

**Mel (Melesio) Casas** | b. 1929, El Paso, TX | d. 2014, San Antonio, TX

**MEL CASAS BEGAN WORK ON WHAT WOULD** come to be known as his *Humanscape* series in 1965 after a fateful trip down the highway in his home of San Antonio, Texas. Glimpsing from the road part of a drive-in movie theater screen, he was struck by the surreal juxtaposition of the actress it featured and the actual trees surrounding it, particularly the way the speaking character appeared to be “munching” on the leaves.<sup>1</sup> Over the course of the next twenty-four years, Casas went on to create 153 paintings that similarly yoked everyday life with popular or mass media imagery, making productive use of their incongruities. While these *Humanscapes* tackled a range of topics, from pop-like explorations of the female body to Chicano culture to the art world itself, after 1967 they hewed to roughly the same compositional format. Painted on six-by-eight-foot canvases, the upper section of each work includes a large, often slightly bowed, rectangular image that conjures the movie screen that gave rise to the series; the surface’s lower register is then often populated with what might be taken as an audience for that screen [FIG. 1]. The series was consistent in another way as well. “The *Humanscapes* are deliberately ambiguous,” Casas claimed in 2008. “If I spell everything out, I’m making an illustration, and I didn’t want to make illustrations. That wasn’t the point. The point was to make art.”<sup>2</sup> As *Humanscape 43* makes clear, that ambiguity became especially potent when, in 1968, Casas turned his attention to explicitly political themes, including the war in Vietnam—themes he pursued until 1975, the year the conflict abroad ended.

This shift within Casas’s practice—like those in many of his contemporaries’ trajectories—occurred at a moment of great social and political unrest across

the United States, with civil rights struggles and antiwar efforts in full swing. The artist was attentive to both. On behalf of the San Antonio-based Con Safo, one of the earliest Chicano art groups, Casas authored his “Brown Paper Report” in 1971. Promoting equality for Chicanos and Chicano culture in a context that saw basic power structures starkly skewed against them, Casas claimed in his text, “If Americana was ‘sensed’ through blue eyes, now brown vision is demanding equal views—polychroma instead of monochroma. Brown eyes have visions too.”<sup>3</sup> Such brown eyes also had a very particular perspective on the ongoing war: Latinos represented a disproportionate number of those fighting and dying during the 1960s.<sup>4</sup> Casas was deeply opposed to the Vietnam conflict, having been drafted, served, and injured during the Korean War—a conflict that similarly pitted communism against democracy. The artist’s record of service and activism resonates with his understanding of Chicano identity as hybrid: “George Washington and Che Guevara homogenized into one.”<sup>5</sup> From this complex position, he articulates his protest in *Humanscape 43*.

The majority of that canvas is given over to the “screen,” which reads “\$KILL\$,” a multivalent play on the slippage between the letter S and the dollar sign. How we choose to read that phrase, in turn, shifts our understandings of the bottom register of the painting, executed in the straightforward language of pop. Set against a bright blue ground are a hand raised upright, two soldiers’ helmets, four guns pointed upward or nearly so, and a soldier aiming a weapon, with the stenciled word “obscenity” jutting up near the middle of all of this like a subtitle for the scene. One way to take \$KILL\$ is as highlighting the obscenity of the fact that, in the artist’s words, “the skills of war are killing”—a reality variously but regularly projected before the nation.<sup>6</sup> (That the screen’s curved edges also call to mind a period television set is suggestive in this context: televisions were what



FIG. 1  
Mel Casas, *Humanscape 81*,  
1969, acrylic on canvas,  
Mel Casas Family Trust

familiarized many with Vietnam.) The painting's figurative section could then seem to underscore this interpretation. Moving from left to right, we might see a soldier moving from induction, to being equipped, to prepared to fire. Alternatively, 1968 being a presidential election year, the suit sleeve of the arm stretched upward might position that figure as a president being sworn in; his action finding echoes in the weapons then serves to align his position with the skills of war.<sup>7</sup>

At the same time, \$KILL\$ stresses the financial motivations that drive wars in America: "dollars kill," as Casas later put it.<sup>8</sup> Viewed from this perspective,

the suit sleeve of the left most figure can be read as an emblem of the corporations fueling and profiting from the war, pledging their allegiance to the country at a marked remove. It seems no accident that, while the race of the soldier on the right is uncertain, this businessman is decidedly white. It is also striking that he is the figure on whom the gun is trained—his vanquishing perhaps foreshadowed by the owners of the now-bodiless helmets to his right. Whether their former occupants are dead or living, those helmets are further reminders of the goods war demands; the sexual quality of the two helmets with the upright bayonet between them hints at the libidinal force of this capitalist aspect of fighting.<sup>9</sup> Those helmets also speak to the way soldiers are dehumanized by the war machine, which is to say, the way their embodied presence is reduced to merely one more piece of equipment. The overarching presence of that machine is underscored by the uninflected, pristine surface of Casas's painting.

The multiple readings invited by *Humanscape 43* are set into new light by a remark Casas made after the series was completed. In America, he claimed, "to be bilingual is to be suspect."<sup>10</sup> As if in opposition to this perception, Casas's painting capitalizes on the possibilities that emerge from being able to speak or read in two different ways. These productive ambiguities move his work beyond not only mere illustration but also the passive consumption of the movies. Instead, the work's large-scale address fosters active reflection on the issues at hand.<sup>11</sup> KM

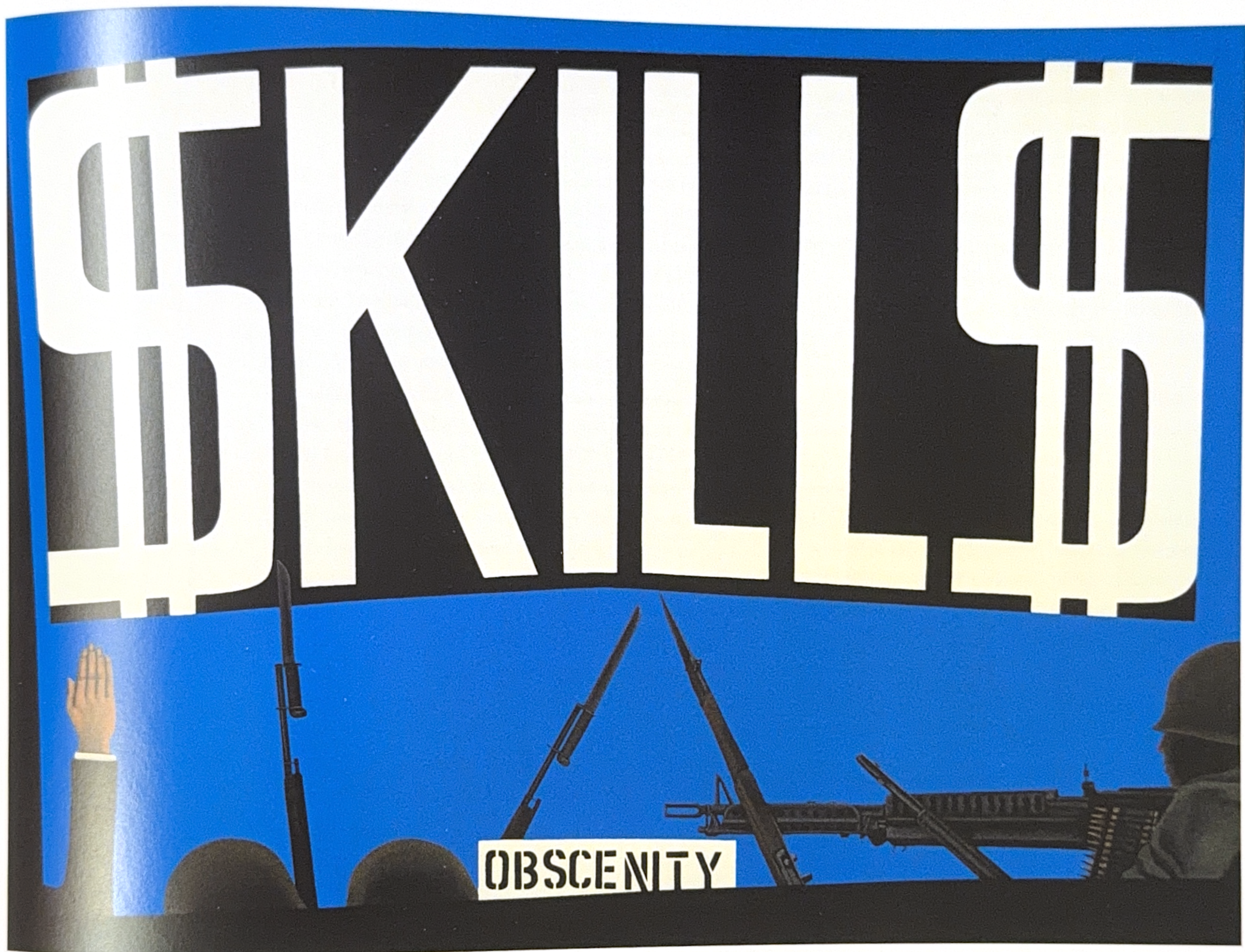
Mel Casas

*Humanscape 43*

1968

acrylic on canvas

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- 1 For Casas's description of this event, see "A Conversation with Mel Casas and Rubén C. Cordova," in *Born of Resistance: Cara a Cara Encounters with Chicana/o Visual Culture*, ed. Scott L. Baugh and Victor A. Sorell (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2015), 158-59.
- 2 Ibid., 166. For more wide-ranging accounts of the *Humanscapes*, see Rubén C. Cordova, "The Cinematic Genesis of the Mel Casas *Humanscape*, 1965-67," *Aztlán: A Journal of Chicano Studies* 36, no. 2 (Fall 2011): 51-87; Rubén C. Cordova, "Getting the Big Picture: Political Themes in the *Humanscapes* of Mel Casas," in *Born of Resistance*, 172-89; Dave Hickey, "Mel Casas: Border Lord," *Artspace: Southwestern Contemporary Arts Quarterly* 12, no. 4 (1988): 28-31; Nancy L. Kelker, *Mel Casas: Artist as Cultural Adjuster* (Lascassas, TN: Highship Press, 2014), 67-79.
- 3 Mel Casas, "Brown Paper Report" (1971), in *Con Safo: The Chicano Art Group and the Politics of South Texas*, ed. Rubén C. Cordova (Los Angeles: Chicano Studies Research Center, University of California, Los Angeles, 2011), 63. See this same volume for an important discussion of *Con Safo*. The position Casas takes in this text was foreshadowed in late 1967 when, after being named San Antonio's artist of the year, he used his acceptance speech to highlight the privilege bestowed upon the ideal of beauty represented by Barbie dolls. See Cordova, "The Cinematic Genesis of the Mel Casas *Humanscape*, 1965-67," 58.
- 4 For relevant statistics, see Melissa Ho, "ONE THING: VIET-NAM, American Art and the Vietnam War," in this volume, 28n61.
- 5 Casas, "Brown Paper Report," in *Con Safo*, 63.
- 6 Casas, quoted in Cordova, "Getting the Big Picture: Political Themes in the *Humanscapes* of Mel Casas," in *Born of Resistance*, 174.
- 7 Thanks to E. Carmen Ramos for this point.
- 8 Casas, quoted in Cordova, "Getting the Big Picture: Political Themes in the *Humanscapes* of Mel Casas," in *Born of Resistance*, 174.
- 9 A sexual charge is not unique to *Humanscape* 43. Figures elsewhere in the series take on the role of lovers, a play on the romantic possibilities of the drive-in.
- 10 Paul Karlstrom, Oral History Interview with Mel Casas, August 14 and 16, 1996, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, <https://www.aaa.si.edu/collections/interviews/oral-history-interview-mel-casas-5449#transcript>.
- 11 Ibid. Though the scale of Casas's series suggests public address, it is important to note that he did not frequently exhibit his works.