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Art With an Accent: Expanded Visions of 'América' in Several San Antonio Exhibitions

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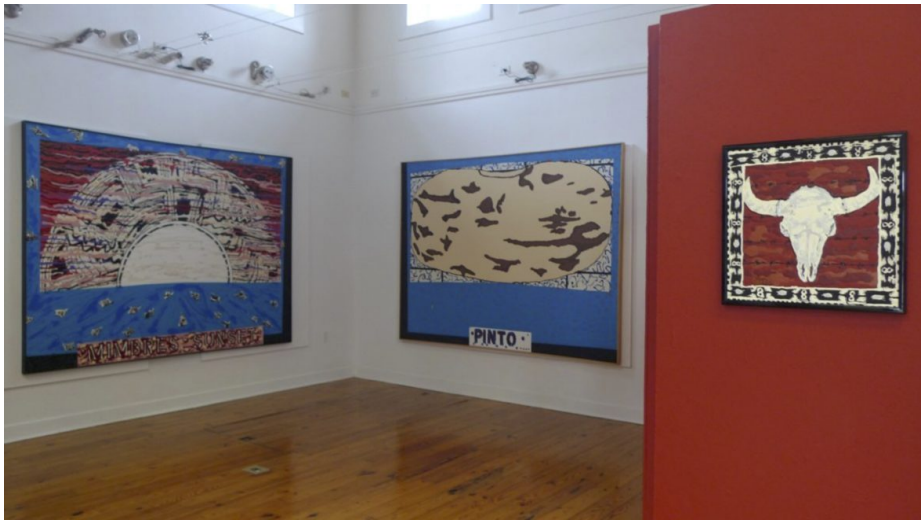

COURTESY / RUBEN CORDOVA, BIHL HAUS ARTS, AND THE MEL CASAS FAMILY TRUST

Three of the paintings by Mel Casas at Bihl Haus Arts are (from left) Humanscape 143 (Mimbres Sunset), 1987; Humanscape 134 (Pinto), 1984; and Where is the Beef, 1993.

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Chicanos believe their ethnic blend of indigenous, Mexican, and colonial heritages to be a strength, whereas white Europeans have historically seen racial mixing as undesirable.

Scholar and curator Ruben Cordova made this statement during a walk-through of *American History Does Not Begin With the White Man: Indigenous Themes in the Work of Mel Casas*, the exhibition he curated for Bihl Haus Arts (https://www.bihlhausarts.org/event/american-history-does-not-begin-with-the-white-man-indigenous-themes-in-the-work-of-mel-casas/2018-10-26/), which runs through Oct. 27.

This dichotomy of cultural values is at the heart of several concurrent exhibitions in San Antonio pointedly featuring art, motifs, and artists of the Americas.

Casas, who is noted for pioneering Chicano identity in art, is also featured at the McNay Art Museum in a solo exhibition, *Mel Casas: Human* (https://www.mcnayart.org/exhibitions/current/mel-casas-human), through Jan. 6 and with a painting in *Pop América, 1965-1975* (https://www.mcnayart.org/exhibitions/current/pop-america-19651975), through Jan. 13.

With similar content but in a variety of mediums, the *Monarchs: Brown and Native Contemporary Artists in the Path of the Butterfly* exhibition is on display at two venues, Blue Star Contemporary (https://bluestarcontemporary.org/exhibitions/monarchs-brown-and-native-artists-in-the-path-of-the-butterfly/) and the Southwest School of Art (https://www.swschool.org/exhibitions/current-exhibitions), through Jan. 6. Other shows at Blue Star, *Color of Confusion* (https://bluestarcontemporary.org/exhibitions/color-of-confusion/) by French artist Sylvie Blocher and *Unearthed: Desenterrado* (https://bluestarcontemporary.org/exhibitions/unearthed-desenterrado/) by former San Antonian Adriana Corral, consider similar questions of skin color in America and the complicated relationship between the United States and Mexico.

Together, these exhibitions make a powerful and subversive statement about the enduring presence and originality of art, artists, and subjects once considered outside the mainstream of so-called "American" art.

What Is America?

To many Americans, that descriptor refers only to the United States. But a more inclusive version of the term would include the entire hemisphere, from Alaska to Chile.

In the title of *Pop América*, which opened Oct. 4 at the McNay, "The simple stroke of a written accent over the letter *e* declares independence from the United States' long presumption of ownership of the word," writes curator Esther Gabara in the exhibition catalogue. Gabara teaches art history (https://aahvs.duke.edu/people/profile/esther-leah-gabara) at Duke University, where the show will travel after its San Antonio stay.

Pop América takes its title directly from a 1968 collage by Hugo Rivera-Scott, a Chilean artist who employed the comic-motif style of New York artist Roy Lichtenstein for his subversive comment. Though the title uses a seemingly innocuous, clever inversion of the word toward greater inclusivity and recognition, the artist intended a more gleefully destructive meaning.

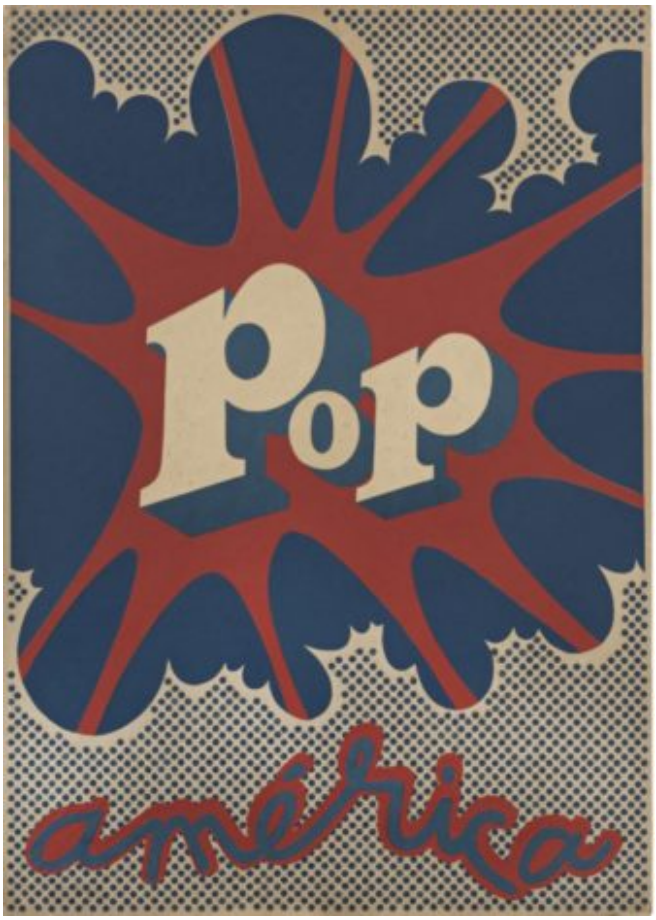


PHOTO BY JORGE BRANTMAYER / COURTESY OF THE ARTIST AND MCNAY ART MUSEUM

The word "Pop" in this sense was meant to "explode America, blow up America," and to upend the dominant culture, as Rivera-Scott is quoted as saying in the exhibition catalogue.

With almost 100 objects on view, *Pop América* is an attempt at a comprehensive "hemispheric vision of Pop art," undertaken to "spark a fundamental reconsideration and expansion" of a style of art generally attributed to

Hugo Rivera-Scott, Pop América, 1968.

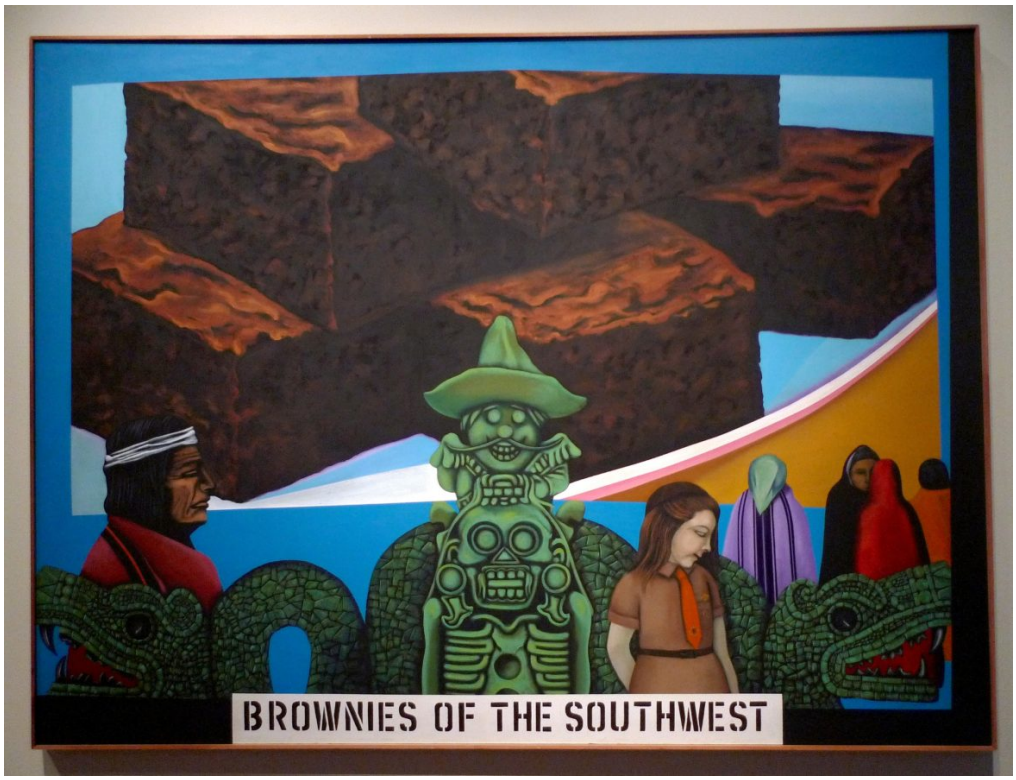
Lichtenstein, Andy Warhol, and other well-known Pop art icons, according to media materials for the show.

Though Pop art is most easily associated with overweening U.S. consumer culture, the style was actually used throughout North, South, and Central America, often to political ends as revolutionary movements rose to prominence in the 1960s.

Latin American artists "used art to advance political and social change, and that is new for me," said Rich Aste, McNay director, when asked what surprised him most about the show as it came to fruition.

Even Warhol is presented as a politically minded artist beyond his ubiquitous images of Mao and the Kennedys, with *Birmingham Race Riot*, a stark, black-and-white screenprint from a 1964 portfolio. A *Mao* screenprint is also in the show, alongside the familiar *Campbell's Soup I (Tomato)*, which appears here as at once high art and an icon of the working class.

Casas, identified by his full given name, Melesio, is represented by *Humanscape 62* from 1970, also called *Brownies of the Southwest* after its painted caption. The painting, now in the collection of the Smithsonian American Art Museum in Washington, D.C., is a darkly comical skewering of Mexican, Native American, and Mesoamerican stereotypes, including the smiling Frito Bandito character used to advertise Frito-Lay corn chips in the late 1960s.



COURTESY / RUBEN CORDOVA

Melesio Casas, Humanscape 62, 1970.

Downstairs at the McNay, more Casas *Humanscape* paintings, along with several *Art Box* sculptures, are on view in a small solo show curated by museum studies intern Bianca Alvarez.

América̱n History

Across town, Casas receives a grander retrospective treatment at Bihl Haus, represented by 12 later-career paintings spanning 1983-2009. *American History Does Not Begin With the White Man: Indigenous Themes in the Work of Mel Casas* is the latest in a series of exhibitions curated by Cordova that focuses on or includes major Casas works since the artist's death in 2014.

The title is Cordova's, designed as a protest against San Antonio's recent portrayals of its history.

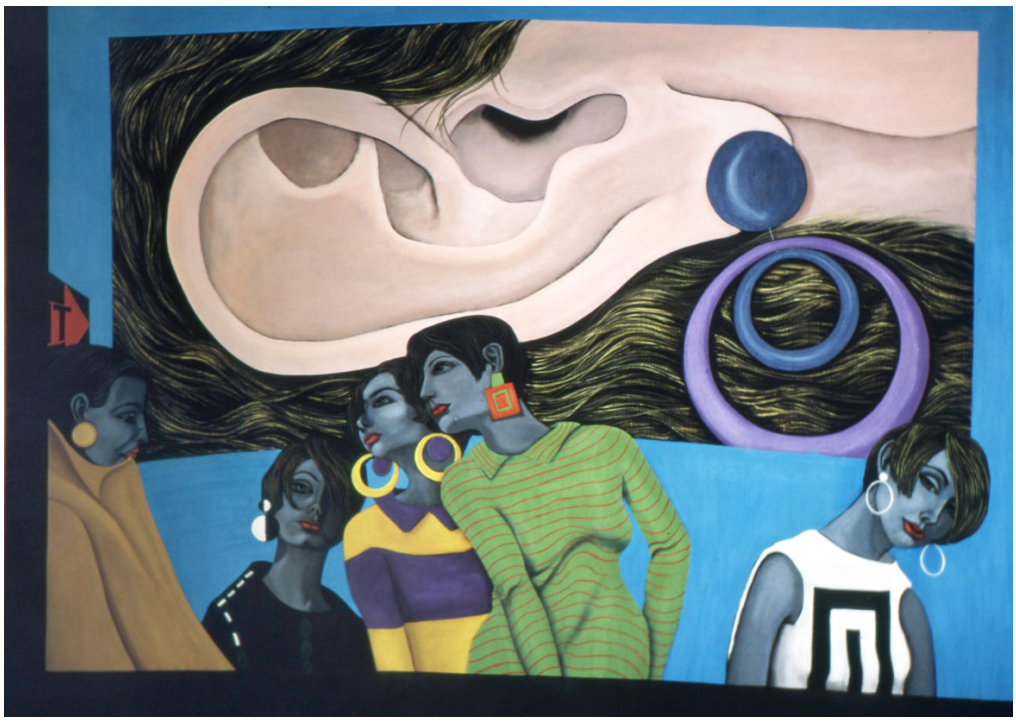
"I would have hoped to see more engagement with Native American themes and history than I have in the Tricentennial," Cordova said. "I wish there were more, and I thought this [exhibition] would be one way to engage it," he said.

"It isn't purely indigenous," he continued, describing the focus of Casas' late paintings, "but it's mixed, and I think that's also what's central to Chicano identity." The racial mixture of indigenous and African roots is a positive aspect in Chicano society to be celebrated, rather than repressed, Cordova said.

By 1970, Casas had turned away from the New York School abstraction he learned as a young artist toward themes of his native Texas. In the 1980s, according to Cordova, the artist began treating indigenous themes by harkening back to abstraction, but through canny use of Latino motifs like striped *sarapes*, Navajo blanket patterns, and Mimbres pottery.

Produced by Southwestern indigenous peoples between the late 10th and early 12th centuries, Mimbres pottery is renowned for its use of figurative imagery, which sets it apart from the more common geometric patterns in use by other tribes of the period.

By painting a Mimbres plate as a setting sun in *Humanscape 143 (Mimbres Sunset)*, Casas wryly equates figuration and abstraction. Similarly, in *Humanscape 134 (Pinto)* the patterns of a common pinto bean are blown up to huge scale, to mimic the paintings of famous abstractionist Clyfford Still.



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Mel Casas, Humanscape 36 (detail), 1967. Acrylic on canvas. Collection of the Mel Casas Family Trust. © 2018 Mel Casas Family Trust

Casas plays on the idea that the indigenous bean – in Spanish its name refers to paint – predates modern abstraction by millennia.

Migratory Patterns

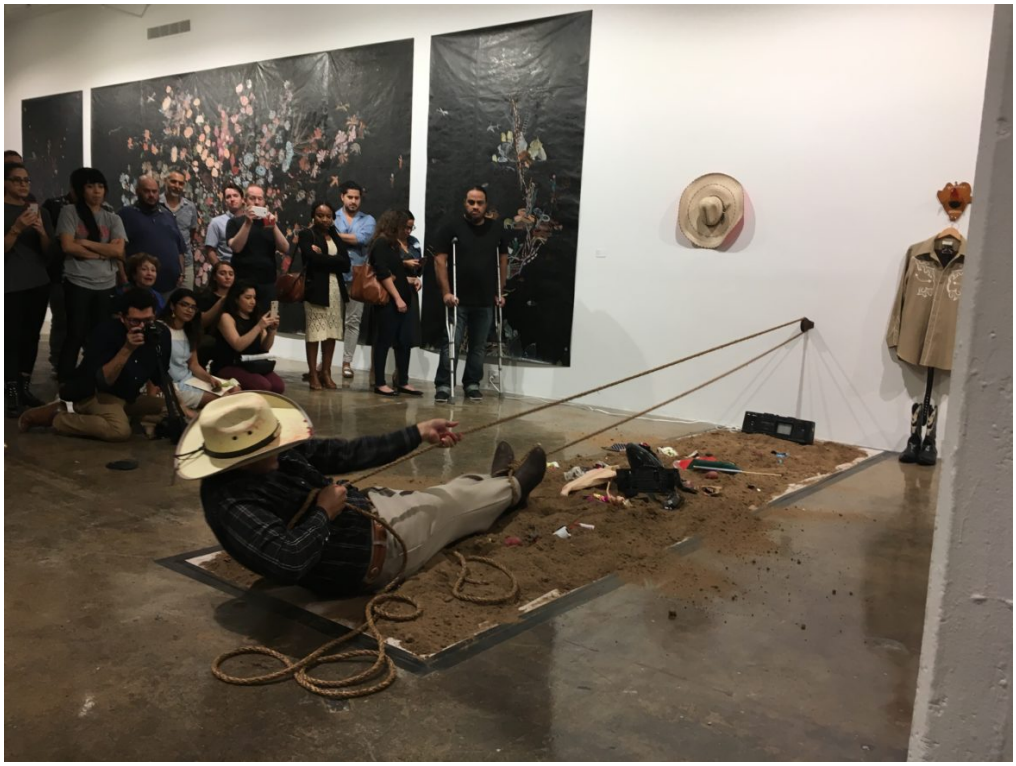
In the *Monarchs* show at Blue Star, San Antonian and Warhol contemporary Gregg Barrios is represented by an early performance work within an archival project by artists Josh Rios and Anthony Romero.

The installation, titled *Is Our Future A Thing of the Past?* is just one facet of a two-venue exhibition featuring 38 artists.

In 1976, Barrios staged a play titled *Stranger in a Strange Land* with local high school students of Crystal City**,** the site of internment camps during World War II. Barrios' "sci-fi rock opera" conflated David Bowie's "extraterrestrial personas" of the 1970s with "the common feeling of alienation experienced by Mexican-American youth growing up under hegemonic Anglo culture," according to a publication accompanying Rios and Romero's installation.

The Barrios script and program are on view along with a U.S. Commission on Civil Rights report from 1970 titled "Stranger In One's Land" and related ephemera.

During the *Monarchs* opening reception Oct. 4, San Antonio performance artist Jose Villalobos exorcised the influence of Mexican-American machismo he grew up with as a young gay *norteño*.



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Performance artist Jose Villalobos at Blue Star Contemporary.

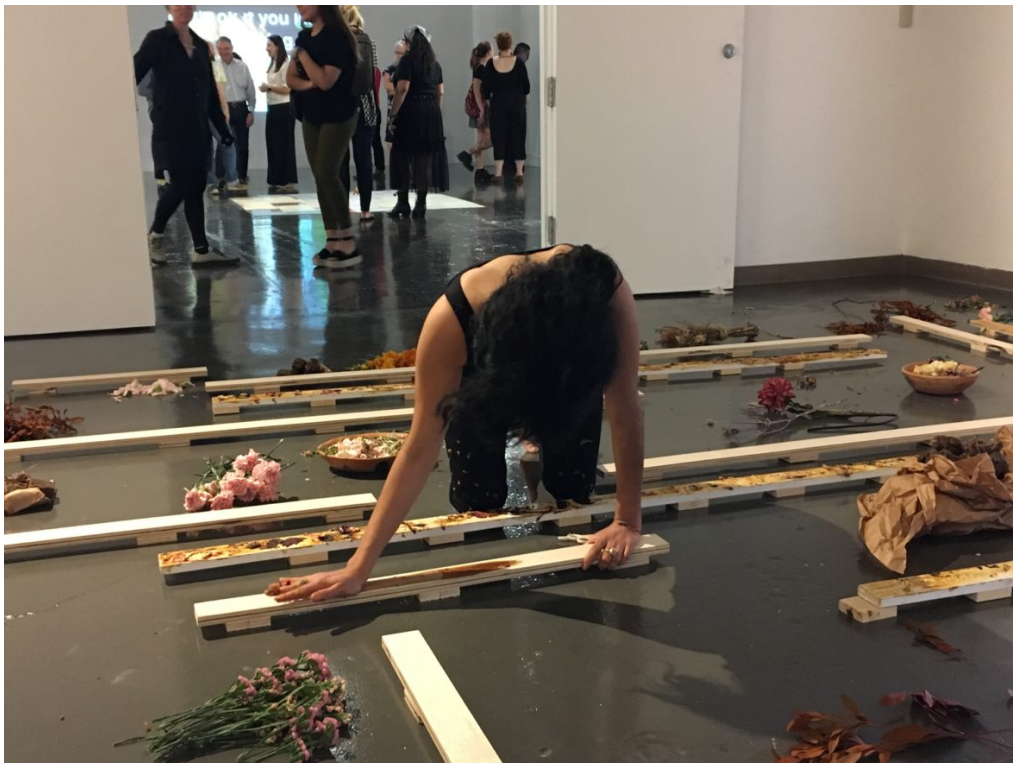
Villalobos donned an elaborate cowboy costume, including silver spurs, and painted his fingernails in bright pink, highlighting the social disjuncture he has experienced. The artist then stomped on and hammered objects representing Texan culture, including a toy pickup truck, covered wagon, and Virgin Mary statue, before roping and dragging himself through a bed of sand.

"For me as far as wearing the identity, I do it as a protest, deconstructing the masculinity behind the object," Villalobos said. "I'm a gay individual, and I'm trying to feel that same empowerment" as the classic American cowboy.

"It's a form of resistance," he said of his work.

That same evening, Mexican artist Flor Ameira performed during the *Monarchs* reception at the Southwest School of Art.

Ameira knelt to spread *cera campeche*, a combination of beeswax and hive honey from her hometown of Chihuahua, onto wooden planks on the floor. She then used scissors to carve the words "*yo soy para todo uso*" ("I am for all use") into the honey to echo the product's "all-purpose" tagline and sprinkled real and fake flower petals onto the honeyed planks.



NICHOLAS FRANK / RIVARD REPORT

Performance artist Flor Ameira at the Southwest School of Art.

As an artist present in the gallery, Ameira said, she acted as a both a welcome and an obstacle, echoing the situation of the border between Mexico and the U.S., which once allowed much freer movement and exchange.

Today, Cordova's explanation for the title he gave the Casas show reflects an expanded, borderless vision of American history and present-day self-regard. "It's giving 'American' back to the first people from the Americas," he said.

For detailed information on these exhibitions, please click on links to the various venues above.

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