

Late Artist Mel Casas Remembered In 'Humanscapes' Series

By Dan R. Goddard



Courtesy

Mel Casas is one of San Antonio's most influential artists, yet also among the most overlooked. During his lifetime, the El Paso-born painter never had a major exhibit at one of his adopted hometown's museums, despite being included in the 1975 Whitney Biennial and the landmark "Chicano Art: Resistance and Affirmation" in the 1990s.

Not to mention being the first president of Con Safo, a pioneering Chicano art group in the early 1970s and his 29 years of teaching art at San Antonio College. Instead, Casas, who died last year, had to settle for a minor retrospective in 1988 at Austin's Laguna Gloria Art Museum.

But freelance curator Ruben Cordova has corrected San Antonio's colossal oversight by staging a spectacular multi-exhibit tribute tracing almost the entire progression of Casas' 150 *Humanscape* paintings from 1965 to 1989. A notable exception may be Casas' best-known painting, **Brownies of the Southwest (1970)**, which contrasts a brown-skinned Girl Scout with a chocolate dessert and Latino icons, purchased three years ago by the Smithsonian American Art Museum and currently included in the national touring exhibit "Our America: The Latino Presence in American Art."

"Casas is arguably the most influential San Antonio artist of the second half of the 20th century," Cordova told the *San Antonio Current*. "He taught generations of artists at SAC and he was a respected theorist, teacher and mentor. *Humanscapes* is one of the most remarkable series of paintings in the history of American art."



Courtesy

Perhaps the artist could have also pushed more. "Casas became disillusioned with galleries and museums. Late in life, he even turned down opportunities to have museum shows that would have helped solidify his legacy," Cordova noted.

Casas' creamy, candy-colored paintings spoofing Southwestern stereotypes are easy to enjoy and still provide a fresh look at shibboleths such as Southwestern desert landscapes, Georgia O'Keeffe-style still-life paintings and, to quote Jon Stewart, political/cultural "bullshit." While he took pride in his Mexican-

American heritage, Casas chafed against the Chicano label. Though he has a reputation as a political artist, only a few paintings contain explicitly Chicano iconography.

However, the notorious "Barbie incident" may have made the local art establishment leery of Casas' cantankerousness. Selected as the San Antonio Art League's Artist of the Year in 1968, Casas used his acceptance speech to strip the clothes off a Barbie doll while lecturing about the privileges of being white, blond and blue-eyed. The Art League stripped Casas of the award, and now the list of artists of the year on the league's website lists the 1968 winner as "All Past Artists."

"He complained about not being paid by galleries and being shunned by the local museums. I think this is why he refused to show much in San Antonio. On the other hand, many artists have warm memories of the man and talk about how kind and encouraging he was about their art. But it's taken me years to convince his family and local institutions to have this show," said Cordova, who is working on a book about Casas.

For a chronological tour, start with the earliest paintings in "Sex and Cinema with Mel Casas, 1965-1968" at FL!GHT gallery through Saturday (August 22). Cordova traced the beginning of the *Humanscapes* to an epiphany Casas had in 1965 when he drove past the San Pedro drive-in movie theater. Fittingly, the earliest painting depicts a monochromatic fetus. The next painting is the fetus abstracted in a projected image. After several paintings of people in movie theaters, Casas arrived at an eight-by-six-foot format proportionately similar to a movie screen. The term "Humanscape" may have come from his painting of a large female nude reclining on the screen. Next, Casas added stenciled captions to the bottom of his paintings, making conceptual wordplay an important aspect of his work.



Courtesy

"Getting the Big Picture: Mel Casas and the Politics of the 1960s and 1970s," on view at the Guadalupe Cultural Arts Center through October 24, boils with the ferment of Chicano activism and protests against the Vietnam War, racism, censorship and Nixon-era skullduggery. A line of penis columns provides a backdrop for a *Phallocractic* arms race. The César Chávez-led United Farm Workers movement inspired *Kitchen Spanish*, based on a book that taught Anglo housewives how to talk to their help; *New Horizons*, the UFW flag rising over toiling farm laborers; and *Show of Hands*, signs by different-colored hands that could be positive or negative, depending on where they're flashed. Featured in the Whitney Biennial, *The Anatomy of a White Dog* (1973), cross-sections of a German shepherd and giant purple bone, refers to the dogs used against Freedom Marchers at Selma and what Casas called "the fear of the black penis."

Mel Casas: "The Southwestern Clichés, 1982-1989," on view at Texas A&M University–San Antonio's Educational & Cultural Arts Center in Market Square through September 27, is a sumptuous feast of fine painting. In sections devoted to the Southwest landscape, food and regional stereotypes, Casas merged his social concerns with a mastery of applying wet paint to canvas, although he did not like to use a brush. Instead, he poured the paint on the flat

canvas and manipulated it with chopsticks and barbecue skewers for a polished, multilayered look.

The last painting, *Gazing*, features a starry Texas sky. Casas decided it would be his last *Humanscape* because he had run out of clichés to mock.

Getting the Big Picture: Mel Casas and the Politics of the 1960s and 1970s

*Free, Noon-5pm Tue-Fri, noon-4 pm Sat, Galería Guadalupe, 723 S. Brazos St., (210) 271-31a51, guadalupeculturalarts.org
Through October 24*

Sex and Cinema with Mel Casas, 1965-1968

*Free, By appointment, FL!GHT Gallery, 134 Blue Star, (210) 872-2586, [facebook.com/flightsa](https://www.facebook.com/flightsa)
Through September 12*

Mel Casas: The Southwestern Clichés, 1982-1989

*Free, 10 am-5pm Tue-Sun, Texas A&M University–San Antonio, Educational & Cultural Arts Center, 101 S. Santa Rosa Ave., (210) 784-1105, tamusa-ecac.com
Through September 27*