



**Smithsonian Institution**

*Archives of American Art*

## **Celebrating 175: Mel Casas, Clippings, 1980-1987**

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Six years ago, when William Agee first came from California's Pasadena Art Museum to head Houston's Museum of Fine Arts, some Houstonians would ask him why there weren't more cowboy paintings in the collection. "People don't ask that anymore," says Agee, who succeeded Philippe de Montebello, now director of New York's Metropolitan Museum of Art, as the Houston museum director. "I guess that's emblematic of how things have changed in Houston art."

The 1970s changed a lot in Houston. At the beginning of the decade the population was just over 1.2 million; with 1.5 million inhabitants according to the 1980 census, Houston is now expected to rank behind New York, Chicago and Los Angeles as the nation's fourth largest city. National and international corporate headquarters are everywhere in Houston's flourishing business community. And as a center of oil production, Houston is being called the "Energy Capital of the World." The 1970s were also a decade of growth for the visual arts in Houston. The city's museums, the Museum of Fine Arts and the Contemporary Arts Museum, both opened major new exhibition halls in 1972-73, as if anticipating the art boom of the later '70s. By 1973, with New York galleries clamoring to open outlets in Houston, the city was rapidly becoming known as the "Buckle on the Sun Belt." Houston's Blaffer Foundation presented major touring collections of masterwork paintings throughout Texas in 1976. From every part of the country, artists arrived in Houston in the '70s to get a piece of the art market action.

Now, in the 1980s, reality has caught up with Houston. After the rapid growth and glamour of the mid-'70s, there remains the difficult task of building a permanent, progressive art audience in a boom town whose residents are primarily transients or blue-collar workers.

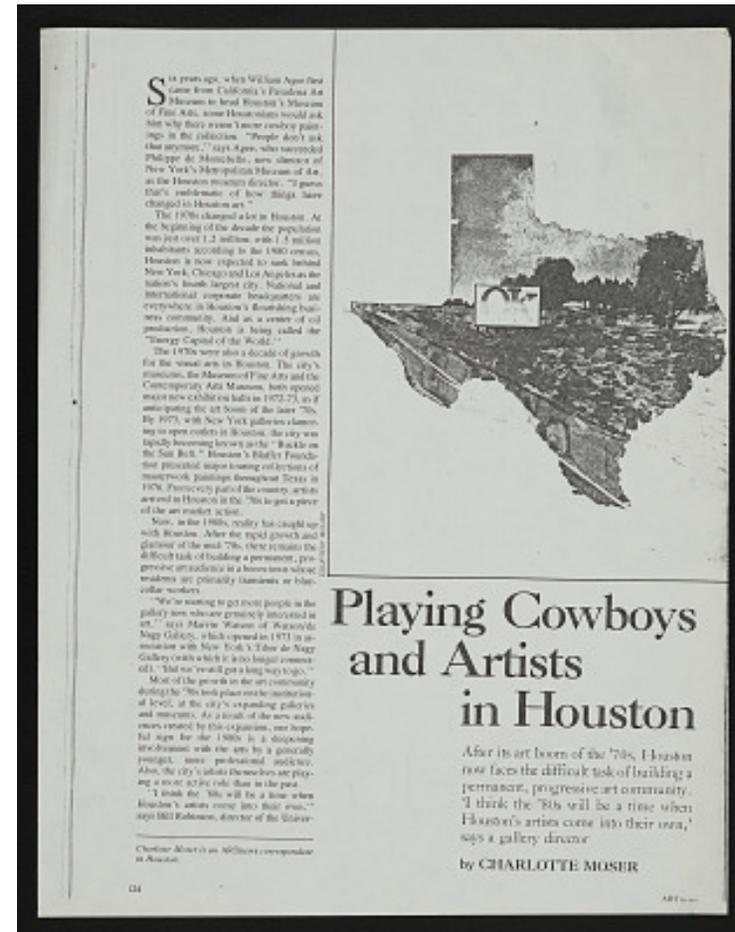
"We're starting to get more people in the gallery now who are genuinely interested in art," says Marvin Watson of Watson/de Nagy Gallery, which opened in 1973 in association with New York's Tibor de Nagy Gallery (with which it is no longer connected). "But we've still got a long way to go."

Most of the growth in the art community during the '70s took place on the institutional level, at the city's expanding galleries and museums. As a result of the new audiences created by this expansion, one hopeful sign for the 1980s is a deepening involvement with the arts by a generally younger, more professional audience. Also, the city's artists themselves are playing a more active role than in the past. "I think the '80s will be a time when Houston's artists come into their own," says Bill Robinson, director of the University of Houston. "I think the '80s will be a time when Houston's artists come into their own," says Bill Robinson, director of the University of Houston. Charlotte Moser is an ARTnews correspondent in Houston.

[[image]]

### Playing Cowboys and Artists in Houston

After its art boom of the '70s, Houston now faces the difficult task of building a permanent, progressive art community. 'I think the '80s will be a time when Houston's artists come into their own,' says a gallery director  
by CHARLOTTE MOSER



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