Kennedy, Martin Luther King Jr., and John F. Kennedy, and it depicted a coffin draped with an American flag and the letters KKK, alluding both to the leaders' surnames and to the white supremacy organization. Casas implies the decline of the American Dream through symbolism, incorporating a vase of wilted flowers and an uneaten slice of apple pie into the composition.



Mel Casas, "Humanscape 41 (Yield)" (1968), 72" x 96", acrylic/canvas

Perhaps Casas's *Humanscape* series is best encapsulated by "Humanscape 63 (Show of Hands)," which depicts an abstracted film screen showing a grayscale variation of Michelangelo's "Creation of Adam." In the middle-ground, a black anarchist flag opposes a United Farm Workers Flag, an important icon during the Chicano labor movement. The foreground features, from left to right: an arm holding a maraca, a Black Power fist, hands spelling out "love" in sign language, a hand holding a joint, and a hand making the "OK" signal, all varying in skin tones. The entire piece is shadowed by the silhouette of a hand giving the middle finger, with the label "Show of Hands" stenciled in at the bottom.



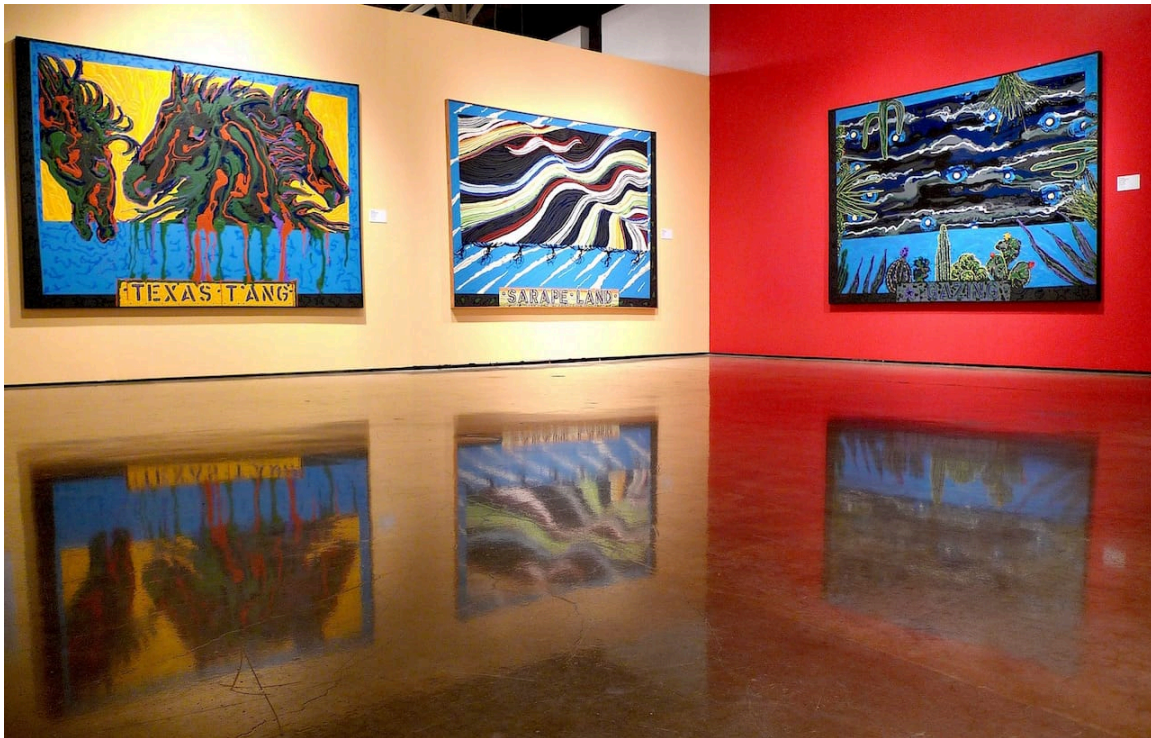
Mel Casas, "Humanscape 63 (Show of Hands)" (1970), 72" x 96", acrylic/canvas

"Humanscape 63" represents Casas's fragmentation of identity. The forceful hand gestures are undermined by their disembodiment; there exists a violent detachment that denies the artist bodily unity, hence an incomplete self. Still, the many fragments of the work inevitably come together to compile a Lacanian illusory self, punctuated by the central defiant gesture of the middle finger. While Casas's power symbols are impotent due to corporeal loss, the middle finger makes a vigorous phallic assertion and successfully reclaims the misappropriated agency.



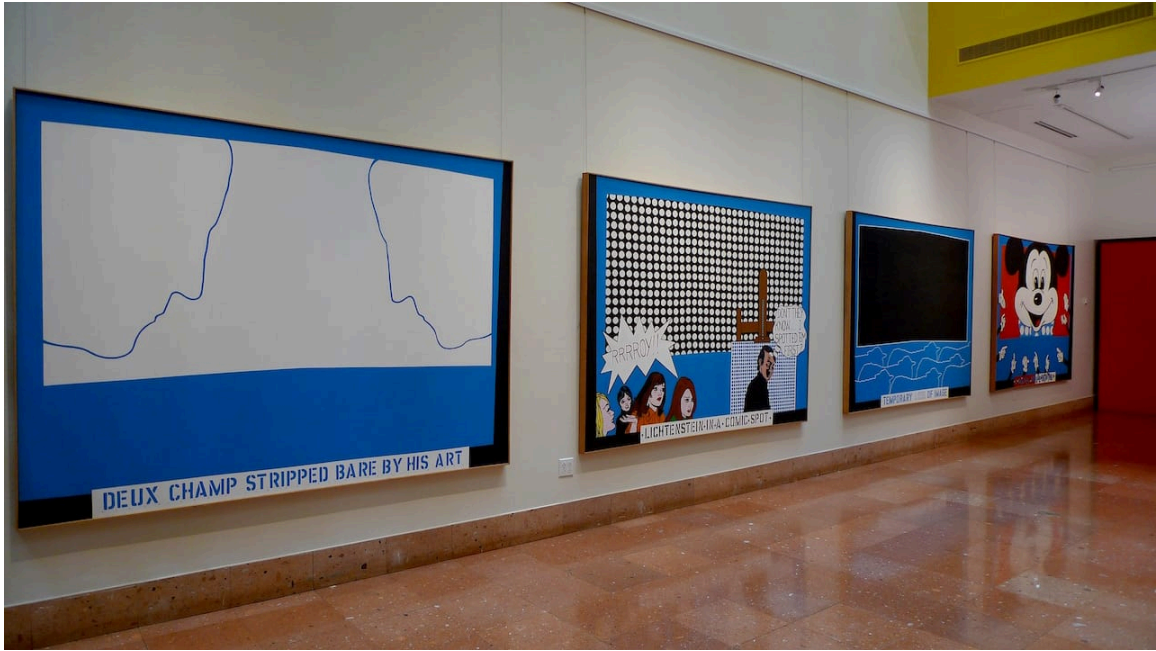
Installation view, San Antonio Central Library (photo by Ruben Cordova)

The play on words and satirical elements in these piece are characteristic of Casas's tongue-in-cheek approach to identity politics. Yet the message is mixed. While Chicano elements are clear, they are not predominant; rather, the inclusion of so many other ethnic and racial allusions somewhat dilutes the potency of the Chicano symbols. This is indicative both of Casas's ambiguity toward the homogeny of one label, as well as the influence of the broader political climate at the time. Where other Chicano artists tended to restrict their vision to their sole heritage, Casas contextualized the movement, and by exhibiting its parallels to other political developments, he established a sense of inclusion.



Installation view, Texas A&M Educational and Cultural Arts Center (photo by Ruben Cordova)

Casas's meditations on identity were not limited to heritage and militarism. Concurrent with the more pointedly political *Humanscapes*, he created works that satirized art history and poked fun at the art market and contemporary artists. The San Antonio Central Library exhibited these works in *Mel Casas: Art about Art, 1975–1981*. By the 1980s, Casas had embarked on what would be the final body of *Humanscape* works, focusing on icons and archetypes of Tejano culture. His canvases fused Pop imagery with an expressionistic application of paint, depicting familiar symbols of the Southwest. The fourth exhibition in Cordova's project, *Mel Casas: The Southwestern Cliches, 1982–1989* at the Texas A&M Educational and Cultural Arts Center, marks the last *Humanscapes* paintings. Casas would utilize a more painterly approach throughout the rest of his career.



Installation view, San Antonio Central Library (photo by Ruben Cordova)

For more than 40 years, Mel Casas created work that challenged and confronted existing notions of cultural identity. He carefully transgressed the margins of both the Chicano and Pop art movements, writing and theorizing on his position as an artist and “cultural adjuster.” Though he was loath to adhere to any single artistic perspective, he is credited with infusing the Chicano art movement with sharp wit and intellectualism, invigorating (and inciting) his peers and empowering his successors to do the same.



Installation view, Texas A&M Educational and Cultural Arts Center (photo by Ruben Cordova)



Mel Casas, "Humanscape 68 (Kitchen Spanish)" (1973), 72" x 96", acrylic/canvas

Getting the Big Picture: Mel Casas and the Politics of the 1960s and 1970s is on view at the *Guadalupe Cultural Arts Center (723 S Brazos St., San Antonio)* through October 24. *Mel Casas: The Southwestern Cliches, 1982–1989* was on view at *Texas A&M University San Antonio Educational and Cultural Arts Center (101 S Santa Rosa Avenue, San Antonio)* June 11–September 27. *Sex and Cinema with Mel Casas* was on view at *Flight Gallery (134 Blue Star, San Antonio)* June 25–August 22. *Mel Casas: Art About Art, 1975–1981* was on view at the *San Antonio Public Library Central Library (600 Soledad, San Antonio)* July 1–31.