

ARTS & CULTURE

Casas exhibit too big for one gallery

By Elda Silva | June 11, 2015

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Photo: Billy Calzada, Staff / San Antonio Express-News

IMAGE 1 OF 10

Detail from Humanscape 73 (Chicano Image on the Move), a painting in the “Getting the Big Picture: Mel Casas and Politics of the 1960s and 1970s” art exhibition at the Guadalupe Cultural Arts Center's Museo Guadalupe. The show will be on display June 5 - October 24.

It took 11 years — and many conversations over meals with apertifs and wine — for curator Ruben C. Cordova to convince Mel Casas to show him the many large-scale paintings the influential San Antonio artist had long kept under wraps in storage.

When Casas finally granted Cordova's request, the curator was amazed at what he found. He had seen reproductions, he said, but he "was still kind of surprised at the vibrancy of the purples and the pinks and the blues in these paintings. They look like they were just painted. Some of these are 50 years old. They don't look 50 years old."

Cordova, who previously organized a Jesse Treviño retrospective for the now defunct Museo Alameda, has curated four exhibits looking at roughly half of the large-scale paintings in the artist's numbered Humanscape series. Most of them have not been exhibited in decades, and all but three of the works in the four shows belong to the Casas family.

"Getting the Big Picture: Political Themes in the Art of Mel Casas, 1968-1977" and "Mel Casas: The Southwestern Cliches, 1982-1989" are now open at the Museo Guadalupe and the Texas A&M-San Antonio Centro de Artes respectively. "Sex and Cinema with Mel Casas, 1965-1968" opens June 25 at Fl!ght, and "Mel Casas: Art about Art, 1975-1981," opens July 1 at the Central Library.

"I think people are going to be so surprised when they see the scope and the beauty and the intellectual processes that Mel put in his work," said his wife, Grace Casas. "You really get the full enormity of Mel's work by seeing it in person. It's bigger than life even in print, but you really don't get the full impact until you see it in person."

MORE INFORMATION

Four by Casas

"Getting the Big Picture: Political Themes in the Art of Mel Casas, 1968-1977," through Oct. 24, Museo Guadalupe, 723 S. Brazos St., 210-271-3151, guadalupeculturalarts.org.

"Mel Casas: The Southwestern Cliches, 1982-1989," through Sept. 27, 101 S. Santa Rosa, www.tamusa-ecac.com.

Casas, who died in December, was perhaps best known for politically charged paintings such as “Humanscape 62 (Brownies of the Southwest).” The iconic piece, which is in the permanent collection at the Smithsonian Institute, helped define the Chicano art movement with pointed visual statements that challenged cultural stereotypes and portrayals of Mexican-Americans in the media. But the El Paso native used his knack for complex, multilayered visual puns and word play to address a range of ideas and issues in his work, such as the impact of film and media, the Vietnam War, censorship and art history.

“Sex and Cinema with Mel Casas, 1965-1968,” June 25-Aug. 22, Flight Gallery, 134 Blue Star, 210-872-2586.

“Mel Casas: Art about Art, 1975-1981,” Central Library, 600 Soledad, 210-207-2500, www.mysapl.org.

The artist served as the first president for Chicano art group Con Safo and taught at San Antonio College for 29 years.

Frustrated and disappointed by experiences with galleries and museums, Casas largely withdrew from exhibiting his work for many years.

Last year, SAC hosted “Mel Casas: Artist as Cultural Adjuster,” an exhibit of 76 works by Casas, in conjunction with a signing of art historian Nancy Kelker’s book by the same title. For the most part, the show was comprised of Casas’ smaller paintings. Cordova’s series focuses exclusively on the artist’s 6-foot-by-8-foot works.

Casas got the idea for the Humanscape series in 1965, when he drove past a drive-in theater. Glancing up at the screen, he saw the towering image of a woman speaking. From his perspective, the woman appeared to be munching on the trees nearby.

“That happened in maybe two seconds, three seconds,” Cordova said. “He spent 25 years reflecting on it, and all of these paintings are a reference to that moment.”

Over time, Casas developed the three-part structure that characterizes the majority of the paintings in the four exhibitions: a large screen in the upper portion of the canvas; figures in the foreground, and stenciled text or subtitles that reference the imagery in a bar along the bottom.

“The very first paintings he did in this series were actually depictions of people at a drive-in, and then he moved to the cinema and had people watching the screen,” Cordova said. “They were kind of ghostly and not very focused, kind of blobbed. Gradually they became more dynamic and had more color, and then, they turned around. They would be dancing or voguing for the person looking at the picture. Eventually they had their own concrete forms and thoughts and desires.”

Cordova, an art historian and former professor at UTSA, first interviewed Casas when he came to San Antonio in 1999 for an article about Con Safo. The two became friends. The charismatic artist enjoyed rich food, smoking cigars, drinking wine and telling stories, Cordova said. But he did not enjoy discussing his work.

“He acted like it pained him to talk about his art,” said Cordova, who subsequently wrote a book about Con Safo published by the UCLA Chicano Studies Research Center Press in 2009. “I don’t really know why.”

Casas destroyed 20 of the 150 large-scale Humanscape paintings he created when he moved from one of his homes.

“He had some of them in a room and he had them all stacked up and he felt like if he was going to make new ones, he had to get rid of some of the old ones,” Cordova said. “I told him, ‘Mel, you sure destroyed some good paintings.’”

The show of 21 paintings at the Museo Guadalupe includes two of Casas' best-known pieces, "Humanscape 63 (Show of Hands)" and "Humanscape 68 (Kitchen Spanish)." Both were featured in "Chicano Visions: American Painters on the Verge," a traveling exhibition of works largely drawn from the collection of actor Cheech Marin, which opened at the San Antonio Museum of Art in 2001.

In "Humanscape 63," the near-touching hands of God and Adam from Michelangelo's Sistine Chapel fresco "The Creation of Adam" float against a the black background of a movie screen. The shadow of a third hand with a raised middle finger reaches up to meet them.

"I think what this was for him was the interplay of the sacred and profane," Cordova said.

In the foreground, hands in a range of skin colors signal various ideologies and beliefs, including an multicultural quartet spelling out "love" in American Sign Language.

"I think what he especially savored about this is that everyone of these gestures is obscene somewhere else," Cordova said.

In "Humanscape 70 (Whitewash)," an array of all-white comic book superheroes burst from a star-spangled screen partially covered by dripping streaks of white paint. A brown-skinned boy standings in the foreground with a single word in the thought bubble above his head: "WOW."

"I don't know if you've been reading all the stories about role models and comic books, but I was thinking, 'This is more topical than when he painted it,'" Cordova said.

"Humanscape 73 (Chicano Image on the Move)" depicts labor leader and civil rights activist Cesar Chavez as a martyr, his blood-streaked face painted against a background of green lettuce leaves.

For the exhibit at the Centro de Artes, Cordova assembled 30 of the paintings that Casas referred to as "Southwestern clichés" — works that grew out of his belief that artists shouldn't merely imitate the prevailing themes and styles of art coming out of Europe and New York. Cordova believes it is the largest exhibit of Casas' work to date.

"I don't know if there's been a show of 30 at once before," he said.

For this series of paintings, Casas used squirt bottles and other implements to apply paint to the canvas in thick, lush layers.

“He wanted to make them about paint, about materiality, and he didn’t want the traces of the brush left in it, so in those paintings he didn’t use a brush at all,” Cordova said.

The exhibit at Flight will have Casas’ first Humanscapes as well as works dealing with the sexual revolution, while the show at the Central Library will be entirely composed of art about art.

In the decade before Casas death, the artist turned down offers for shows from at least three large institutions, including a major West Coast museum, Cordova said.

“Once he decided he wasn’t going to show, he was pretty stubborn about it,” he said.

The artist, however, was pleased with plans for the series of exhibitions, Grace Casas said.

“He really was appreciative of it,” she said. “He always said an artist really needs to look at the big picture to see where he’s been.”

lsilva@express-news.net



Elda Silva

Arts writer | San
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