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Mel Casas, American artist

By **Elda Silva**, *San Antonio Express-News*
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"Humanscape No. 64 (Bok Choy: China's Icon)"

SAN ANTONIO — Mel Casas is probably best known for politically charged paintings such as "Humanscape 62 (Brownies of the Southwest)," one of a handful of works that helped define the Chicano art movement with pointed visual statements that questioned cultural stereotypes and portrayals of Mexican-Americans in the media.

"Mel Casas: Artist as Cultural Adjuster," a new book by art historian Nancy Kelker, reminds us that while those works were greatly influential, they were in reality a small part of a long and prolific career during which Casas tackled a number of issues, including the impact of film and media, the Vietnam War, censorship and art history.

A retrospective by the same title seeks to do much the same. It opens Friday at the Visual Arts Center Gallery at San Antonio College, where Casas taught for 29 years. Kelker will sign copies of her book at the reception

The exhibit, curated by Thomas C. Willome and Eduardo Rodriguez, features 76 paintings from Casas' extended "Humanscape" series produced between 1965 and 2012. Though some of Casas' most famous works, including "Brownies of the Southwest," as the painting is commonly referred to, are in private and museum collections, "we had this opportunity to go into the closet, so to speak, and pull things out," Willome said.

"What Ed and I looked for was the work that embodied the human aspect of Mel — his sensitivity, his sense of virility, his sense of intellect, the power of the mind to engage," said Willome, an art professor who considers Casas a mentor.

This is the first exhibit of Casas' work in San Antonio since 2001, when three of his large-scale paintings were featured in "Chicano Visions: American Painters on the Verge." The show opened at the San Antonio Museum of Art and went on to travel throughout the country. His last solo show was "Scopophilia: Enjoying Looking," an exhibit of erotic paintings of female nudes and women's high heel shoes, at the now defunct Joan Grona Gallery in 2000.

Although Casas has not shown his work in recent years, he has continued to paint "vigorously," Willome said. "Sometimes I noticed in the dates of the paintings that he was making a painting every five or six days."

Now 84, the artist, who is ailing, was not available for comment, but his wife, Grace Casas, confirmed he paints almost daily.

“He's very committed to his work,” she said. “It keeps him sane.”

The earliest works in the show are two pieces from 1968. Casas painted “Humanscape 47 (Still-Life)” as a tribute to Robert F. Kennedy and Martin Luther King Jr., who were both assassinated that year, and John F. Kennedy, who was killed in 1963.

By that time, Casas had begun painting what Kelker calls his “VistaVision” paintings, referring to a form of widescreen cinematography. In pieces framed by a dark border, Casas evokes a movie theater with close-up images inside a rectangular screen and the blue glow of the projector in the foreground.

In “Humanscape 47,” Casas depicts a collection of objects including a vase of wilting flowers; a cut-glass dish standing upside down; an empty coffee cup; and an uneaten slice of pie with an upended fork placed on it. A flag draped coffin sits in the foreground, the pattern of red and white stripes interrupted by the inscription “KKK,” a reference both to the three fallen leaders, whose surnames all begin with 'K,' and the white supremacist organization that opposed their views. In her book, Kelker describes the piece as “an all-American vanitas painting,” referring to the still-life genre in which the objects represented allude to the transient nature of life.

Kelker, who first met Casas in the 1970s, began working on her book after she invited the artist to exhibit his work at Georgia Southwestern State University in 1999, where she taught at the time.

“When the exhibition at Georgia was finished, we packed up the paintings in my van and I drove them back to San Antonio because I wanted to make sure they got there safely,” said Kelker, currently a professor at Middle Tennessee State University. “While I was there, I spent three days interviewing him, discussing works of art and his life. Listening to him and going through newspaper articles, catalogs and other documents that he provided me and thinking of these things for a long period, it all came together to what I hope is a book that does justice to his work.”

Though Casas, one of the founders of the Chicano arts group Con Safo, is recognized as a seminal figure in the Chicano art movement, “what Mel is trying to do is not just present Chicano issues,” Kelker said. “He's trying to convey what he calls 'a brown point of view' on the larger American culture that we're all a part of. He told me when I was talking to him many years ago: 'I don't want to be known as a Chicano artist. I want to be known as an American artist.' And what I'm trying to do with the book is introduce him to the rest of America as an American artist.”

Internationally known photographer Kathy Vargas, who was interviewed for Kelker's book, was one of Casas' design students in the 1970s. She joined Con Safo at his invitation.

Casas “was looking at the whole world,” Vargas said. “He was looking at how all of us — black, white, brown, purple — existed in the world; how all of us were treated by the world; how all of us in a sense either accepted what was going on or tried to change it or fought back. He was always looking at the big picture.”

“Humanscape 70 (Comic Whitewash),” a painting from 1970 in the exhibition, depicts a group of all-white comic book superheroes swinging into action. Batman, Superman, Thor, Captain America, Spider-Man and Hawkman frame the rectangular screen within the painting, which is occupied by a starry field partially obscured by dripping streaks of white paint. A young brown-skinned boy stands in the fore-ground with a single word in the thought bubble above his head: “WOW.”

“It's a message for all of us about how we perceive each other in society and the things we do that make us question our own self-worth,” Kelker said. “I asked (Casas) if the boy was to be read as Chicano and he said, 'It can be anybody who's not white.' It's the same message if you're African-American, if you're Chicano, if you're Asian-American, if you're Native American. The people who we make heroes in this society don't look like you. What does that tell you?”

The screen within the painting goes entirely dark in “Humanscape 77 (Temporary Loss of Image),” a work from 1977, also featured in the show. In the foreground, where the audience should be, there are only the ghostly outlines of sheep.

With only a single work representing the 1980s — a period during which Casas produced a number of works dealing with the Texas myth and Mexican contributions to the culture of the Southwest — the exhibit plunges headlong into the following decades. Unlike the earlier paintings in the show, all 6-feet-by-8-feet, the scale of these works is more intimate. Casas also has moved to a thick poured paint application in works such as “Humanscape 152 (Horseplay),” a whimsical image of a carousel horse from 1996.

During the 1990s, Casas' and his wife lived in Italy for a period of about four years. This is when he began painting women's shoes, inspired by Italian fashion. There are a handful of examples in the exhibit, including the suggestive “Humanscape 78 (Follow Me)” from 1994.

While some may view heels as restrictive to the wearer, “(Casas) sees them as putting women on pedestals, which is a different attitude,” Kelker said.

A series of self-portraits from 2007 also let us see the artist through his own eyes, ever-shaded by a jaunty fedora.

“One thing that I'm pleased about is the opportunity to have something to do with moving his work to another level of attention, or bringing it out in a way that people who have never encountered it can discover it for the first time,” Willome said. “I think it's been one of the best kept secrets.”

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