



**Smithsonian Institution**

*Archives of American Art*

## **Celebrating 175: Mel Casas, Exhibition Announcements and Catalogs, 1975-1976**

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**HUMAN SCAPES: Visual Conundrums**, images are manipulated to create contradictory visual questions. A riddle whose answer depends or refers to a pun and has only a conjectural answer. Contradictory visual perceptions are visualized more readily simultaneously. Interpretation of the imagery takes place at different levels but only one can be verified at any given moment. The conundrum plays with our cultural concepts, with our cultural vision.

Mel Casas.

Mel Casas' paintings related to current realist trends in American art in the 1970's, but also infuse a major style, Pop, with a third world Chicano humanist sensibility, taking that form beyond the psycho-social limitations imposed on it by its progenitors in New York. Traditional Pop art employed common images which, once derived from the media, advertising and cartoons, were transformed into idealized symbols representative of the socio-sexual evolutionary change of the 1960's. Current realist imagery involves a re-humanization of the pop sensibility, resulting in an original form of realism.

From an orientation which is that of the disenfranchised Texas Chicano, Casas focuses on politically charged images, e.g., the American Beauty Queen, Daniel Ellsberg, and Gabacho attack dogs used against blacks and browns in the south and southwest. His approach involves specific transportation of word content into image. Using Pachuco logic, barrio humor and a piercing intellectual approach to integrate the message content, Casas establishes a sophisticated didactic painting which politicizes a mythical assessment of the cultural reality. The paintings communicate his expanded comprehension of American culture predicated on direct experience and on his profound intuition of how environment controls his own functions as an artist.

James Harithas, Director

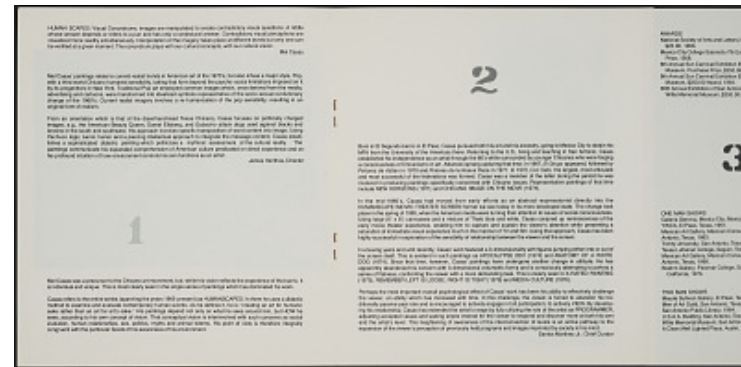
1

Mel Casas was a precursor to the Chicano art movement, but, while his vision reflects the experience of the barrio, it is individual and unique. This is most clearly seen in the single series of paintings which has dominated his work.

Casas refers to the entire series (spanning the years 1965-present) as **HUMANSCAPES**. In them he uses a didactic method to examine and evaluate contemporary human events. As he defines it, he is "creating an art for humans' sake rather than for art's sake." His paintings depend not only on what he sees around him, but **HOW** he sees, according to his own concept of vision. That conceptual vision is interinvolved with such concern as social evolution, human relationships, sex, politics, myths and animal totems. His point of view is therefore integrally congruent with the particular facets of his awareness of his environment.

2

Born in El Segundo barrio in El Paso, Casas pursued both his art and his ancestry, going to Mexico City to obtain his MFA from the University of the Americas there. Returning to the U.S., living and teaching in San Antonio, Casas established his independence as an artist through the 60's while surrounded by younger Chicanos who were forging a consciousness of Chicanismo in art. Alliances sprang up during that time. In 1967, El Grupo appeared, followed by Pintores de Aztlán in 1970 and Pintores de la Nueva Raza in 1971. In 1972, Con Safo, the



largest, most articulate and most successful of the federations was formed. Casas was a member of the latter during the period he was involved in producing paintings specifically concerned with Chicano issues. Representative paintings of that time include NEW HORIZONS (1971) and CHICANO IMAGE ON THE MOVE (1974).

In the mid-1960's, Casas had moved from early efforts as an abstract expressionist directly into the HUMANSCAPE/MOVIE-THEATER SCREEN format we see today in its more developed state. The change took place during the spring of 1965, when the American media were turning their attention to issues of social consciousness. Using large (6'x8') canvases and a mixture of Thalo blue and white, Casas conjured up reminiscences of the early movie theater experience, enabling him to capture and sustain the viewer's attention while presenting a saturation of immediate visual experience much in the manner of TV and film. Using the approach, Casas has been highly successful in exploration of the sensibility of relationship between the viewer and the screen.

In ensuing years and until recently, Casas' work featured a 3-dimensionality with figures jumping either into or out of the screen itself. This is evident in such paintings as APOCALYPSE 2001 (1974) and ANATOMY OF A WHITE DOG (1974). Since that time, however, Casas' paintings have undergone another change in attitude. He has apparently abandoned his concern with 3-dimensional volumetric forms and is consciously attempting to portray a sense of flatness, confronting the viewer with a more demanding task. This is clearly seen in X-RATED PAINTING (1975), REMEMBER LEFT IS LOOSE, RIGHT IS TIGHT (1976) and MEDIA CULTURE (1976).

Perhaps the most important overall psychological effect of Casas' work has been his ability to effectively challenge the viewer, an ability which has increased with time. In this challenge, the viewer is forced to abandon his traditionally passive past role and is encouraged to actively engage in full participation; to actively VIEW. By developing his relationship, Casas has extended the artist's range by fully utilizing the role of the artist as PROGRAMMER, adjusting accepted values and waking ample interest for the viewer to respond and discover more at both his own and the artist's level. This heightening of awareness of the interconnection of levels is an active pathway to the expansion of the viewer's perception of previously held programs and images imprinted by society in his mind.

Santos Martinez Jr., Chief Curator

#### AWARDS

National Society of Arts and Letters 2nd P  
\$25.00, 1956.

Mexico City College Saloncito 7th Exhibiti  
Prize, 1958.

6th Annual Sun Carnival Exhibition El Pas  
Museum, Purchase Prize, \$250.00, 195

9th Annual Sun Carnival Exhibition El Pas  
Museum, \$25000 Award, 1964.

36th Annual Exhibition of San Antonio Art  
Witte Memorial Museum, \$250.00 Awar

3

ONE MAN SHOWS

Galeria Genova, Mexico City, Mexico, 195  
YWCA, El Paso, Texas, 1961.  
Mexican Art Gallery, Mexican Consulate,  
Antonio, Texas 1963.  
Trinity University, San Antonio, Texas, 196  
Texas Lutheran College, Sequin, Texas 1  
Mexican Art Gallery, Mexican Consulate,  
Antonio Texas, 1968.  
Boehm Gallery, Palomar College, San Ma  
California, 1973.

#### TWO MAN SHOWS

Maude Sullivan Gallery, El Paso Texas, 1  
Men of Art Guild, San Antonio, Texas, 196  
San Antonio Public Library, 1964.  
U.S.A.A. Building, San Antonio, Te  
A Clean Well Lighted Place, Austin, Texas

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1976

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