



MEL CASAS



Cover Illustration:

Humanscape 141: Barrio Dog, 1987

acrylic on canvas

72x96 inches

Collection of the Artist

An exhibition organized by
Laguna Gloria Art Museum
Austin, Texas

MEL CASAS

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Acknowledgments

Happily, this eagerly anticipated exhibition is now a reality. We can all congratulate ourselves for a powerful, visually dynamic, deeply meaningful and satisfying conclusion to all of our preparation.

The Exhibitions Department has done an exceptional job of moving forward with this project, in spite of the roadblocks and detours which have been an unexpected and sometimes difficult aspect of it. And thus, I thank Sylvia Metz Stevens, Debbie Armstrong-Morgan, Peter Mears and Julia Hart for their enthusiasm, hard work, and consummate professionalism in seeing this exhibition to its finished state. The Development Department is to be wholeheartedly applauded as well, for it is no easy task in the current economic climate to seek or to secure financial support for an exhibition. And I owe many thanks to the entire staff for the infinite ways in which they have worked together for the success of this exhibition.

Special appreciation is due to the lenders to the exhibition for parting with their works over the duration of the exhibition and allowing viewers in Texas to share their admiration and understanding of Mel's work. Our thanks to Ann and Jim Harithas of New York/Houston and to Sherry Somer and Tom Willome of Mico, Texas. Ann Harithas is also to be commended for her support and underwriting of the wonderful billboard project that allowed all of

Austin to experience Mel's work, if only in passing. Mel has a staunch and loyal supporter in her.

Support and enthusiasm for the exhibition were generated from a number of sources. AT&T provided a generous grant for the exhibition and its programs. Tracor, Inc., of Austin assisted greatly with the publication of not only the catalogue, but the invitation and poster as well. Our wholehearted thanks to them both.

Dave Hickey, art critic, cultural critic, writer and artists' friend *cum laude*, deservedly respected and admired for his extensive work in Texas, who now resides in San Diego, California, was the artist's and curator's unanimous choice for the catalogue essay. Here, Dave has written not only a wonderful personal account of his friend's work, but also an excellent study of Mel's artistic development and direction, and for this he is to be unreservedly commended. Many thanks go to Maria Oliphant as well, for her sensitive and unerring ability to provide Spanish translation for the English essay.

Finally, it is to Mel Casas whom I wish to address a special note of gratitude. Full of wisdom and good humor, he has been helpful to the extreme at every moment in the life of this exhibition. I congratulate him on the vigor, courage, and depth of this stunning body of work.

Monica F. Kindraka

BORDER LORD

by Dave Hickey

"Anything is immoral that consoles, stimulates or confirms a distortion. Anything that acts in place of the natural will to live is immoral. All cheap amusement becomes at maturity, immoral—the heroin of the soul."

Scott Fitzgerald, *In His Own Time*

"Evolution . . . is obviously not some process of drowning beings clutching at straws and climbing from suffering and travail and virtual extinction to tenuous momentary survival. Rather, evolution has been a matter of days well-lived, chameleon strength, energy, zappy sex, sunshine stored up, inventiveness, competitiveness, and the whole fun of busy brain cells."

Edward Hoagland, *Red Wolves and Black Bears*

That an artist like Mel Casas would make the transgression of observable borders and the articulation of invisible ones the business of his art should come as no surprise to anyone. One might say (although one would be wrong) that he could hardly have done otherwise, having been born on one border in El Paso, and wounded fighting for another in Korea, educated on one side of a border in Mexico to paint and teach on the other side in the United States, all the while participating in the culture and language of both—or all three if you count the Oriental culture he was exposed to during the Korean war and which still occupies a good deal of his interest and attention.

The general relevance of Casas' endeavor, however, arises from the less often acknowledged fact that, in the late 20th-century, like it or not, we all live on the border, on a multiplicity of borders, in fact, and the problems of identity that are so theatrically self-evident in Mel Casas' experience, exacerbated as they are by the confluence of culture and language, are equally implicit in our own.

We negotiate daily those more obvious and highly-mediated lines of demarcation that divide na-

tions, cultures, races, classes, generations, sexes, iconographies and languages. But we do so, as Casas' art so relentlessly demonstrates, more or less at the mercy of that more mysterious border between language itself and the actions, images, values and imperatives it signifies and validates. The perplexity of this condition is only intensified by our efforts to locate ourselves comfortably to one side or the other of these cultural fault lines, since these efforts inevitably result in our discovery that the rifts run, not to one side or the other, but through the very centers of our being.

So, gradually we are forced to acknowledge that the safe, bordered haven of autonomy we seek probably doesn't exist and that, finally, as far as our consciousness is concerned, nothing exists *but* the borders—that everything we know and do, we know and do in terms of those fluid and unstable areas of intersection between what we know and how we know it, boundaries which perpetually and reflexively divide, define and subvert signs and symbols, actions and attitudes that have no meaning distinct from one another.

AMO Y SEÑOR DE LA FRONTERA

por Dave Hickey

"Lo que sea que consuela, estimula, o confirma una distorsión, es inmoral. Lo que sea que toma el lugar del natural deseo de vivir, es inmoral. En la madurez, todas las entretenimientos baratas se vuelven inmorales: la heroína del alma."

Scott Fitzgerald, *En su propio tiempo*

"La evolución . . . obviamente que no es un proceso en el que aquellos que están a punto de perecer se aferran a medidas desesperadas y saliendo del sufrimiento, tribulación y virtual extinción, logran un estado de tenue sobrevivencia. Por el contrario, la evolución ha consistido en días bien vividos, fuerza de camaleón, energía, vida sexual maratónica, luz solar acumulada, inventiva, anhelo de competir y la entretenimiento de tener los células grises en constante uso."

Edward Hoagland, *Lobos rojos y osos negros*

A nadie debería sorprender que un artista como Mel Casas eligiera como tema de su arte la violación de fronteras evidentes así como la articulación de aquellas que son invisibles. Uno podría decir (aunque uno estaría equivocado) que era algo casi inevitable, habiendo nacido en una frontera en El Paso y sido herido en Korea batallando por otra frontera, educado en un lado de una frontera en Méjico, para terminar pintando y enseñando al otro lado, en los Estados Unidos, continuamente participando en la cultura e idioma de ambos, o de los tres, si contamos la cultural Oriental a que tuvo acceso durante la Guerra de Korea y la que todavía mantiene gran parte de su interés y atención.

Sin embargo, la importancia general del esfuerzo de Casas, tiene su origen en un hecho que pocos reconocen: que en la última parte del siglo veinte, nos guste o no, todos vivimos en la frontera, o más bien en una multiplicidad de fronteras y los problemas de identidad que en el caso de Mel Casas son tan dramáticamente evidentes ya que están exacerbados por la confluencia de cultura e idioma, están igualmente implícitos en los nuestros.

Dariamente tenemos que ver con aquellas líneas de demarcación más obvias y altamente arbitradas que dividen a las naciones, culturas, razas, clases, generaciones, sexos, iconografías y lenguajes pero, como el arte de Casas implacablemente demuestra, lo hacemos a merced de esa frontera más misteriosa aún que existe entre el lenguaje mismo y los actos, imágenes, valores e imperativos a que da significado y validez. La perplejidad de esta condición se ve intensificada por nuestros esfuerzos en plantarnos cómodamente a uno u otro lado de estas fisuras culturales, ya que estos esfuerzos resultan, inevitablemente, en que descubrimos que las hendiduras no van de uno a otro lado sino que por el centro mismo de nuestro ser.

De modo que nos vemos obligados a reconocer, gradualmente, que el refugio seguro y demarcado de la autonomía que buscamos tal vez no exista y que, en último término, en lo que atañe a nuestra conciencia, nada existe *sino* las fronteras y que todo lo que sabemos y hacemos, lo sabemos y

Casas encapsulates the artist's stake in this paradoxical situation in a succinct paraphrase of Korzybski: "Language makes us see," he notes in one of his conceptual diagrams, and "image makes us talk." But, where other artists in recent years have taken this bottom-line, post-modern axiom as an occasion for despair and an excuse to retreat into academic exegesis or salon decoration, Casas, early in his career, extended this observation to define the task he set for himself as an artist: *to combine language and image in such a way that we might see more articulately and speak more imaginatively.*



hich brings us hard up against the first cultural border Mel Casas' art simply disregards: Thomas DeQuincey's pervasive 19th-century Romantic distinction between the art of "Knowledge" which teaches us and the art of "Power" which moves us. Casas' art always aims to teach us and to move us simultaneously. As such, it is *always* political, at least in the classical sense. It aims to use "beauty" in the service of "truth" and "truth" in the service of the "good," and to define the "good" as an increase in general awareness on the part of the public at large. As an artist Casas has no interest in "true" statements or "good" paintings as distinct from one another, nor confused with one another, for that matter. It is a stance that renders standard art-language discussion of "style," "imagery," "metaphor," and "genre" inoperable and inconsequential, since it is the invisible linguistic substructures and cultural hierarchies of "style," "imagery," "metaphor," and "genre" which supply the actual *content* of the paintings whose *subject* is most often the ways life imitates art, usually to life's detriment.

Having dispensed with these traditional *beaux arts* parameters of definition, what Casas gives us in its place is a *format*, a topographical, syntactical division of his 6' by 8' canvases, designed not to predicate but to subvert and deconstruct the hierarchical and metaphorical content of the words, images, and styles he employs. Each of the canvases after 1968 is composed of three distinct semiotic domains: (1) A black border extends across the bottom of each canvas occasionally rising up one vertical side to define the canvas surface as a "page" upon which some graphic text is usually applied in the manner of a caption. (2) Above this black border and extending up the sides of the canvas a blue ground defines a shallow "pictorial" space usually peopled with traditional representational images from "real life." (3) Above and "behind" this pictorial space, a large, concave rectangular area in the shape of a "Vista-vision" screen fills the entire upper and central two-thirds of the canvas within the black and blue borders providing a domain for "pure images"—that is, for images whose reference is not to the phenomenal world but to the generalized world of metaphor, definition, and abstraction.



In the language of semiotics, then, these canvases are divided into a flat black field of *graphic* signs, a shallow blue field of *phenomenal* signs, and a symbolic (no-size) field of *categorical* signs. This format provides a syntax for "sorting out" these levels of reference and visualizing the otherwise invisible anomalies and interpenetrations generated by what Charles Morris calls "the tripartite composition of signs." In

hacemos a través de esas cambiantes e inestables áreas de intersección entre lo que sabemos y cómo lo sabemos, fronteras que perpetuamente y en forma refleja dividen, definen, revolucionan las señales y los símbolos, las acciones y las actitudes cuyos significados no se distinguen uno del otro.

Casas resume el riesgo que el artista corre en esta paradójica situación en una breve parafrasis de Korzybski: "El lenguaje nos hace ver", que aparece en uno de sus diagramas conceptuales, así como "la imagen nos hace hablar". Pero, a diferencia de otros artistas que en los últimos años han tomado este axioma límite y post-modernista, como una razón para desesperar y una excusa para refugiarse en elaboraciones académicas o decoraciones de salón, Casas, muy temprano en su carrera, extendió esta observación para definir la tarea que, como artista, se había impuesto a sí mismo: *combinar el lenguaje y la imagen de tal manera, que nos permita ver más elocuentemente y hablar más imaginativamente.*

Lo que nos pone de golpe frente a la primera frontera cultural que el arte de Mel Casas simplemente ignora: la distinción romántica y típica del siglo 19 que Thomas DeQuincey hace entre el arte del "Conocimiento", que nos enseña, y el arte del "Poder", que nos motiva. Casas mantiene que el arte siempre tiene como objeto enseñarnos y motivarnos al mismo tiempo. Siendo por esta razón *siempre* político, por lo menos en el sentido clásico de la palabra. Aspira a usar la "belleza" al servicio de la "Verdad" y la "Verdad" al servicio del "bien", definiendo el "bien" como un incremento en el entendimiento general por parte del grueso del público. Como artista, a Casas no le interesan las

declaraciones "verdaderas" o las "buenas" pinturas que se distingan una de la otra, ni tampoco que se confundan una con la otra. Esta es una actitud que vuelve la clásica discusión del arte-lenguaje sobre "estilo", "imágenes", "metáfora", y "género", inoperable y sin importancia, ya que son las subestructuras lingüísticas invisibles y las jerarquías culturales de "estilo", "imágenes", "metáfora", y "género" las que en efecto proporcionan el *Contenido* de las pinturas cuyo *tema* es, la mayoría de las veces, los modos en que la vida imita al arte, generalmente en detrimento de la vida.

Una vez que Casas ha dejado de lado estos parámetros de definición tradicionales de los *beaux arts*, lo que nos da en su reemplazo es un *formato*, una división topográfica y sintáctica de sus telas de 6' por 8', con la intención no de predicar sino que de revolucionar y desmantelar el contenido jerárquico y metafórico de las palabras, imágenes y estilos que emplea. Cada una de las telas producidas después de 1968 está compuesta de tres zonas semióticas: 1) Un borde negro a lo ancho de la parte baja de la tela, de vez en cuando extendiéndose verticalmente hacia un lado definiendo así la tela como una "página" donde un texto gráfico generalmente aparece como un título. 2) Arriba de este borde negro y extendiéndose hacia arriba por los costados, en forma vertical, un campo azul define un espacio "pictórico" sin profundidad, poblado, por lo general, por imágenes tradicionales de "la vida real." 3) Más arriba y "detrás" de este espacio pictórico, una área rectangular, grande y cóncava en la forma de una pantalla de "Vista-visión" llena los dos tercios superiores y centrales de la tela, enmarcada por los bordes negros y azules creando una zona para "puras imá-



Humanscape 58: American Beauty, 1969
acrylic on canvas
72×96 inches
Collection of the Artist

Morris' formulation every sign or group of signs embodies, regardless of its apparent neutrality, a *designative* component (denoting *this* or *that*), an *appraisive* component (assessing *good* or *bad*), and a *prescriptive* component (implying *ought* or *ought not*). The paintings are equally and urgently concerned with the business of laying bare these subliminal *appraisive* and *prescriptive* cultural undertones of apparently neutral designative terms and images, and with offering some healing insight to the neurotic symptoms generated by living in a world dominated by alien and antique cultural images and stereotypes, like "Brownies" in *Humanscape 62*, to take a simple instance, or "American Beauty" in *Humanscape 58*.

Humanscape 58 is "captioned" with the legend "American Beauty" in American colors, blue on a red and white ground, above which a "pictorial" image of two pink (red and white) "American beauties" and a clump of roses are deployed on a blue ground, behind which, on the symbolic screen, we are presented with the categorical "dictionary" image which defines the qualities of an American Beauty Rose. What Casas' juxtaposition of sign, image and symbol implies is that the bonding of this idealized rose with the term "American Beauty" presents us as well with a subliminal prescriptive definition of "Beauty in America," in terms of a WASPish, voluptuous combination of "American" colors.

This idea, that we live in a landscape not of things but of subliminally appraisive and prescriptive images, is most succinctly demonstrated in the earliest painting in this exhibition, *Humanscape 35: Exit* (1967), which also entitles the whole series. In this painting we are presented with a cluster of dispossessed dark-

skinned people loitering in the shallow pictorial space before a large symbolic image of the torso of a reclining white woman viewed from above so that we are looking across her breasts and through her legs. The torso is rendered as a theatrical 19th-century landscape (or, more literally, humanscape) with the path between her breasts and legs implying some form of passage with overtones of ritual rebirth. This reading is reinforced by the painting's subtitle, "Exit," and the image most probably represents the setting of Casas' hometown, El Paso del Norte, the pass to the north, the exit from Mexico translated into the imagery of American popular culture that tends to portray the American landscape in terms of a recumbent fertile white woman from "the moon on the breast of the new-fallen snow" to its "purple mountain majesties above the fruited plain." It is a convention borrowed from 18th-century English landscape literature that also provides the central joke of England's most famous dirty book *Fanny Hill* (i.e. fanny = hill), in which the convention of the "humanscape" is pursued with a good deal of antic vitality. Casas, of course, employs this powerful, yet all but invisible cultural stereotype to dramatize the daunting prospect of brown-skinned immigrants who can only escape from the South by being, in effect, reborn into a white mother culture.

Again and again in the early paintings we are given examples of the extent to which generalized popular imagery and language imposes itself on our everyday life. In *Humanscape 70: Comic Whitewash* a veritable squadron of white, costumed, authoritarian superheroes come flying out of the symbolic frame to infect the dreams and, by implication, the self image of a young Chicano; in *Humanscape 68: Kitchen Spanish* the reference of

genes," es decir, imágenes cuyo punto de referencia no es el mundo perceptible, sino que aquel de la metáfora, definición y abstracción.

Por lo tanto, en el lenguaje semiótico estas telas están divididas en un campo negro plano de signos *gráficos*, un campo azul sin profundidad de señales *perceptibles*, y un campo simbólico (sin tamaño definido) de señales *categorías*. Este formato provee una sintaxis para "ordenar" estos niveles de referencia y visualizar las anomalías e interpenetraciones invisibles, generadas por lo que Charles Morris llama "la composición tripartita de las señales." En la formulación de Morris, cada señal o grupo de señales, representa sin importar su aparente neutralidad, un componente *designador* (que denota *ésto* o *éso*), un componente *valorativo* (que califica *bueno* o *malo*) y un componente *prescriptible* (que implica *debería* o *no debería*). Las pinturas se ocupan igual y urgentemente con la cuestión de poner a descubierto estos matices culturales subliminales *valorativos* y *prescriptibles* de términos e imágenes designadores aparentemente neutrales, que ofrecen una percepción algo restauradora a los síntomas neuróticos generados al vivir en un mundo dominado por imágenes culturales y estereotipos foráneos y antiguos, como "Brownies" en *Humanscape 62*, para citar un ejemplo simple, o *American Beauty* en *Humanscape 58*.

Humanscape 58 tiene como título "American Beauty" escrito en los colores de la bandera: azul sobre un campo rojo y blanco, sobre el cual una imagen "pictórica" de dos "Bellezas Americanas" de color rosa (rojo y blanco) y un ramo de rosas aparecen desplegadas en un campo

azul, detrás del cual, en la pantalla simbólica nos vemos enfrentados con la imagen categórica de "diccionario" que define las cualidades de una rosa American Beauty. La yuxtaposición que hace Casas de señal, imagen y símbolo implica que, al fusionar esta rosa idealizada con el término "American Beauty," nos está confrontando al mismo tiempo con una definición prescriptible y subliminal de "La Belleza en América" por medio de una voluptuosa combinación de colores "Americanos," que dan por entendido ser blanco, anglo-sajón y protestante.

Esta idea de que vivimos en un paisaje no de objetos sino que de imágenes valorativas y prescriptibles subliminales es demostrada más escuetamente en la pintura más antigua de esta exposición: *Humanscape 35: Exit* (1967) que también presta su título a toda la serie. En esta pintura nos enfrentamos con un grupo de desposeídos de piel oscura, malgastando el tiempo en el espacio pictórico sin profundidad delante de una imagen grande simbólica del torso de una mujer blanca reclinada vista desde arriba, de modo que podemos ver por el medio de sus pechos y por el medio de las piernas. El torso está representado como un paisaje (o mejor dicho, un paisaje humano) teatral del siglo 19 con el sendero entre los pechos y piernas implicando algún tipo de travesía con indicios de un re-nacimiento ritual. Esta interpretación se ve reenforzada por el subtítulo del cuadro, "Salida." La imagen tal vez represente el lugar de origen del pintor: El Paso del Norte, la salida de Méjico traducida en una imagen de la cultura popular Americana que tiende a representar el paisaje Americano como una mujer blanca reclinada como por ejemplo "The moon on the breast of the new-fallen show" o "purple mountain majesties above the fruited plain."

the term is expanded from its casual association with a pidgin language to encompass a whole race of people, the "kitchen Spanish," who are regarded by the dominant white culture as cartoon stereotypes, as standardized and interchangeable as any other "kitchen appliance."

The blame for these cultural aberrations is not laid solely at the feet of the white culture and its media manipulators, however. The populace at large is called to account just as readily in paintings like *Humanscape 77: Temporary Loss of Image* in which the symbolic screen has gone black and the herd of sheep crossing before it, in the absence of cultural authority, have lost their images as well, existing only as transparent profiles in the vacuum.

Having said all of this, however, I should hasten to point out that the quality that most distinguishes Mel Casas as an artist is neither his artistic acuity, nor his intellectual subtlety, nor the trenchancy of his critique of contemporary culture. Nor is it even his longtime commitment to an artistic strategy, only recently fashionable. Finally, for me at least, it is the courage and high spirits with which he has accepted the rather demoralizing conclusions and daunting challenges posed by his own insights into the nature of culture, language and the artistic endeavor.

Looking back, as I have been, over twenty years of largely unrecognized and unrewarded creative work, what strikes me most immediately is not the despair or the anger (although they are there, in spades), but the dazzling vitality, the visual elegance and thoroughgoing good-heartedness of the

spectacle, its systematic acceptance of its own challenges. The work that begins in the '60s with a critique of the virulence of the popular culture readily accepts the challenge to provide real political imagery in the Farmworker paintings, and having bid farewell to that idiom (with the shadowy "shanghai gesture" superimposed on *Humanscape 63: Show of Hands*), he proceeds to its alternative and swiftly dismantles the comic impotence of abstract art in a series of paintings like *Humanscape 108: Surely a Collectible*, in which the startling irrelevance of the endeavor is starkly dramatized by the total depopulation of the frontal pictorial space.

What is most amazing about all of these efforts at subversion and deconstruction is that Casas, the artist, indulges in none of the masochistic visual self-denial, or self-conscious ugliness so characteristic of contemporary efforts in these areas. There is a charming impudence in his perfect willingness to have his cake and deconstruct it too. He seems delighted, in fact, to indulge himself in the voluptuousness of the "American Beauty," in the pop dazzle of the "Comic White-wash," in the faux grandeur of political rhetoric and the tasteful wash-and-spatter vocabulary of abstract painting, as if to say, "Where is the authority in criticizing something you can't do?" In the process he has made a lot of good pictures and good paintings in the service of the public good.

And, finally, in his latest paintings, having cleared the field of proletarian low-art imagery, mid-cult political imagery and elitist high-art imagery, Casas accepts the challenge to fill the symbolic space he has so shrewdly vacuumed out over the years with his own rambunctious,

Este es un convencionalismo que se remonta a la literatura inglesa del siglo 18 con el paisaje inglés como protagonista y que también fue la broma central del libro pornográfico inglés más famoso, *Fanny Hill* (fanny=hill=trasero=colina) y en el que el convencionalismo del "paisaje humano" se explota con gran vitalidad jocosa. Por supuesto que Casas emplea este poderoso pero no invisible estereotipo cultural para dramatizar el intimidante prospecto de aquellos inmigrantes de piel oscura que sólo pueden escapar desde el sur al volver a nacer en la cultura de la madre blanca.

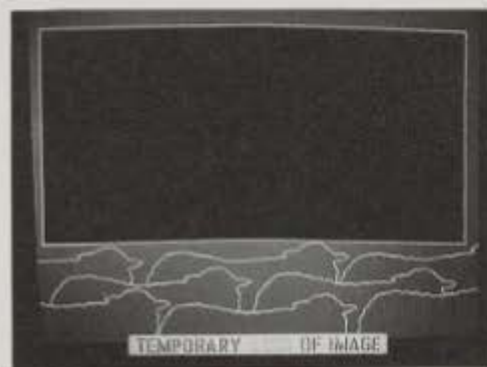
En las pinturas más antiguas hay un ejemplo tras otro en que vemos hasta qué punto las imágenes populares generalizadas y el lenguaje popular se imponen en nuestra vida diaria. En *Humanscape 70: Comic Whitewash*, un verdadero escuadrón de superhéroes vestidos de blanco, autoritarios, emergen volando del marco simbólico para contaminar los sueños y, por ende, la visión que un Chicano joven tiene de sí mismo; en *Humanscape 68: Kitchen Spanish*, la referencia al término se expande más allá de la asociación accidental con un idioma jerigonza para abarcar toda una raza, the "kitchen Spanish" a quien la cultura blanca dominante ve como estereotipos de historietas, tan uniforme e intercambiable como cualquiera otra "máquina de cocina." Sin embargo, la culpabilidad por estas aberraciones culturales no recae solamente sobre la cultura blanca y sus expertos en manipular los medios de comunicación. En pinturas como *Humanscape 77: Temporary Loss of Image*, al populacho en general se le llama a rendir cuentas: la pantalla simbólica se ha vuelto negra y el rebaño de ovejas que lo cruza, en la ausencia de

autoridad cultural, también ha perdido su imagen existiendo sólo como perfiles transparentes en el vacío.

Sin embargo, después de todo lo dicho, prontamente debería señalar que la cualidad que mejor distingue a Mel Casas como artista no es ni su agudeza artística, ni su sutileza intelectual, ni tampoco su crítica mordaz de la cultura contemporánea. Ni siquiera es su dedicación durante tanto tiempo, a una estrategia artística que sólo se ha puesto de moda últimamente. Más bien, para mí por lo menos, es la entereza y optimismo con que ha aceptado las conclusiones más bien desmoralizadoras y desafíos intimidantes que él mismo ha lanzado en sus cavilaciones sobre la naturaleza de la cultura, lenguaje y cometido artístico.

Reflexionando sobre veinte años de labor creativa que ha sido prácticamente ignorada y que no ha cosechado laureles, lo que más me llama la atención no es la desesperanza ni el enfado (aunque están presentes en alto grado), sino que la vitalidad deslumbrante, el espectáculo tan altamente humanitario y de elegancia visual, así como la aceptación sistemática de sus propios desafíos. La obra que comienza en la década del 60 criticando la virulencia de la cultura popular, prontamente acepta el desafío de proveer imágenes políticas reales en las pinturas sobre los Trabajadores Agrícolas y habiendo dejado de lado esa jerga (con el tenebroso dedo fálico superimpuesto sobre *Humanscape 63: Show of Hands*), procede a una alternativa y rápidamente desmantela la cómica impotencia del arte abstracto en una serie de pinturas como *Humanscape 108: Surely a Collectible*, donde

Humanscape 77: Temporary Loss of Image, 1975
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homegrown, street-wise cultural iconography. From the glamorous paper animals of *Humanscape* 138: *Pinatas*, to the viscous avocado of *Humanscape* 132: *Guacamole* with its ominous tostados protruding like lurking Chicano sharks, to the lively, scrungy street-pooch of *Humanscape* 141: *Barrio Dog* with his feral grin and his bilingual bark, these images benignly infect all the semiotic domains of the canvas and celebrate a culture without romanticizing it.

By way of a conclusion I found myself casting about for a comparison that might illuminate Mel Casas' peculiar combination of suave aesthetics, intellectual acrobatics and egalitarian politics, and despaired of finding one until I chanced to flip the television to a filmed performance of "Major Barbara." In one of those low-grade, medium-wattage epiphanies critics are prone to under deadline, I realized I had stumbled upon a true compadre for Mel Casas. In the person of Bernard Shaw, the bi-cultural Irish-English intellectual, wit and playwright, I had found another artist dedicated to channeling all of his craft and intellect toward changing the oppressive status quo, and just

as equally dedicated to not getting all mopey about the sorry state of affairs in which the world perpetually finds itself. In fact, there is a passage in a Desmond McCarthy review of a Shaw play that pretty much characterizes the source of my affection and respect for Mel Casas as a man and artist. "All through Bernard Shaw's work," McCarthy notes, and I would say the same for Mel Casas, "there plays perpetually a little fountain of irrational gaiety; I am inclined to think it is his distinguishing characteristic. I call this gaiety of spirit 'irrational' because it is quite unaffected by his conclusions or by events. How refreshing it is in hot debate, how cooling to the swollen solemnity of passion, how exhilarating to watch! (I prefer myself to drink courage at a spring of laughter than to get 'dutch courage' from a swig at anger's brandy bottle)."

la alarmante falta de propósito de esa corriente es vívidamente dramatizada por la carencia total de figuras en el espacio pictórico frontal.

Lo más asombroso de todos estos intentos de subversión y desmantelamiento es que Casas, el artista, no cae en la abnegación masoquista visual o en la fealdad cohibida tan característica de los esfuerzos contemporáneos en estas áreas. Hay un atractivo descaro en su deseo de crear y desmantelar al mismo tiempo. Parece deleitarse, en realidad, en entregarse a la volup-tuosidad de "American Beauty," en el centelleo de historietas de "Comic Whitewash," en la falsa magnificencia de la retórica política y en el vocabulario de buen gusto de la pintura abstracta, a punto de lavado y salpicado, como diciendo: "Quién les dio la autoridad para criticar lo que ustedes mismos no pueden hacer?". En el proceso ha producido un montón de buenos cuadros y buenas pinturas en servicio del bien público. Y, finalmente, en sus pinturas más recientes, habiendo dejado de lado las imágenes proletarias del bajo arte, las imágenes políticas de cultura mediana, y aquellas elitistas del alto arte, Casas acepta el desafío de llenar el espacio simbólico, que tan hábilmente ha vaciado a través de los años, con su propia iconografía cultural vibrante, hecha en casa, a sus anchas con la sagacidad popular urbana. Desde los glamorosos animales de papel en *Humanscape 138: Piñatas* al aguacate viscoso en *Humanscape 132: Guacamole*, con sus tostadas de mal agujero, protuberancias que parecen tiburones Chicanos al acecho, al perrucho vivaz y de mala catadura de *Humanscape 141: Barrio Dog*, con su mueca salvaje y su ladrido bi-lingüe, estas imágenes contaminan benignamente todos los dominios semióticos de la tela, celebrando una cultura sin idealizarla.



manera de conclusión me sorprendí a mí mismo tratando de encontrar una comparación que me ayudara a iluminar la peculiar combinación en Mel Casas de una estética afable, acrobacia intelectual, política igualitaria. Estaba a punto de darme por vencido, cuando al cambiar el canal de televisión me encontré con una versión filmada de "Major Barbara." En una de esas inspiraciones de bajo calibre y potencia media a que los críticos son tan propensos cuando la fecha de entrega está por vencerse, me dí cuenta que había encontrado el alma gemela de Mel Casas. En la persona de Bernard Shaw, el dramaturgo, intelectual, hombre de ingenio, bi-cultural Irlandés-Inglés había encontrado otro artista dedicado a encauzar talento e intelecto para cambiar el status quo, e igualmente determinado a no dejarse abatir por el eterno mal estado en que el mundo parece encontrarse. En efecto, hay un pasaje en un análisis de una de las obras de teatro de Shaw que Desmond McCarthy escribió y que resume en gran parte el origen de mi afecto y respeto por Mel Casas como persona y artista. "A través de toda la obra de Bernard Shaw," dice McCarthy, y yo diría lo mismo de la de Mel Casas, "corre perpetuamente un manantial de alegría irracional; estoy por creer que es la característica que lo distingue. Digo que esta alegría es 'irracional' porque ni sus conclusiones ni los hechos parecen afectarla. ¡Qué refrescante parece en el medio de ardiente debate!, ¡qué frescor para la engreída solemnidad de la pasión!, ¡qué regocijo observarla! (Lo que es yo, prefiero beber valor en un manantial de risa que sentir valentía de borracho con un trago de la botella del enfado)."

Art as Language
Art of the Southwest
Art of the Border

On the Border of What?

1. fringe art
2. marginal art
3. ornamental art
4. art on the verge
5. art on the brink
6. art on the rim
7. art of the ethnic minorities

Compound Question by Compounding
Border into Borderline.

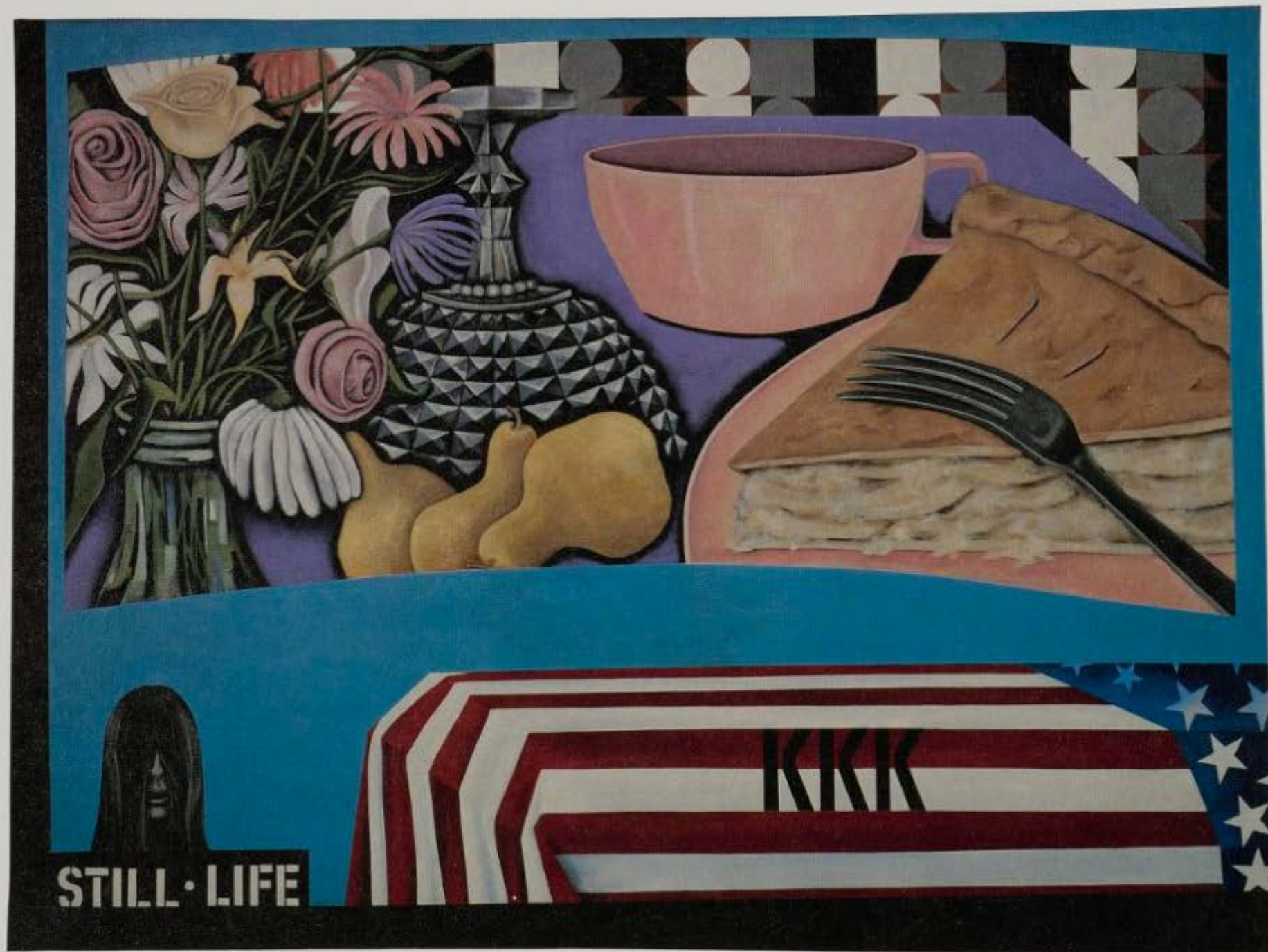
1. borderline art
2. intermediate art
3. in between art
4. not quite average art
5. marginal validity art

Do Negative Word Factors Produce
Negative Image Responses?





Humanscape 35: Exit, 1967
acrylic on canvas
72 x 96 inches
Collection of the Artist



Humanscape 47: Still Life, 1968
 acrylic on canvas
 72 x 96 inches
 Collection of the Artist



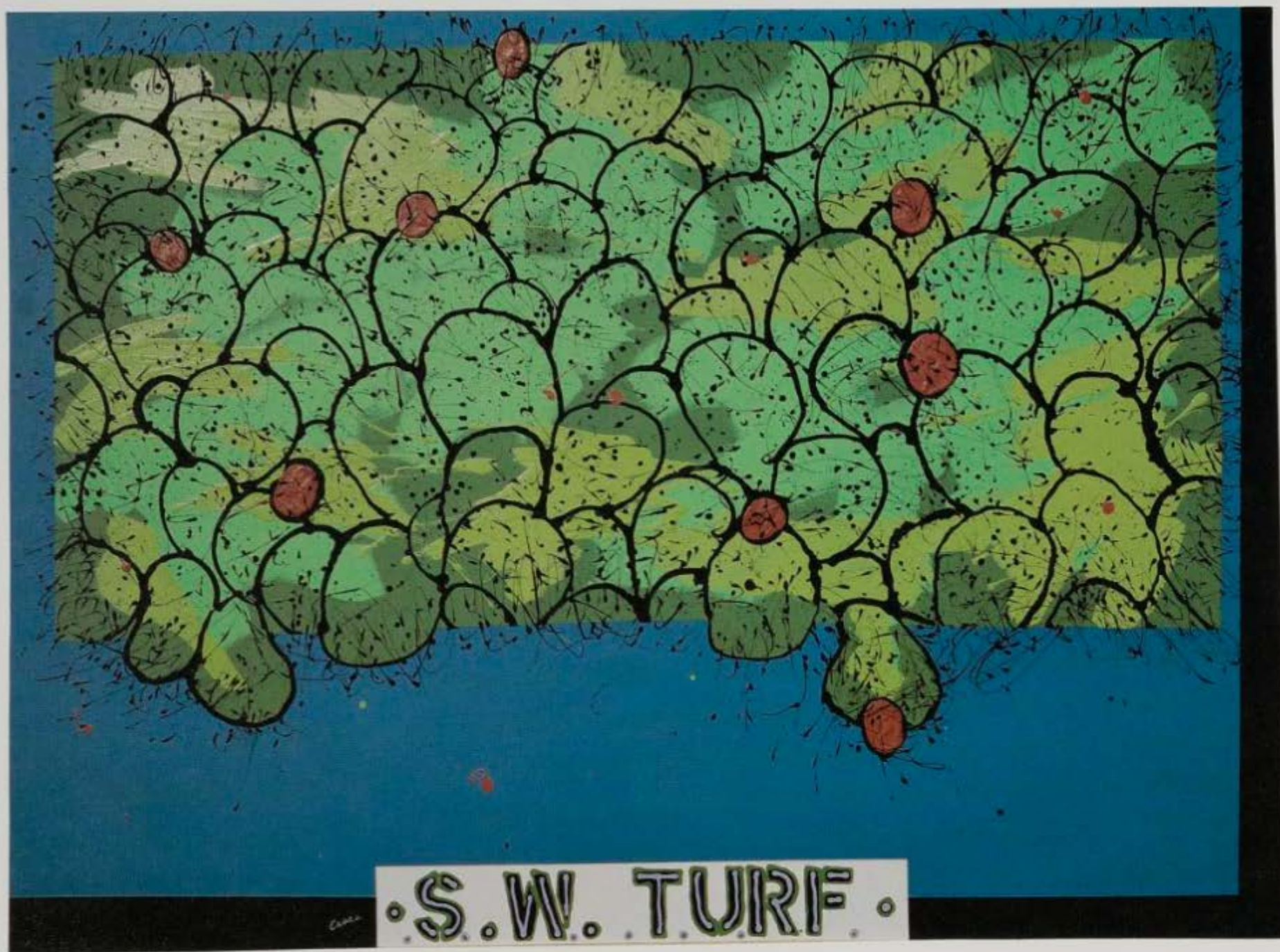
Humanscape 63: Show of Hands, 1970
acrylic on canvas
72 x 96 inches
Collection of the Artist



Humanscape 68: Kitchen Spanish, 1973
 acrylic on canvas
 72 x 96 inches
 Collection of the Artist



Humanscape 86: Bingo is a Catholic Icon, 1976
 acrylic on canvas
 72 x 96 inches
 Collection of the Artist



Humanscape 120: Southwest Turf, 1983
acrylic on canvas
72 x 96 inches
Collection of the Artist



Humanscape 132: Guacamole, 1984
acrylic on canvas
72 x 96 inches
Collection of the Artist

Painting of a Dog A Dog of a Painting

BARRIO DOG: (bow guau)

1. Socially Frustrated
2. Insecure
3. Violent
4. Residence: Inner City, Urban
5. Bark: Bilingual - Barriolese
6. Food: Leftovers, Scarce
7. Independent
8. Self Actualizing

SUBURBIAN DOG: (bow wow)

1. Socially Adjusted
2. Secure
3. Amiable
4. Residence: Suburbia, Rural
5. Bark: Monolingual - Anglolese
6. Food: Specialized, Abundant
7. Dependent
8. Socialized Subsidized

Dog With A Cause

Dog Without A Cause

"Man's Best Friend"
Barks to the social status quo



Humanscape 141: Barrio Dog, 1987
acrylic on canvas
72 x 96 inches
Collection of the Artist

Checklist of the Exhibition

Humanscape 35: Exit, 1967
acrylic on canvas
72 x 96 inches
Collection of the Artist

Humanscape 47: Still Life, 1968
acrylic on canvas
72 x 96 inches
Collection of the Artist

* *Humanscape 49: Meta-Ethics*, 1968
acrylic on canvas
72 x 96 inches
Collection of the Artist

* *Humanscape 54: Cornucopia*, 1969
acrylic on canvas
72 x 96 inches
Collection of the Artist

Humanscape 62: Brownies of the Southwest, 1970
acrylic on canvas
72 x 96 inches
Collection of the Artist

Humanscape 63: Show of Hands, 1970
acrylic on canvas
72 x 96 inches
Collection of the Artist

* *Humanscape 64: Greening of America*, 1971
acrylic on canvas
72 x 96 inches
Collection of the Artist

Humanscape 65: New Horizons, 1971
acrylic on canvas
72 x 96 inches
Collection of Mr. & Mrs. James Harithas,
Houston/New York City

Humanscape 68: Kitchen Spanish, 1973
acrylic on canvas
72 x 96 inches
Collection of the Artist

Humanscape 70: Comic Whitewash, 1973
acrylic on canvas
72 x 96 inches
Collection of the Artist

* *Humanscape 72: Anatomy of a White Dog*, 1974
acrylic on canvas
72 x 96 inches
Collection of the Artist

Humanscape 73: Chicano Image on the Move, 1974
acrylic on canvas
72 x 96 inches
Collection of Mr. and Mrs. James Harithas,
Houston/New York City

Humanscape 75: Lichtenstein in a Comic Spot, 1975
acrylic on canvas
72 x 96 inches
Collection of the Artist

Humanscape 80: Remember Left is Loose, Right is Tight, 1976
acrylic on canvas
72 x 96 inches
Collection of the Artist

* *Humanscape 84: Cages are Crummy*, 1976
acrylic on canvas
72 x 96 inches
Collection of the Artist

Humanscape 86: Bingo is a Catholic Icon, 1976
acrylic on canvas
72 x 96 inches
Collection of the Artist

Humanscape 108: Surely a Collectible, 1980
acrylic on canvas
72 x 96 inches
Collection of Sharon Somers and Thomas Willome, Mico, Texas

* *Humanscape 111: Possible Landscape*, 1981
acrylic on canvas
72 x 96 inches
Collection of the Artist

Humanscape 117: Texano, 1982
acrylic on canvas
72 x 96 inches
Collection of the Artist

Humanscape 120: Southwest Turf, 1983
acrylic on canvas
72 x 96 inches
Collection of the Artist

* *Humanscape 127: Juan Handcock*, 1984
acrylic on canvas
72 x 96 inches
Collection of the Artist

Humanscape 132: Guacamole, 1984
acrylic on canvas
72 x 96 inches
Collection of the Artist

* *Humanscape 136: Pico de Gallo*, 1984
acrylic on canvas
72 x 96 inches
Collection of the Artist

Humanscape 138: Piñatas, 1985
acrylic on canvas
72 x 96 inches
Collection of the Artist

Humanscape 140: Day of the Muertos, 1987
acrylic on canvas
72 x 96 inches
Collection of the Artist

Humanscape 141: Barrio Dog, 1987
acrylic on canvas
72 x 96 inches
Collection of the Artist

* *Humanscape 142: Bluebonnet Plague*, 1988
acrylic on canvas
72 x 96 inches
Collection of the Artist

* *Humanscape 143: Mimbres Sunset*, 1988
acrylic on canvas
72 x 96 inches
Collection of the Artist

Humanscape 146: Penitentes, 1988
acrylic on canvas
72 x 96 inches
Collection of the Artist

Humanscape 148: Texas T'ang, 1988
acrylic on canvas
72 x 96 inches
Collection of the Artist

* not in exhibition at Laguna Gloria Art Museum

MELESIO CASAS



Born November 24, 1929 in El Paso, Texas
 B.A. in Painting, Texas Western College, El Paso, Texas, 1956
 M.F.A. in Painting, University of the Americas, Mexico City, Mexico, 1958
 Currently Professor of Art and Chairman of the Visual Arts and Technology Department, San Antonio College, San Antonio, Texas

Selected Awards

- 1956 National Society of Arts and Letters, El Paso, Texas
- 1958 University of the Americas Art Gallery, Seventh Exhibition, Mexico City, Mexico
- 1959 Sixth Annual Sun Carnival Exhibition, El Paso Art Museum, El Paso, Texas
- 1964 Ninth Annual Sun Carnival Exhibition, El Paso Art Museum, El Paso, Texas
- 1966 Thirty-sixth Annual Exhibition of San Antonio Art League, Witte Memorial Museum, San Antonio, Texas
- 1976 Certificate of Appreciation for "Distinguished Service in the Field of Art" presented by The Committee of Citizens Dedicated to Excellence in College Education, San Antonio, Texas
- 1977, 1979 Piper Professor Candidate, San Antonio College, San Antonio, Texas
- 1986 Seventh Annual Tribute to the Chicano Arts, "Outstanding Service Award," Our Lady of the Lake College, San Antonio, Texas
- Main Street Invitational, Fort Worth Art Festival, Fort Worth, Texas

Solo Exhibitions

- 1958 Galeria Genova, Mexico City, Mexico
- 1961 Y.W.C.A., El Paso, Texas
- 1963, 1968 Mexican Art Gallery, Mexican American Institute of Cultural Exchange, San Antonio, Texas
- 1967 Trinity University, San Antonio, Texas
- Texas Lutheran College, Seguin, Texas
- 1973 Boehm Gallery, Palomar College, San Marcos, California
- 1976 "Mel Casas/Humanscapes," Contemporary Arts Museum, Houston, Texas
- 1979, 1982 Koehler Cultural Center, San Antonio College, San Antonio, Texas
- 1984 "Southwest Icons," Koehler Cultural Center, San Antonio College, San Antonio, Texas

Two Man Shows

- 1959 Maude Sullivan Gallery, El Paso, Texas
- 1964 Men of Art Guild Gallery, San Antonio, Texas
- San Antonio Public Library, San Antonio, Texas
- U.S.A.A. Building, San Antonio, Texas
- 1967 Witte Memorial Museum, San Antonio, Texas
- 1969 A Clean Well Lighted Place, Austin, Texas

Selected Group Exhibitions

- 1960 El Paso Museum of Art, El Paso, Texas
- 1962 Mexican Art Gallery, Mexican Consulate, San Antonio, Texas
- 1963 Centennial Art Museum, Rental Gallery, Beaumont, Texas
- 1963-65 Men of Art Guild Gallery, San Antonio, Texas
- 1963-66 North Star Gallery, San Antonio, Texas
- 1964 Two-Twenty-Two Gallery, El Paso, Texas
- 1965 "Today's Printing Exhibition," O.P.I.C. Gallery, Mexico City, Mexico
- Men of Art Guild Show, Trinity University, San Antonio, Texas
- 1965-66 Bright Shawl Invitational, San Antonio, Texas
- Contemporary Artists' Guild, San Antonio, Texas and tour to South Plains College, Levelland, Texas; Arlington, Texas; Memorial Library, Port Arthur, Texas; Del Mar College, Corpus Christi, Texas; Texas College of Arts and Industries, Kingsville, Texas
- 1966 A.C. Gallery, Monterrey, Mexico
- Contemporary Artists' Group Show, Incarnate Word College, San Antonio, Texas
- "Paintings by Outstanding Southwestern Artists," Witte Museum, San Antonio, Texas
- 1967 "Now and Beyond Show," Witte Museum, San Antonio, Texas
- 1970 "South Texas Sweet Funk," St. Edward's University, Austin, Texas
- 1971 Louisiana Gallery, Houston, Texas
- "A Blending of Cultures—A Blending of Time," University of Texas at El Paso, El Paso, Texas
- 1971-72 "Texas Painting and Sculpture: The 20th Century," Pollock Galleries, Owen Arts Center, Southern Methodist University, Dallas, Texas and tour to San Antonio Museum Association, Witte Confluence Museum, HemisFair Plaza, San Antonio, Texas; University Art Museum, The University of Texas at Austin, Austin, Texas; Amon Carter Museum of Western Art, Fort Worth, Texas; The Museum, Texas Tech University, Lubbock, Texas
- 1973 "Mexican American Art Symposium Exhibit," Laurie Auditorium, Trinity University, San Antonio, Texas
- 1974 "12/Texas," Contemporary Arts Museum, Houston, Texas
- 1975 "1975 Biennial Exhibition of Contemporary American Art," Whitney Museum of American Art, New York City
- "Texas Tough," Witte Museum, San Antonio, Texas
- 1977 "Dale Gas: Chicano Art of Texas," Contemporary Arts Museum, Houston, Texas
- 1977-79 "Ancient Roots/New Visions," Tucson Museum of Art, Tucson, Arizona and tour to National Collection of Fine Arts and Fondo del Sol Visual Arts and Media Center, Washington, D.C.; Museum of Albuquerque, Albuquerque, New Mexico; El Paso Museum of Art, El Paso, Texas; Barnstall Memorial Gallery, Los Angeles Municipal Art Gallery, Los Angeles, California; Sarah Campbell Blaffer Gallery, University of Houston, Houston, Texas; Colorado Springs Fine Arts Center, Colorado Springs, Colorado; Everson Museum of Art, Syracuse, New York; San Antonio Museum Association and The Arts Council of San Antonio, San Antonio, Texas; Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago, Illinois
- 1979 "FIRE!," Contemporary Arts Museum, Houston, Texas
- "San Antonio College Faculty Exhibition," Koehler Cultural Center, San Antonio College, San Antonio, Texas
- 1983 "Showdown: Perspectives on the Southwest," Alternative Museum, New York City
- "Showdown/Houston," Square One, Houston, Texas
- "Main Street Invitational," Fort Worth Art Festival, Fort Worth, Texas
- "Chicano Expressions," Intar Gallery, New York City and tour to Otis Art Institute, Parsons School of Design, Los Angeles, California; Museo de Arte Mexicano, San Francisco, California

Selected Group Exhibitions

- 1987-88 "Third Coast Review: A Look at Art in Texas," The Aspen Art Museum, Aspen, Colorado and tour to University of Colorado Art Galleries, Boulder, Colorado; Powerplant Visual Arts Center, Fort Collins, Colorado; Blue Star Art Space/Contemporary Art for San Antonio, San Antonio, Texas
- 1988-89 "¡Mira!: The Canadian Club Hispanic Art Tour III," tour to Los Angeles Municipal Art Gallery, Los Angeles, California; Meadows Museum, Southern Methodist University, Dallas, Texas; Bass Museum of Art, Miami Beach, Florida; Chicago, Illinois; New York City

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- Jacinto Quirarte, *Mexican American Artists*, University of Texas Press, Austin, Texas, 1973
- Philip D. Ortega, ed., *We Are Chicanos: An Anthology of Mexican American Literature*, Washington Square Press, New York City, 1973
- 12/Texas*, Contemporary Arts Museum, Houston, Texas, 1974
- Janet Kutner, "Mocking myths, nachos, nostalgia," *ARTnews*, December 1975, pp. 88-92
- Hilton Kramer, "The Uninteresting Mess at the Whitney," *The New York Times*, February 16, 1975, p. D31
- Santos Martinez, book review of "Mexican American Artists" by Jacinto Quirarte, *Caracol*, November 1975, pp. 18-19
- Veronica Salazar, *Dedication Rewarded: Prominent Mexican Americans*, Mexican American Cultural Center, San Antonio, Texas, 1976
- Roberta Smith, "Twelve Days of Texas," *Art in America*, July/August 1976, pp. 42-48
- Mel Casas/Humanscapes*, Contemporary Arts Museum, Houston, Texas, 1976
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LAGUNA
GLORIA
ART
MUSEUM

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