



Mel Casas, *Humanscape 63: A Show of Hands*, 72" x 96" acrylic on canvas, 1970.

ists in recent years have taken this bottom-line, postmodern axiom as an occasion for despair and an excuse to retreat into academic exegesis or salon decoration, Casas, early on in his career, extended this observation to define the task he set for himself as an artist: *to combine language and image in such a way that we might see more articulately and speak more imaginatively.*

Which brings us hard up against the first cultural border Mel Casas's art simply disregards: Thomas De Quincey's pervasive 19th-century, romantic distinction between the art of "Knowledge," which teaches us, and the art of "Power," which moves us. Casas's art always aims to teach us and to move us simultaneously. As such, it is *always* political, at least in the classical sense. It aims to use "beauty" in the service of "truth" and "truth" in the service of the "good," and to define the "good" as an increase in general awareness on the part of the public at large. So, as an artist, Casas has no interest in "true" statements or "good" paintings as distinct from one another, nor confused with one another, for that matter. This stance renders any standard art-language discussion of *style, imagery, metaphor* and *genre* inoperable and inconsequential, since it is the invisible linguistic substructures and cultural hierarchies of *style, imagery, metaphor* and *genre* which supply the actual content of paintings whose subject is most often the ways that life imitates art, usually to life's detriment.

Having dispensed with these traditional *beaux arts* parameters of definition, what Casas gives

us in its place is a *format*—a topographical, syntactical division of his 6-by-8-foot canvases. This syntax, however, is designed not to predicate but to subvert and deconstruct the hierarchical and metaphorical content of the words, images and styles he employs. Each of the canvases after 1968 is composed of three distinct semiotic domains:

1. A black border extends across the bottom of each canvas occasionally rising up one vertical side to define the canvas surface as a "page" upon which some graphic text is usually applied in the manner of a caption.

2. Above this black border and extending up the sides of canvas a blue ground defines a shallow "pictorial" space, usually peopled with traditional representational images from "real life."

3. Above and "behind" this pictorial space, a large, concave rectangular area in the shape of a "Vista-vision" screen fills the entire upper and central two-thirds of the canvas within the black and blue borders providing a domain for "pure" images—that is, for images whose reference is not to the phenomenal world but to the generalized world of metaphor, definition and abstraction.

In the language of semiotics, then, these canvases are divided into a flat black field of *graphic* signs, a shallow blue field of *phenomenal* signs, and a symbolic (no-size) field of *categorical* signs. This format provides a syntax for "sorting out" these three levels of reference and visualizing the otherwise invisible anomalies and interpenetra-

tions generated by what Charles Morris calls "the tripartite composition of signs." In Morris's formulation every sign or group of signs embodies, regardless of its apparent neutrality, a *designative* component (denoting *this* or *that*), an *appreciative* component (assessing *good* or *bad* or *ought* not). The paintings are equally as urgently concerned with the business of laying bare the subliminal *appreciative* and *prescriptive* undertones of apparently neutral *designative* terms and images and with offering some healing insight to the neurotic symptoms generated by living in a world dominated by alien, antique cultural images and stereotypes. Casaparsing of the cultural implications of the "Brownies" in *Humanscape 62* is a fairly straightforward instance; his explication of "American Beauty" in *Humanscape 58* is a somewhat oblique one.

*Humanscape 58* is "captioned" with the end "American Beauty" in American cursive blue on a red and white ground, above which is a "pictorial" image of two pink (red + white) "American beauties" and a clump of rose deployed on the blue ground, behind which is on the symbolic screen, we are presented with the categorical "dictionary" image which defines the qualities of an American Beauty. What Casas's juxtaposition of sign, image and symbol implies is that the bonding of this sized rose with the term "American Beauty" presents us as well with a subliminal *prescriptive* definition of "Beauty in America," or in terms of a WASPish combination of "can" colors.

This idea—that we live in a landscape of things but of subliminally *appreciative* and *prescriptive* images—is most succinctly stated in *Humanscape 35: Exit*, 1967, the painting which titled the whole series. In this painting we are presented with a cluster of dark-skinned people loitering in a shallow pictorial space before a large image of the torso of a reclining white woman viewed from above so that we are looking at her breasts and through her legs. The rendered as a theatrical 19th-century landscape (or, more literally, *humanscape*) with the space between her breasts and legs implying form of passage with overtones of ritual. This reading is reinforced by the painting's title, *Exit*, and the image most probably presents the setting of Casas's home town of Del Norte, the pass to the north, the Mexico translated into the imagery of popular culture which tends to present the American landscape in terms of a fertile white woman—a convention from 18th-century English landscape painting which also provides the central image of the gland's most famous dirty book, *Fanny Hill* (i.e., fanny = hill), in the convention of the "humanscape" with a good deal of antic vitality.

course, employs this powerful yet available cultural stereotype to dramatizing prospect of brown-skinned immigrants can only escape from the South effect, reborn into a white moth. Again and again in the early paintings given examples of the extent to

which, finally, in his latest paintings, having entered the field of proletarian low-art imagery, Casas accepts the challenge to fill the pictorial space he has so shrewdly vacuumed over the years. And he does so with his own unambitious, homegrown, street-wise iconography. From the glamorous *Piñatas*, to the various *avocado* of *Humanscape 132: Guacacaca*, with its ominous *testudas* protruding like Chicano sharks, to the lively, scrungy *Barrio Dog*, with his lurching grin and his bilingual bark, these images benignly infect all the semiotic domains of the canvas and celebrate a culture without announcing it.

By way of a conclusion, I found myself cast-aside for a comparison that might illuminate Mel Casas's peculiar combination of suave wit, intellectual acrobatics and egalitarian politics, and at first despaired of finding one. Then I chanced to flip the television on to a live performance of *Major Barbara* and, in the course of those low-grade, medium-wattage epiphanies are prone to under deadline, I realized that I had stumbled upon a true *compadre* in Mel Casas in the person of Bernard Shaw. The Irish-English intellectual, wit and playwright was another of that rare breed of men dedicated, like Casas, to channeling the craft and intellect toward changing

the oppressive state of affairs dedicated to a sorry state of affairs. He perpetually finds in a Desmond that pretty much affection and an artist.

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Mel Casas is Arts Department Texas. The has mounted ber 3-October

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