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Celebrating 175: Mel Casas, Exhibition Announcements and Catalogs, 1971-1974

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AUSTIN

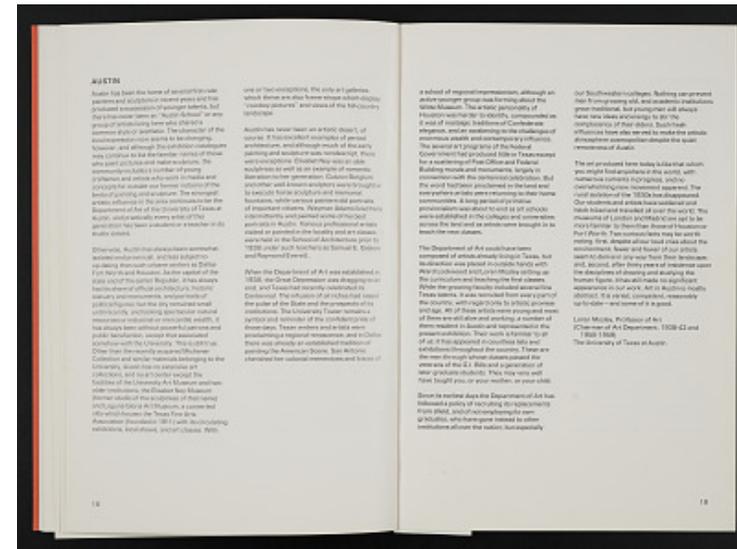
Austin has been the home of several first-rate painters and sculptors in recent years and has produced a succession of younger talents, but there has never been an "Austin School" or any group of artists living here who shared a common style or aesthetic. The character of the local expression now seems to be changing, however, and although the exhibition catalogues may continue to list the familiar names of those who paint pictures and make sculpture, the community includes a number of young craftsmen and artists who work in media and concepts far outside our former notions of the limits of painting and sculpture. The strongest artistic influence in the area continues to be the Department of Art of the University of Texas at Austin, and practically every artist of this generation has been a student or a teacher in its studio classes.

Otherwise, Austin has always been somewhat isolated and provincial, and less subject to up-dating than such urbane centers as Dallas-Fort Worth and Houston. As the capital of the state and of the earlier Republic, it has always had its share of official architecture, historic statuary and monuments, and portraits of political figures; but the city remained small until recently, and lacking spectacular natural resources or industrial or mercantile wealth, it has always been without powerful patrons and public benefaction, except that associated somehow with the University. This is still true. Other than the recently acquired Michener Collection and similar materials belonging to the University, Austin has no extensive art collections, and no art center except the facilities of the University Art Museum and two older institutions, the Elisabet Ney Museum (former studio of the sculptures of that name) and Laguna Gloria Art Museum, a converted villa which houses the Texas Fine Arts Association (founded in 1911) with its circulating exhibitions, local shows, and art classes. With one or two exceptions, the only art galleries which thrive are also frame shops which display "cowboy pictures" and views of the hill-country landscape.

Austin has never been an artistic desert, of course. It has excellent examples of period architecture, and although much of the early painting and sculpture was nondescript, there were exceptions. Elisabet Ney was an able sculptress as well as an example of romantic liberation to her generation. Gutzon Borglum and other well-known sculptors were brought in to execute horse sculptures and memorial fountains, while various painters did portraits of important citizens. Wayman Adams lived here intermittently and painted some of his best portraits in Austin. Various professional artists visited or painted in the locality and art classes were held in the School of Architecture prior to 1938 under such teachers as Samuel E. Gideon and Raymond Everett.

When the Department of Art was established in 1938, the Great Depression was dragging to an end, and Texas had recently celebrated its Centennial. The infusion of oil riches had raised the pulse of the State and the prospects of its institutions. The University Tower remains a symbol and reminder of the confident pride of those days. Texan writers and artists were proclaiming a regional renaissance, and in Dallas there was already an established tradition of painting the American Scene. San Antonio cherished her colonial mementoes and traces of 18

a school of regional impressionism, although an active younger group was forming about the Witte Museum. The artistic personality of Houston was harder to identify, compounded as it was of nostalgic traditions of Confederate elegance, and an awakening to the challenges of enormous wealth and contemporary influence. The several art programs of the Federal Government had produced little in Texas



except for a scattering of Post Office and Federal Building murals and monuments, largely in connection with the centennial celebration. But the word had been proclaimed in the land and everywhere artists were returning to their home communities. A long period of primitive provincialism was about to end as art schools were established in the colleges and universities across the land and as artists were brought in to teach the new classes.

The Department of Art could have been composed of artists already living in Texas, but its direction was placed in outside hands with Ward Lockwood and Loren Mozley setting up the curriculum and teaching the first classes. While the growing faculty included several fine Texas talents, it was recruited from every part of the country, with regard only to artistic promise and age. All of these artists were young and most of them are still alive and working, a number of them resident in Austin and represented in the present exhibition. Their work is familiar to all of us; it has appeared in countless lists and exhibitions throughout the country. These are the men through whose classes passed the veterans of the G. I. Bills and a generation of later graduate students. They may very well have taught you, or your mother, or your child.

Since its earliest days the Department of Art followed a policy of recruiting its replacements from afield, and of not employing its own graduates, who have gone instead to other institutions all over the nation, but especially our Southwestern colleges. Nothing can prevent men from growing old, and academic institutions grow traditional, but young men will always have new ideas and energy to stir the complacency of their elders. Such fresh influences have also served to make the artistic atmosphere cosmopolitan despite the quiet remoteness of Austin.

The art produced here today is like that which you might find anywhere in the world, with numerous currents in progress, and no overwhelming new movement apparent. The rural isolation of the 1930s has disappeared. Our students and artists have soldiered and hitch-hiked and travelled all over the world. The museums of London and Madrid are apt to be more familiar to them than those of Houston or Fort Worth. Two curious facts may be worth noting: first, despite all our loud cries about the environment, fewer and fewer of our artists seem to derive in any way from their landscape and, second, after thirty years of insistence upon the disciplines of drawing and studying the human figure, it has still made no significant appearance in our work. Art in Austin is mostly abstract. It is varied, competent, reasonably up-to-date - and some of it is good.

Loren Mozley, Professor of Art
(Chairman of Art Department, 1938-42 and 1958-59)
The University of Texas at Austin



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