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Artist, 'cultural adjuster' Mel Casas has died

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Gift Article



Artist Mel Casas, pictured in his home in 2001, helped found the influential Chicano art group Con Safos.

RODOLFO B. ORNELAS, STAFF / SAN ANTONIO EXPRESS-NEWS

Mel Casas, an influential artist and teacher who helped define the Chicano art movement has died after a two-year battle with cancer. He was 85.

The artist died at home Sunday surrounded by family, said Grace Casas, his wife of 35 years.

Casas was best known for pointed visual statements that questioned cultural stereotypes and portrayals of Mexican Americans in the media, works such as "Humanscape 62 (Brownies of the Southwest)," an iconic painting currently in the Smithsonian's permanent collection.

A charismatic figure with a neatly trimmed goatee and razor wit, Casas was professor emeritus at San Antonio College, where he taught for 29 years before retiring as chairman of the art department in 1990.

In the early '60s, he helped found the seminal Chicano art group Con Safo, whose members included Kathy Vargas, Cesar Martínez, Carmen Lomas Garza, Santa Barraza and Jesse Treviño.

On his personal business card, Casas referred to himself as a "cultural adjuster."

"It's what he'd come up with to describe himself and what he did with his art," Grace Casas said. "He looked at culture and the idiosyncracies of his culture and the political aspect of things, because he was very politically involved."

The son of Mexican immigrants, Casas was born in El Paso. He graduated from high school in 1948 and was later drafted to serve in the Korean War. He was wounded by an exploding landmine, suffering injuries to his right hand, torso and face. After coming home, he earned a bachelors degree from Texas Western College. He continued his studies at the University of the Americas in Mexico City, where he earned a master's degree before moving to San Antonio in 1961.

Though primarily celebrated for his Chicano-themed paintings, those works comprised only a small part of a long and prolific career.

As a painter, Casas began his career as an abstract expressionist, but returned to representational work in the mid-1960s and launched his "Humanscape" series. Using a large-scale, rectangular canvas to mimic the look of a movie screen, Casas explored the impact of cinema and the media, focusing on the objectification of women early on.

In 1970, he began creating works dealing with Mexican-American cultural issues. A fan of word play, Casas employed humor and visual puns in works such as “Humanscape 62” — commonly referred as “Brownies of the Southwest” — in which he juxtaposed an image of a plate of the chocolate dessert bars that looks as if were plucked from a Betty Crocker ad with a young Brownie Scout and iconic figures of Latino culture. An image of the Frito Bandito is depicted astride a pre-Colombian skeletal figure

In addition to paintings that explored the impact of media, he created works about the Vietnam War, national politics, and censorship. After a period when he and his wife lived in Italy, Casas began painting images of stiletto shoes, which he viewed as pedestals for women, and sensuous nudes.

Vargas, a noted photographer who has exhibited her work internationally, was one of Casas’ students at SAC. She describes him as “brilliant” and “a genius.”

“I always tell people Casas taught me how to think,” Vargas said. “Most artists are right-brained and he was both right-brained and left-brained and he got my left brain going so that I could be analytical which is very important to artists. We can’t just run on instinct.”

Martinez, best known for his paintings of pachucos, batos and rucas, met Casas through Con Safo which was founded at a time when Chicano art was not being shown at mainstream institutions.

“He was really a very clear thinker about what we were up to, and he was the one who could articulate all of those things,” Martinez said. “Because at the time, nobody would touch us with a 10-foot pole.”

In an Express-News article from 1998, Casas talked about the significance of the group. Its “success was its demise, because it succeeded in doing what it wanted to do,” he said. “And I wonder, had it not, would it still be a struggling group? But it was fast and efficient.”

Earlier this year, San Antonio College hosted “Mel Casas: Artist as Cultural Adjuster,” an exhibit of 76 works curated by Thomas C. Willome and Eduardo Rodriguez. A book by the same title by art historian Nancy L. Kelker was published last year.

Writing the book “was not an easy thing to do because it’s hard to give justice to his paintings,” said Kelker, currently a professor at Middle Tennessee State University. “They’re so much deeper than the surface glance would make you think. That for me was just really exciting working on them because he was such an intelligent, creative man.”

In spite of his illness, Casas continued working up until about seven months ago, Grace Casas said.

“He always had an idea and he worked on his ideas,” she said. “He’d draw little pictures of what he wanted to do at least to start, and then develop things from there.”

Martínez revisited Casas’ work at the SAC exhibition and found it “still fresh, still good, still vibrant — always will be, actually,” he said.

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