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Luis Jiménez

Press Packet

Cordova, Ruben C. "Mel Casas and Luis Jiménez: Two Chicano Trailblazers From Texas." In *Sixties Surreal*, edited by Dan Nadel, Laura Phipps, Scott Rothkopf, Elisabeth Sussman pp. 266–69. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2025.

Ford, Lauren Moya. "Inside Luis Jiménez's American Southwest." *Hyperallergic*, November 23, 2021.

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MEL CASAS AND LUIS JIMENEZ: TWO CHICANO TRAILBLAZERS FROM TEXAS

RUBEN C. CORDOVA

Mel Casas was a thirty-five-year-old art professor at San Antonio College and an artist working in an Abstract Expressionist vein when, on a nighttime drive in 1965, he glimpsed the screen of the San Pedro Outdoor Theater. The larger-than-life actress, instead of speaking, appeared to be "munching" on trees in the landscape, a visual experience Casas characterized as "surreal."[1] It inaugurated his cycle of 153 *Humanscape* paintings, a sustained critique of the psychological manipulations performed by media images that the artist would produce over the next twenty-four years, inspired as much by Marshall McLuhan's *The Mechanical Bride: Folklore of Industrial Man* (1951) as by his glimpse of the drive-in movie screen.[2]

Each *Humanscape* features a large "screen" image—the functional equivalent of the San Pedro drive-in screen—against which Casas juxtaposes objects and/or people in the foreground, often images from popular culture and the mass media that serve symbolic functions. The artist's turn to figuration coincided with the burgeoning Chicano movement, which had commenced the same year as Casas's drive-in revelation, when farm workers went on strike against grape growers in California. Though Texas state laws forbade picketing and other standard union practices, workers in Starr County nevertheless undertook a wildcat strike against melon growers.[3] As David Montejano notes, the melon strike and its brutal suppression "ignited a broad resentment among all classes of the Mexican American community" in Texas, radicalizing high school and college students, and "even the usually proper middle class."[4]

The nebulous spectators of Casas's early *Humanscape* paintings gradually evolved into fully fleshed beings, and in January 1968, with *Humanscape 40 (Game)*, he inaugurated the use of subtitles to multiply the verbal–visual puns

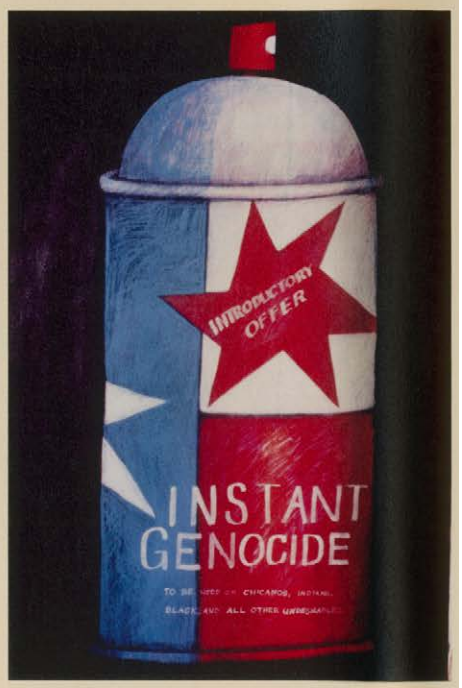

Fig. 1. Felipe Reyes, *Peace on Earth Good Will Towards Men aka Instant Genocide*, c. 1971. Acrylic on canvas, dimensions unknown

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present in these painted ensembles.[5] The following month, in California, United Farm Workers leader César Chávez began a twenty-five-day hunger strike, which culminated in a Catholic mass attended by Senator Robert F. Kennedy, who would be killed in June, two months after Martin Luther King Jr. That year, Casas told a journalist that he wanted his screen images to be "more real than reality," a surreal description of their intended symbolic valence.[6] He abandoned oneiric cinemascapes for increasingly vivid political paintings and depictions of the sexual revolution, and at the same time emerged at the vanguard of artists situating the Chicano struggle for civil rights within a broader context of the country's social and political upheavals. An American flag–draped coffin dominates the foreground of *Humanscape #47 (Still-Life)* (1968); the letters "KKK" that are emblazoned on it refer to the assassinations of the Kennedy brothers and King as well as to the racism that fueled much of that era's political violence. *Humanscape #49 (Meta-Ethics)* (1968) features human-shaped shooting-range targets, with one of the white shooters taking direct aim at the viewer.[7]

"The concept of American beauty is not only physical beauty, it's also racial beauty," Casas once said.[8] He connected the American veneration of blondness to what he termed the "Barbie ideal," a point he dramatically made when he received 1968 artist-of-the-year honors from a San Antonio art group and proceeded to strip a Barbie doll while lecturing about white privilege, which resulted in the revocation of the prize.[9] The following year, Casas issued an arresting rejoinder in the form of *Humanscape #56 (San Antonio Circus)* (p. 274). It critiques Fiesta, the city's annual festival celebrating the defeat of the Mexican army in 1836 at the Battle of San Jacinto. This victory enabled the establishment of the Republic of Texas, the culmination of a "revolution" for independence that was, in fact, a land grab that also sought to perpetuate the enslavement of Black people.[10] Specifically, Casas addresses the crowning of a Fiesta queen and her court by the Order of the Alamo, an elite, racially exclusive group.[11] As such, these faux royals are traditionally drawn from a coterie of Anglo and German American families, chosen more for their wealth and Texas heritage than for their beauty, talent, or congeniality.

Although Casas sometimes represented blond women as malevolent symbols of hegemonic power in the screen images of his early *Humanscape* paintings, here his eight vacant Alamo queens appear both villainous and preposterous. Most dramatically, they are eyeless, their empty sockets instead occupied by elements from the ridiculous tiaras worn by their adjacent royals: crystal scrollwork, red orbs (a symbolic cherry?), yellow stars, and dollar signs. Atop this social pyramid, the queen of queens surmounts a bell-capped fool. Her red eye and the horn-like aspect of her Lone Star crown make her appear demonic, yet her elongated neck seems to connect her to the giraffes that lean in for their photo op and to their unwittingly comic expressions.

Fig. 2. Jesse Treviño, *Mi Vida*, 1971–72. Acrylic on gypsum board, 96 × 168 in. (243.9 × 426.7 cm)

If the not-quite-fully-formed figures of this royal court seem to hark back to the dreamlike, somnambulistic figures in earlier *Humanscapes*, the caged, growling tiger, by contrast, is startlingly realistic and vigorous. It represents the excluded people of color, their righteous anger as well as their nascent power, currently held at bay—but for how long? The year after Casas painted this *Humanscape*, the white establishment in Texas was dumbfounded when Chicanos swept elections in Crystal City and Zavala County, where they held large pluralities. Chicano activists who had launched a nationwide campaign against the Vietnam War were met with violence in Los Angeles, where police killed two youths and the journalist Rubén Salazar. The killing of a bystander at a demonstration against police brutality in Pharr, Texas, in 1971 led to the mobilization of Mexican American and Chicano residents, who would go on to win political offices in Pharr and other cities in the Rio Grande Valley.[12]

Felipe Reyes, the primary founder of the Chicano artist group Con Safo, which Casas subsequently joined and chaired, responded to the state-sponsored violence with *Instant Genocide* (fig. 1). Its label based on the Texas flag, this genocidal spray can bears the inscription: "To be used on Chicanos, Indians, Blacks, and all other undesirables."[13] Objects of popular consumer culture are likewise connected to potentially lethal violence in *Mi Vida* (fig. 2), a mural Casas's student Jesse Treviño created on his bedroom wall. The haunting, phantasmatic painting was a response to the grave injuries the artist sustained in Vietnam, which resulted in the amputation of his painting hand.[14]

In *Humanscape #68 (Kitchen Spanish)* (fig. 3) Casas depicts furtive resistance. A cartoonish undocumented Mexican maid (taken from a handbook instructing housewives to boss their servants) appears to be all-obeisant: She says yes to everything. But *perra* ("dog") is also slang for "bitch."[15] Casas demonstrates that even the most powerless have the ability to resist. And, above all, Chicano history is the history of resistance.

Indeed, at the same moment Casas was confronting the legacy of Anglo supremacy in his *Humanscape #56 (San Antonio Circus)*, fellow El Paso native Luis Jimenez was also emerging as a critical figure giving visual expression to the Chicano movement's spirit of defiance. From a remarkable crucible filled with mythic, historical, artistic, personal, and popular sources *Man on Fire* (1969–70; p. 269) emerged, a work that Jimenez described as a "spiritual self-portrait."[16] Its fiberglass material and intense, reflective, colorful finish connect it to popular culture and commercial products, in particular the automobile, that quintessential symbol of postwar American prosperity and a fixation that figured prominently in the contemporaneous imagery of the artist, who grew up in El Paso working at his father's neon sign shop, where he also learned to work fiberglass

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auto bodies and custom spray-paint hot rods. In 1967, Jimenez had feverishly penned images of a Volkswagen and a woman in sexual union, inaugurating a human–machine theme rooted in Jungian myth that would prove fertile.[17] The artist intended his mating cars and humans as contemporary versions of ancient European and Mesoamerican myths, manifestations of archetypal content in the imagery and technology of the auto-industrial age, with motorcycles, Porsches, or a Jaguar-like *Cat Car* (1967) replacing Olympian or Mesoamerican gods. Jimenez also depicted the offspring of the carnal machine–human union in the drawing *Woman Giving Birth to Motorcycle Man* (1969) and the sculpture *Birth of the Machine Age Man* (1970). The latter features an auto–man hybrid blasting out of the womb, replete with a neon umbilical chord, a modern-day incarnation of the Aztec patron god Huitzilopochtli, who was born with full regalia and a lust for vengeance.[18]

If *Man on Fire* is a human torch that represents the ideal of liberty, it contrasts pointedly with Jimenez's take on that more conventional representation, the Statue of Liberty. In multiple works at this time, the artist satirized the American icon, whose promise he regarded as "racially exclusive," the works' titles alone indicative of his jaundiced view: *Fallen Statue of Liberty* (1963), *Statue of Liberty with Pack of Cigarettes* (1969), and *Statue of Liberty with Wine* (1969).[19] Jimenez monumentalized his depiction of a white, blond Lady Liberty—slattern, inebriated, decadent—in *The Barfly—Statue of Liberty* (fig. 4) the same year he produced *Man on Fire*. Like *Man on Fire*, his immoral Lady Liberties are expressions of the artist's opposition to the Vietnam War.

Jimenez's inspirations for *Man on Fire* suggest it as a far nobler representation of liberty, rooted in heroic struggle against oppression and injustice. A colored pencil study from 1969 depicts a man tossing a Molotov cocktail, inspired by Black and Puerto Rican protestors Jimenez witnessed in New York, whom he viewed as mythic, fire-giving Promethean figures. The artist also drew Buddhist monks, whose self-immolations in protest of persecution at the hands of the South Vietnamese government and of the Vietnam War were widely televised. He likened their mute suffering to that of the last Aztec leader, Cuauhtémoc, who was tortured by fire and executed by the Spanish, and whom Jimenez regarded as a stoic superman.[20] Even as the visual association of the flaming head of *Man on Fire* to the hood ornaments on the Pontiac cars owned by Jimenez's father connects on one level to the artist's automotive–human hybrids, it also connects to another Indigenous leader who confronted European colonialist forces, the Odawa chief Pontiac, who fought the British in the mid-eighteenth century.[21]

While sacrifice—especially self-sacrifice—and defiance are significant aspects of the statue's meaning, the colored pencil study *Red Angel* (1969) confers another layer of meaning. The twin plumes that arise from the burning man in this sketch resemble wings; as the title implies, the man is something more than a torture victim or self-immolating protestor: he is a formidable, supernatural force, a revivified Cuauhtémoc/Pontiac/superman, a guardian of the just, perhaps even an avenger.

Fig. 3. Mel Casas, *Humanscape #68 (Kitchen Spanish)*, 1973. Acrylic on canvas, 72 × 96 in. (182.9 × 243.9 cm)

Fig. 4. Luis Jimenez, *The Barfly—Statue of Liberty*, 1969–74. Acrylic on fiberglass, 88 × 54 × 30 in. (223.5 × 137.2 × 76.2 cm)

NOTES

1 Ruben C. Cordova, "The Cinematic Genesis of the Mel Casas Humanscape, 1965–1967," *Aztlán: A Journal of Chicano Studies* 36, no. 2 (Fall 2011): 51.

2 Ibid., 53–54, 60, 62–64, 68, 73.

3 Ruben C. Cordova, "Felipe Reyes, Part 2: The United Farm Workers and UFW Imagery, c. 1970–72," *Glasstire*, August 3, 2020, https://glasstire.com/2020/08/03/felipe-reyes-part-2-the-united-farm-workers-and-ufw-imagery-c-1970-72/.

4 David Montejano, *Anglos and Mexicans in the Making of Texas, 1836–1986* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1987), 284.

5 Cordova, "Cinematic Genesis," 51–53, 55, 76–77.

6 Ibid., 63, 76–77.

7 Ruben C. Cordova, "Getting the Big Picture: Political Themes in the Humanscapes of Mel Casas, 1968–1977," in *Born of Resistance: Cara a Cara Encounters with Chicana/o Visual Culture*, ed. Victor A. Sorell and Scott L. Baugh (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2015), 175–76, 181–82.

8 Mel Casas, quoted in Jacinto Quirarte, *Mexican American Artists* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1973), 133.

9 Cordova, "Cinematic Genesis," 58–60. See also, Ruben C. Cordova, "Is It Time for San Antonio's Fiesta to Secede from San Jacinto? A Modest Proposal," *Glasstire*, June 23, 2021 (updated April 17, 2023), https://glasstire.com/2021/06/23/is-it-time-for-san-antonios-fiesta-to-secede-from-san-jacinto-a-modest-proposal/.

10 In Texas mythology, the "sacrifice" of the Anglo American occupiers of the Alamo enabled the victory at San Jacinto. The Alamo became a potent anti-Mexican symbol and a central element in the rituals of elite Anglo groups that are enacted annually at Fiesta. See Ruben C. Cordova, *The Other Side of the Alamo: Art Against the Myth* (San Antonio: Guadalupe Cultural Arts Center and Blurb, 2018).

11 Ruben C. Cordova, "Getting the Big Picture," 176–77. For an expanded analysis of this painting, see Cordova, "Is It Time for San Antonio's Fiesta to Secede from San Jacinto?"

12 Ruben C. Cordova, "Felipe Reyes, Part 3: Struggles in Pharr and San Antonio; Race, Trump and the 2020 Election," *Glasstire*, October 26, 2020, https://glasstire.com/2020/10/26/felipe-reyes-part-3-struggles-in-pharr-and-san-antonio-race-trump-and-the-2020-election/.

13 Ruben C. Cordova, "Felipe Reyes, Part 1: 'Instant Genocide,' Rubén Salazar, and Black Lives Matter," *Glasstire*, July 20, 2020, https://glasstire.com/2020/07/20/felipe-reyes-part-i-instant-genocide-ruben-salazar-and-black-lives-matter/.

14 Ruben C. Cordova, "A Baptism of Fire: Jesse Treviño Paints *Mi Vida*," *Glasstire*, January 26, 2019, https://glasstire.com/2019/01/26/a-baptism-of-fire-jesse-trevino-paints-mi-vida/.

15 See Cordova, "Getting the Big Picture," 179–80; and Constance Cortez, "Aztlan in Tejas: Chicano/Chicana Art from the Third Coast," in Cheech Marin, *Chicano Visions: American Painters on the Verge* (Boston: Bullfinch Press, 2002), 37.

16 The statue includes a self-referential anatomical anomaly that the artist referred to as his "deformed" rib cage, the edge of which has a pronounced wishbone-like character. See Ruben C. Cordova, "Luis Jimenez's *Man on Fire*: From the Olmec Were-Jaguar and the Vietnam War to Spiritual Self-Portrait," *Glasstire*, March 16, 2022, https://glasstire.com/2022/03/16/luis-jimenezs-man-on-fire-from-the-olmec-were-jaguar-and-the-vietnam-war-to-spiritual-self-portrait/.

17 Jimenez valued Jungian psychology because he shared Jung's belief that universal archetypal forms reappeared repeatedly across time and space. See Cordova, "Jimenez's *Man on Fire*."

18 Ibid.

19 Ibid.

20 Ibid.

21 Like Cuauhtémoc, Pontiac led an anticolonial resistance movement, one that was more prolonged. Some Pontiac Indian hood ornaments morph into jet airplanes, which may have influenced Jimenez's machine–men hybrids. These hybrid hood ornaments likely inspired his works that treat the theme of progress (from the horse age to the jet age). See Cordova, "Jimenez's *Man on Fire*."

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Luis Jimenez, *Man on Fire*, 1969–70. Fiberglass with urethane finish on painted fiberboard base, 89 × 60 × 19 in. (226.1 × 152.4 × 48.3 cm). The Museum of Fine Arts, Houston; Museum purchase funded by the Caroline Wiess Law Accessions Endowment Fund 2010.1760

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HYPERALLERGIC

Art

Inside Luis Jiménez's American Southwest

Born to an immigrant family in El Paso, Texas, Luis Jiménez grew up in a world dominated by cowboys, cactus, and rattlesnakes, all of which appeared in his art.

Lauren Moya Ford November 23, 2021

Luis Jiménez, "Progress II," 1976 (1999), fiberglass, resin and acrylic paint, 125 3/4 x 261 x 136 1/4 inches, Blanton Museum of Art, the University of Texas at Austin (© Luis Jiménez/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York)

AUSTIN, Texas — With its feet and tail flying in the air, an electric blue mustang mounted by a cowboy dives towards a longhorn leaping above our heads. The two animals' hooves meet on a small patch of land where insects and small animals crawl. A nearby skull resting against a spear is a reminder of the Native Americans who were forced out by Anglo invaders, and a barbed wire fence signals our proximity to the US-Mexico border. This enormous, engaging sculpture, "Progress II" (1976/1999) by Luis Jiménez, stuns us with its gravity-defying shapes and flashing colors. But it also contains poignant messages about the complex history, culture, and landscape of the artist's homeland.

Ford, Lauren Moya. "Inside Luis Jiménez's American Southwest." *Hyperallergic*, November 23, 2021.

The American Southwest was at the center of Jiménez's life and work. Born to an immigrant family in El Paso, Texas in 1940, the artist grew up in a world dominated by cowboys, cactus, and rattlesnakes, all of which later appeared in his drawings, prints, and fiberglass sculptures. Aside from a brief period when he lived in New York City in the late 1960s, Jiménez spent his career working in the Southwestern region of the United States. Fifteen years after the artist's tragic death in an accident at his Hondo, New Mexico studio, *Border Vision: Luis Jiménez's Southwest* at the Blanton Museum of Art explores the crucial role that this often marginalized and misunderstood place played in his artwork.

Jiménez grew up in a strict Protestant household. Barred from parties and other social engagements, the young artist passed the time drawing the local animals and insects from the hills near his family's home. He also worked in his father's electric sign shop from the age of six, where he was introduced to some of the industrial materials, bold colors, and lighting accents that appeared in his later artwork. As a teenager, Jiménez wasn't permitted to date or attend dances, so he taught himself to restore classic cars with fiberglass. This material became Jiménez's unlikely choice for his fine art, and a connection to his roots.

Mexican immigrants, jackrabbits, and firemen all appear in Jiménez's fiberglass sculptures. "If my images were going to be taken from popular culture, I wanted a material that didn't carry the cultural baggage of marble or bronze," Jiménez said. But despite his unorthodox material and

Installation view of *Border Vision: Luis Jiménez's Southwest*, Blanton Museum of Art, the University of Texas at Austin

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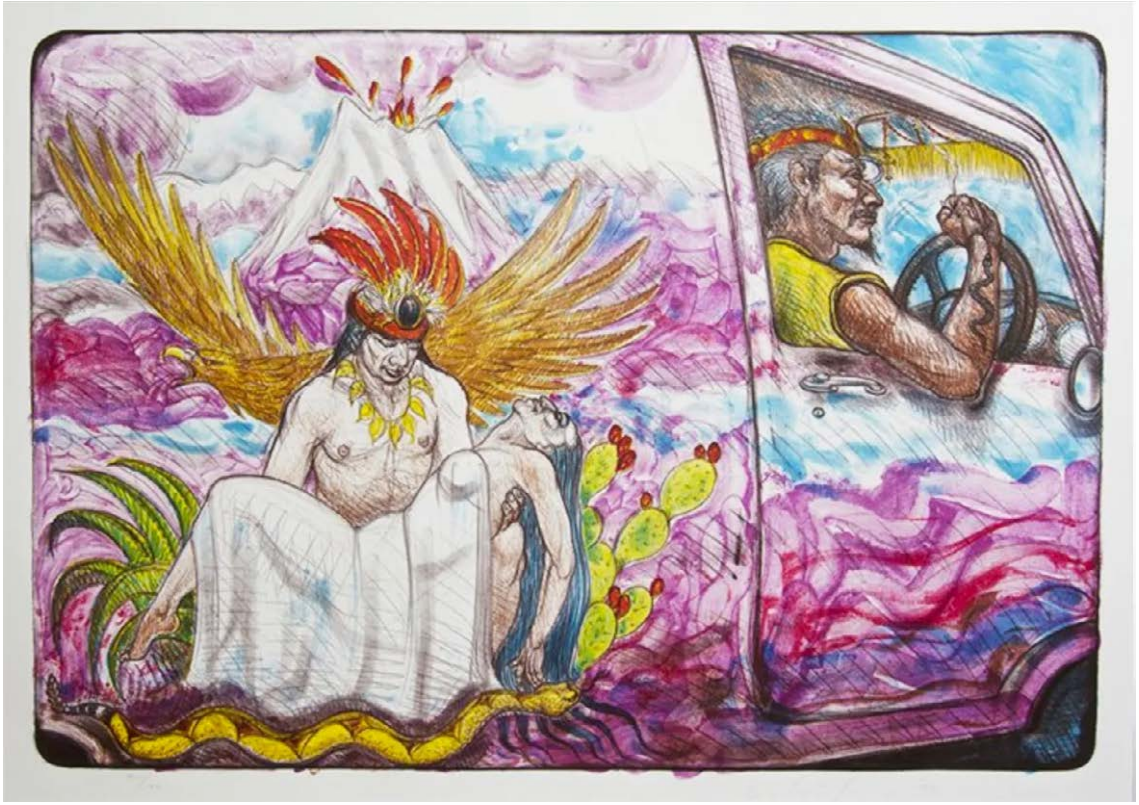


Luis Jiménez, "Cholo and Van with Popo and Ixta" (1997), lithograph, 27 x 39 inches (collection of Gilberto Cárdenas, Austin © Luis Jiménez/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York)

subjects, he was deeply invested in some aspects of the Western art tradition. After initially studying architecture, he switched to fine art in his final year of college. "Most teachers were focused on Abstract Expressionism at the time," curator Florencia Bazzano told Hyperallergic on a recent tour of the exhibition. "He wanted to do figuration, so he was going against the grain."

Indeed, Jiménez's careful attention to human musculature, movement, and balance recalls the work of Rodin and Greek sculpture, and he was also a master draftsman. Dynamic drawings and prints record Jiménez's uncanny ability to capture the figure in motion, but they also register his commitment to representing his community on its own terms. Jiménez's 1997 lithograph "Cholo and Van with Popo and Ixta" fuses the worlds of everyday people with ancient myths. The van, driven by a man with a snake tattoo, displays a mural depicting the star-crossed lovers Popocatépetl and Ixtaccíhuatl, an iconic pair that appears in countless Mexican calendars and restaurant walls. In another lithograph, "Baile con la Talaca (Dance with Death)" (1984), the artist shows himself dancing with the Mexican embodiment of death, La Talaca (or Calaca), showing Jiménez's close connection to his sense of mortality and ancestral culture.

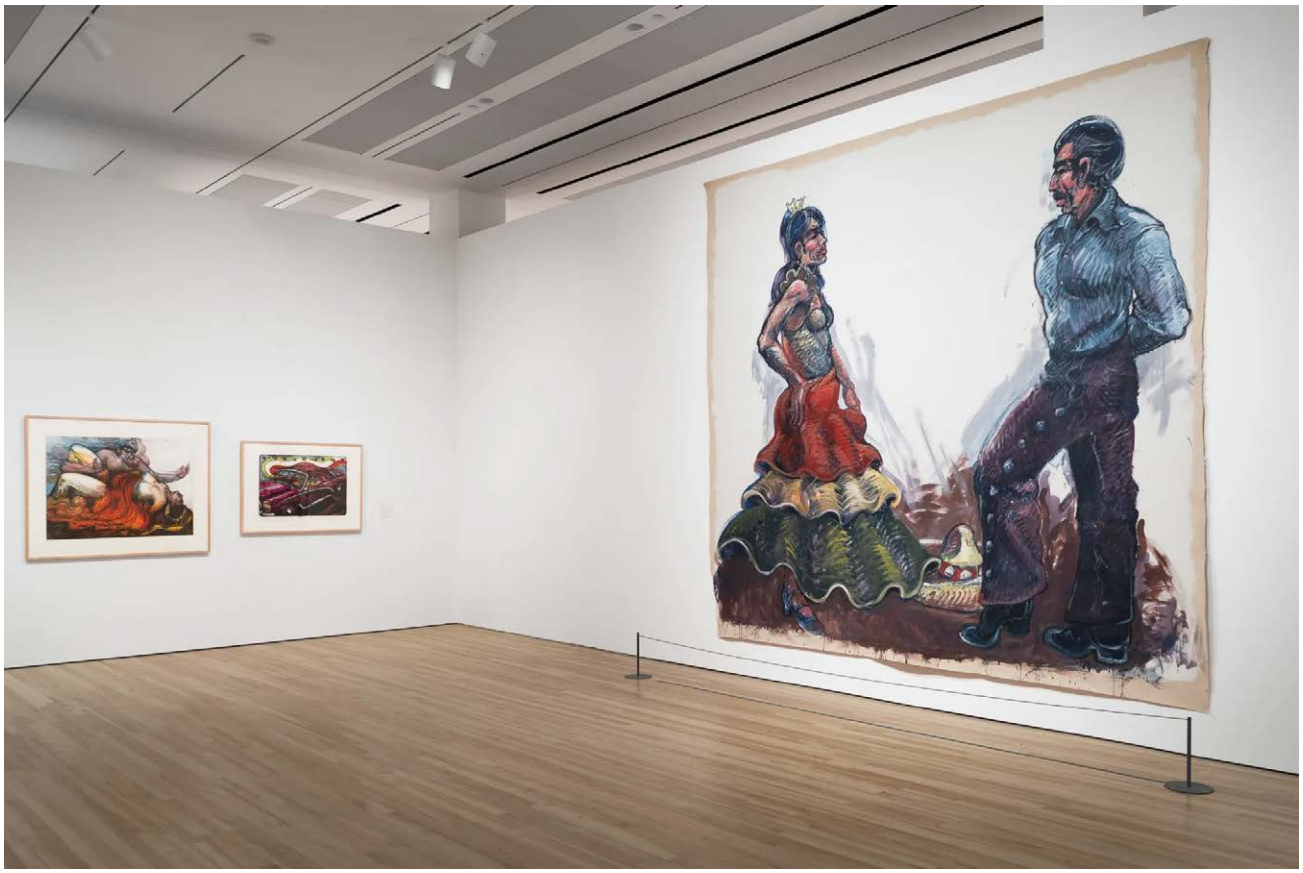
"His approach to art is distinctly shaped by a *rasquache* or underdog aesthetic," Bazzano told Hyperallergic. "He was looking at regular, working class people and aspects of their lives." Jiménez's unique blend of Pop, Chicano, and classical art presents a critical, colorful, and humane view of the Southwest that continues to be relevant today.

Ford, Lauren Moya. "Inside Luis Jiménez's American Southwest." *Hyperallergic*, November 23, 2021.

Luis Jiménez, "Baile con la Talaca [Dance with Death]" (1984), lithograph sheet, 39 1/8 x 26 7/8 inches, Blanton Museum of Art, the University of Texas at Austin (Archer M. Huntington Museum Fund, 1985 © Luis Jiménez/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York)

Luis Jiménez, "Progress Suite" (1979), lithograph, 23 1/2 x 35 inches (collection of Irene Branson, Austin, © Luis Jiménez/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York)

Ford, Lauren Moya. "Inside Luis Jiménez's American Southwest." *Hyperallergic*, November 23, 2021.



Installation view of *Border Vision: Luis Jiménez's Southwest*, Blanton Museum of Art, the University of Texas at Austin

Border Vision: Luis Jiménez's Southwest *continues at the Blanton Museum of Art (200 East Martin Luther King Jr. Boulevard, Austin) through January 16, 2022. The exhibition was curated by Florencia Bazzano.*

Ford, Lauren Moya. "Inside Luis Jiménez's American Southwest." *Hyperallergic*, November 23, 2021.

Art in America

A Baroque Populism

The vibrantly colored, controversy-provoking sculptures of Luis Jiménez celebrate working-class culture and history, especially that of Mexican Americans. A traveling survey of his work is currently in Houston.

BY CHARLES DEE MITCHELL

Luis Jiménez: American Dream, *1969, fiberglass, 34 by 58 by 30 inches. Collection Donald B. Anderson. Photo Tracy Hicks.*

Man on Fire, *1969, fiberglass with urethane finish 89 by 60 by 19 inches. Collection Frank Ribelin. Photo Kirk Gittings.*

Luis Jiménez's 1989 polychrome sculpture *Border Crossing (Cruzando El Rio Bravo)* is dedicated to the artist's father, who, along with Jiménez's grandmother, entered the U.S. illegally from Mexico in 1924.[1] Made from urethane-coated fiberglass, the 10-foot-high, totem-polelike sculpture depicts three figures—a man, a woman and an infant—who flow into one another almost as though the fiberglass were still in a semi-liquid state. Standing barefoot, with his pants rolled up to his calves, the man carries the woman on his shoulders. The crying baby struggles out from under the woman's shawl. Jiménez renders the figures more dramatic by painting shadows along the heavily corded muscles on the man's arms and between the lines on both figures' faces. The reds and blues that dominate their clothing tend toward a purplish range which, together with the glossy highlights, helps evoke a moonlit river crossing. As is often the case with Jiménez's sculpture, the faces of the figures seem older than their bodies—testifying to a life of struggle. In fact, *Border Crossing* is a memorial to the hundreds of thousands of Mexicans who have made the clandestine journey north, and the expressions on the faces of the figures speak of fear, determination and hope. Knowing the history behind the dedication, it is tempting to view the baby as a self-portrait, but actually Jiménez was born on this side of the border, in El Paso, Texas, in 1941.

Jiménez, who has been known to open his slide presentations with the statement, "I have an agenda," considers his primary audience to be the Chicano working class. In the numerous public art works he has addressed to this chosen constituency, Jiménez often favors violent and kitschy imagery. These sculptures have struck some viewers as unnervingly stereotypical and devoid of moral uplift, but the artist sees his use of Chicano stereotypes as part of an effort to redeem aspects of Southwest American history that have either been ignored or erased by Anglo culture.

The first touring retrospective devoted to Jiménez is aptly titled "Working Class Heroes, Images from the Popular Culture." Along with eight monumental sculptures, the show, which is making its final stop at the University of Houston's Blaffer Gallery [Jan. 23-Mar. 28], presents over 60 maquettes and works on paper. (At the Dallas Museum of Art, where it debuted, there were several more sculptures and an installation that did not travel to other venues.) Seen in depth, Jiménez's work creates a world where raucousness and pathos hold equal sway, where pointed social commentary coexists with a feel for the heroic dimension of everyday lives. His figurative style is a distinctive blend of sinewy Baroque forms and cartoonlike, Pop energy.

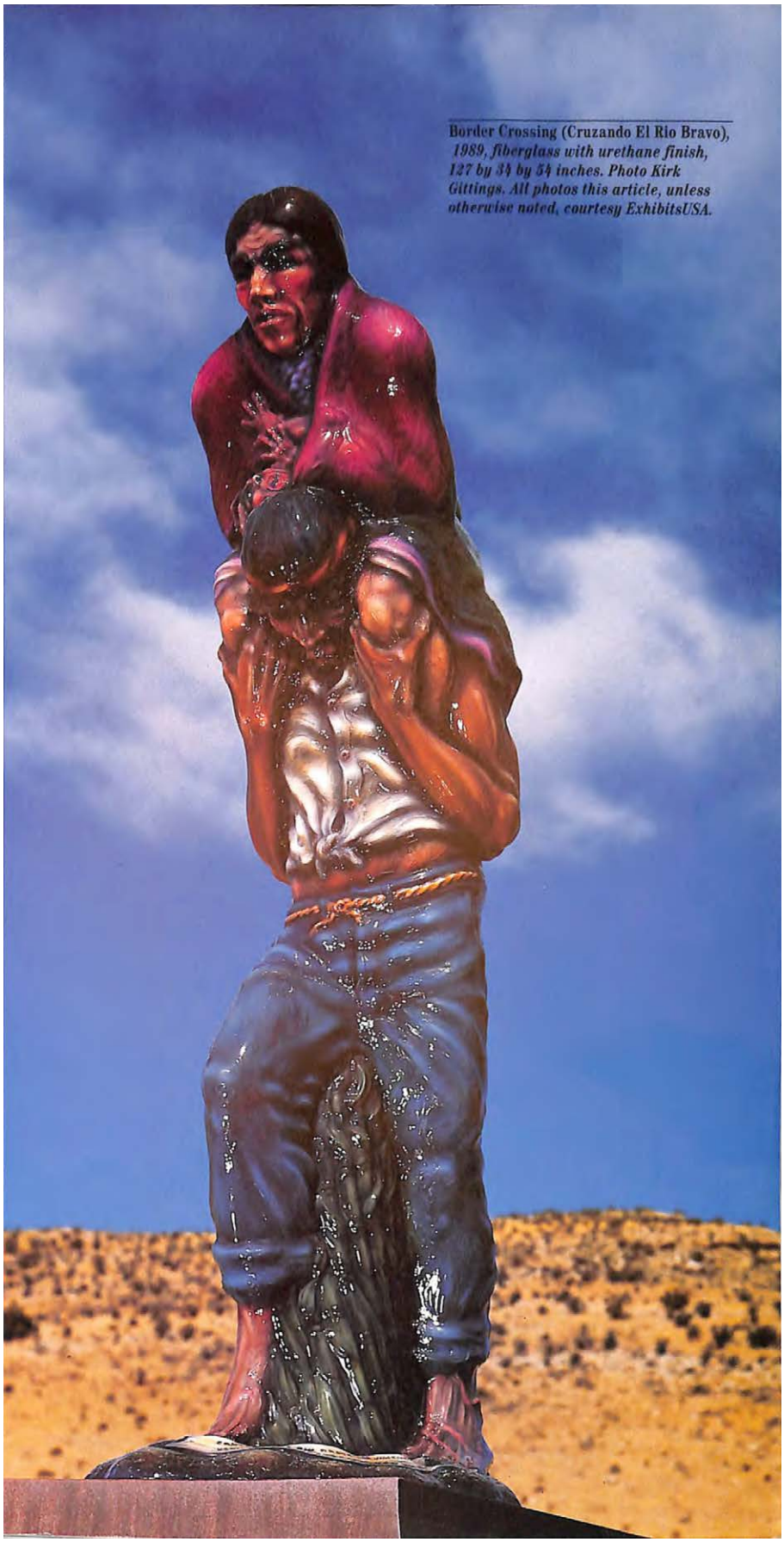
Growing up in El Paso, Jiménez worked in his father's neon sign shop, and the bold color and fluid, sexy design of neon informs much of his work. The other great influence from his youth is American car culture, from hot rodders' transformed Model Ts to low riders' extravagantly customized cars. This retrospective includes watercolors and drawings, some as large as 4 by 8 feet, depicting low riders and other barrio figures with their cars and women.

One of Jiménez's earliest sculptures, *American Dream* (1969), shows the ecstatic sexual coupling of a woman and a Volkswagen beetle, a fantastic union that presumably could, like all mythological encounters of mortals and gods, bring forth a hero.

Jiménez began using fiberglass when he was an art student at the University of Texas at Austin in the early 1960s. The material seemed as "unavoidable" to him as he felt steel, with its connotations of industry and modernity, must have been for David Smith and Alexander Calder when they started out. A component in many commercial products, fiberglass was also used for customized cars and decorations in amusement parks. Its popular appeal rested in large part on the flawless finish it could acquire in expert hands, a quality which was then largely abhorred as a element in the fine arts. This prejudice was challenged when Jiménez and others started to work with fiberglass in the 1960s. In Los Angeles, Craig Kaufmann emphasized, even exaggerated the slick commercial quality of fiberglass in abstract sculptures that gave birth to the term "finish fetish." Bruce Nauman, in his early work, preferred fiberglass in its funkier, unfinished state where it more closely resembled human skin. Kaufmann and Nauman may have represented polar opposites in their approaches to the material, but both were concerned with taking fiberglass away from its established commercial uses, and thereby transforming it unmistakably into art. Jiménez proceeded differently, developing a figurative style that enthusiastically adopted techniques used in making airplane fuselages, racing car bodies or figures for the midway.

His process, then as now, begins with the creation of plasticine models from which he makes fiberglass molds. After sanding and polishing the fiberglass forms, he uses an airbrush to apply layers of jet-aircraft acrylic urethane paints. These paints come in a limited range of lurid colors, which helps explain the dominance of red, blue and purple in all his work. Jiménez then coats the painted sculpture in layers of clear urethane, a process that tones down the color by sealing it under a gelatinous glaze, in effect creating an image in which color and form become one.

The earliest large-scale sculpture in the retrospective is *The Barfly—Statue of Liberty* (1969), a work created in response to the Vietnam War. The nearly 8-foot-tall figure depicts Lady Liberty as a loud drunk. Leaning back on a barstool draped in an American flag in which skulls replace the stars, this aging babe waves an overflowing beer glass above her head. As is typical in Jiménez's work, the elements (in this case, figure, flag and stool)



Border Crossing (Cruzando El Rio Bravo), 1989, fiberglass with urethane finish, 127 by 34 by 54 inches. Photo Kirk Gittings. All photos this article, unless otherwise noted, courtesy ExhibitsUSA.

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Progress I, *1974, fiberglass, 108 by 126 by 90 inches. Albuquerque Museum.*

Southwest Pietà, *1984, fiberglass with urethane finish, 120 by 126 by 72 inches. Commissioned by the city of Albuquerque. Photo Kirk Gittings.*

Jiménez views the Chicano community as his primary audience and is concerned with redeeming aspects of Southwest American history that have been erased or ignored by Anglo culture.

are fused into a single sinuous form. Candy flaking, the technique of mixing glitter and urethane favored by hotrod customizers, lends *Barfly* her glow. Jiménez has literally painted on her clothes, demonstrating how well-suited fiberglass is for defining such lubricious details as nipples and "love handles."

By the mid-1970s, Jiménez had expanded his scope to create complex, life-sized tableaux that fully exploited the possibilities of fiberglass. The underlying intention of many of these works is to remedy the shortcomings of most 19th-century portrayals of the American West. The figures in *Progress I* (1974), which depicts an Indian buffalo hunt, and *Progress II* (1974), which shows a cowboy roping a steer, are drawn from the bronze sculptures of Frederic Remington and Charles Russell, while the titles call to mind some triumphalist WPA mural celebrating the march of civilization and industry across the continent. In Jiménez's sculptures, in contrast to the official version, the violence that accompanied that march is never understated. As the Indian hunter's arrow in *Progress I* hits it mark, bloody saliva flows from the buffalo's mouth. Rider, horse and quarry all trample a chaos of debris that includes cacti, yucca plants, a cow skull, snakes, a wolf and a rabbit—an inventory of flora and fauna as specific as that found in the background of medieval tapestries, and serving a similar allegorical function. The cowboy in *Progress II* ropes his steer in a landscape that contains both human and animal skulls. While meek desert creatures cower, an owl snatches its prey. Indian arrows litter the ground and a piscine fossil reminds us that millions of years ago these prairies were at the bottom of a sea.

While the emphasis in *Progress I* is on a powerfully fused image of rider, horse and buffalo, Jiménez is already experimenting with secondary molds to create elements that appear to fly away from the composition—a rabbit leaps from the buffalo's path, the Indian's loin cloth flaps in the wind. *Progress II* follows this up by incorporating two extravagantly cantilevered elements—a cowboy and a steer—with multiple additions. It says something about the carnival atmosphere generated by Jiménez that the blue horse and

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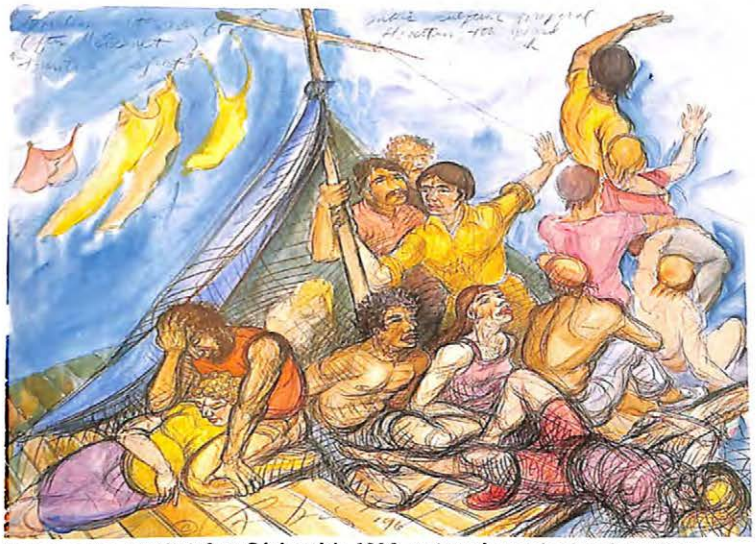
purple longhorn do not immediately strike viewers as unnaturally colored. In this artist's hands, the red lightbulbs that stand in for the animal's eyes seem an appropriate rather than a grotesque choice. The glowing bulbs evoke both the animal's life force, and the Christmas lights strung around the sign of a West Texas bar.

The *Progress* sculptures are unusual in Jiménez's career in that they were created as private commissions rather than as public projects. In his catalogue essay for "Working Class Heroes," Dave Hickey asserts that Jiménez is almost unique among contemporary artists in that he is primarily a public artist, directing his work toward a popular audience, who has gained, in that process, an art-world following. Stressing the artist's democratic qualities, Hickey observes that "there are *no* wrong ways of responding to the work of Luis Jiménez. There are only different ways of looking at it." Given the controversies that have plagued several of his installations, Jiménez himself might question that last statement.

Vaquero (1981), a life-sized sculpture of a pistol-waving Mexican cowboy on a bucking Appaloosa, is among Jiménez's most familiar images. On one level, the work clearly parodies traditional, pompous equestrian statues of military heroes found in parks all over the Western world; but more importantly, for Jiménez, it also corrects a historical error by reminding the public that the first American cowboys were Mexican. When Anglos moved into the western territories, they found a cowboy culture already in place and merely adapted its dress and terminology. Jiménez's *Vaquero* is the anti-John Wayne, and his jubilant pose suggests that he is celebrating his restored status.

Steelworker, ***1990, fiberglass, 126 inches high; commissioned for the Niagara Transportation Authority, subsequently installed in Pittsburgh. Courtesy the artist.***



Homeless Set Adrift (after Géricault), ***1996, watercolor and colored pencil on paper, 47½ by 52½ inches. Courtesy Moody Gallery, Houston.***

Cholo Van With Southwest Pietà, ***1994, watercolor on paper, 48 by 72 inches. Courtesy Moody Gallery.***

The sculpture was originally intended for Tranquility Park in Houston, a site next to the city hall, "but the city fathers," according to Jiménez, "didn't like the idea of this Mexican cowboy with a gun in the middle of downtown Houston and ended up suggesting another site." The sculpture was relocated to Moody Park in a largely Hispanic neighborhood, but here, too, it provoked controversy.

In 1978, Moody Park had been the site of riots following the unjustified police shooting of a young Chicano. A community group, backed by a local politician running for higher office, objected to *Vaquero*, claiming that the sculpture was an unwanted reminder of the riots and that it presented Mexicans as violent and dangerous. Although these efforts to remove the work failed, 12 years later the sculpture again became the target of attacks by the same politician, again during an elec-

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Honky Tonk, *1997, life-size plywood cutouts; installed at the State Capitol building, Albuquerque. Photo Susan Jiménez.*

Honky Tonk, *1981, lithograph, 35¼ by 50 inches.*

tion period. Now, it seemed, *Vaquero* was a bad influence because Moody Park had become notorious for gang and drug activity. As he had done when *Vaquero* was initially challenged, Jiménez met with all parties involved to defend his art. The publicity surrounding those meetings created a groundswell of support from the community itself and the sculpture stayed in place.

The controversies surrounding another work, *Southwest Pietà* (1984), are harder to comprehend for anyone not versed in Mexican-American politics. The sculpture, which was commissioned for Tiguex Park in Albuquerque, depicts a scene from ancient Mexican myth: Popocatepetl holding his dead lover Ixtacihuatl draped across his lap. The image of the mythological lovers, who are supposed to have been transformed into two of Mexico's major volcanos, is familiar from the gloriously lurid pictures featured on illustrated calendars and black velvet paintings.

Jiménez's work creates a world where raucousness and pathos hold equal sway, where pointed social commentary coexists with a feel for the heroic dimension of everyday lives.

In Jiménez's version, Popocatepetl is given Spanish facial characteristics while Ixtacihuatl's features are more indigenous American. Jiménez saw the work as a dialogue on the Spanish and Indian mix that gave rise to the Mexican-American population, but New Mexico residents claiming direct Spanish lineage objected to the image. Rumors spread that it represented a Spaniard raping a Tiguex Indian woman, a legendary incident recorded in the area some 300 years before. In a replay of the *Vaquero* controversies, the sculpture was moved to the working-class Mexican neighborhood of Martineztown.

The pattern of political objections followed by working-class support is common to Jiménez's public commissions. A similar situation developed in Pittsburgh with the installation of *Steelworker* (1986). The sculpture's original title was *Hunky Steelworker*, a term Jiménez had picked up from the local publication the *Millhunk Herald*. "Hunky" is an old-fashioned, sometimes disparging slang term for Americans of central or eastern European background that was especially applied to industrial workers. Jiménez used it to honor the ethnic origin of many of the region's steelworkers, in the same way that in his Southwest works he uses Spanish slang terms. Pittsburgh officials objected to the word "Hunky" and the artist agreed to grind off the offending term. Afterwards, however, many locals who had understood the level of homage Jiménez meant to pay them came by the sculpture to touch the area where the inscription had been.

Jiménez's handling of another public-art project in Houston shows that the artist has developed a sense of humor about the political responses his works can generate. In 1996, when Jiménez viewed the Houston park for which the sculpture was being commissioned, he noticed a large homeless population and guessed that the commissions he and other artists were being given were part of a plan to clean the place up. The sculpture Jiménez proposed was based on Géricault's *Raft of the Medusa*, but in the place of shipwreck victims it depicted a lean-to encampment surrounded by homeless men

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and women. The present exhibition includes a large 1996 watercolor, *Homeless Set Adrift (After Géricault)*, which was as far as the project got—this time Jiménez didn't even make the short list.

As integral as public work remains to Jiménez's practice, the definitive piece in "Working Class Heroes" may well be an installation made to be seen in a museum. Titled *Honky Tonk* (1997), the work (which unfortunately was on view only in Dallas) marks a striking shift in mediums for the artist. It's a re-creation of a Texas bar in which over a dozen larger-than-life-sized, cutout plywood figures dance, drink, sulk and give one another the eye. Jiménez has worked on *Honky Tonk* for the past 15 years, adding figures and adjusting their poses to suggest new narrative possibilities. The characters include middle-aged couples dressed for a night on the town, young people on the make, solitary drinkers and a dog in danger of getting stepped on. That the artist considers this the most personal of his works was made clear by his inclusion in the installation of watercolor and graphite works that seem out-of-place in the barroom environment. These are portraits of three generations of his family, portraits whose sensitivity takes a harsher turn when the artist depicts himself in a series of hand-colored lithographs from 1995. Looking gaunt and grim, Jiménez seems intent in these large prints on presenting the "skull beneath the skin."

Jiménez has explored the dance-hall theme frequently in prints and drawings, and one image that does tour with the exhibition captures much of the feeling of the installation. Sharing the same title as the Dallas installation, *Honky Tonk* (1981) is a 35¼-by-50-inch color lithograph lightly dusted with glitter that introduces one of the central images from the installation. On a crowded dance floor, a woman has thrown her arms around her partner's neck. Although he's grabbed a generous piece of her ass, his eyes stray to another woman whose expression conveys equal parts of encouragement and threat.

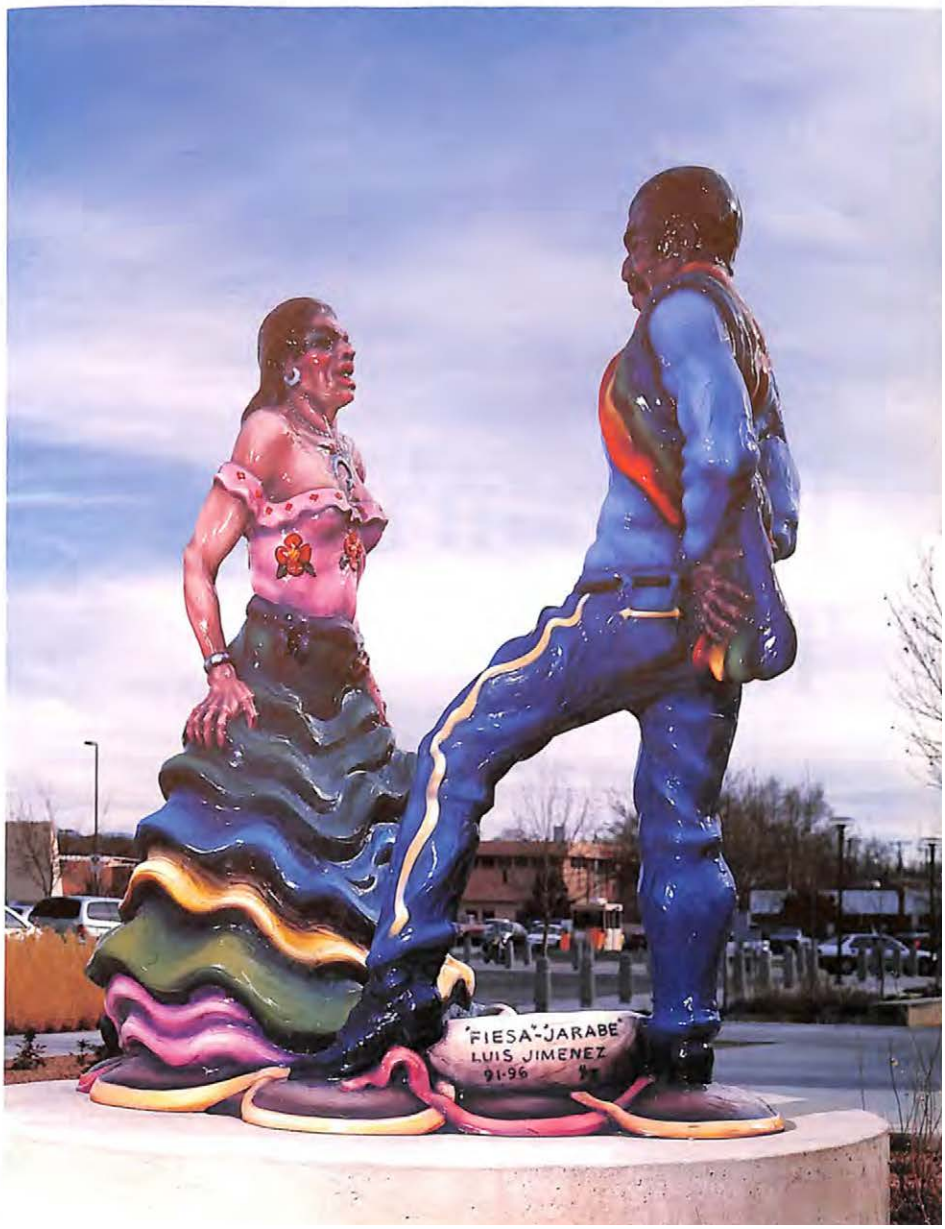
Given Jiménez's previous use of art-historical references ranging from Russell and Remington to Géricault, it is not too great a leap to see the rhythmic and friezelike composition of this lithograph as a variation on Poussin's *Dance to the Music of Time*. But whereas Poussin and those who have followed his lead, such as Matisse, have used the dance as a graceful image of an ordered culture or an evocation of an Arcadian past, Jiménez's dancers inhabit a world ready to slip at any moment into low comedy, melodrama or tragedy—or, more likely, all three at once. It's a world that has been created by the vaqueros, by the border crossings and the history of violent "progress" that Jiménez has explored since the 1960s. It is a world, like any other, that has to be loved to be understood and that Jiménez embraces in its unruly entirety □

1. When Jiménez's father learned of the dedication, he pointed out to his son that he and his mother had never been "illegal aliens." "I just never had my papers straight," he said. See Man on Fire, Luis Jiménez, *Albuquerque, Albuquerque Museum, 1994, p. 146.*

"Luis Jiménez: Working Class Heroes, Images from the Popular Culture" was curated by Benito Huerta. After debuting at the Dallas Museum of Art [May 18-Aug. 2, 1997], the exhibition traveled to the Eiteljorg Museum, Indianapolis [Sept. 1-Nov. 15, 1997], the Museum of Texas Tech University, Lubbock [Dec. 15, 1997-Mar. 10, 1998], the Tacoma Art Museum [Apr. 10-June 21, 1998], and the Palm Springs Desert Museum [July 11-Oct. 4, 1998]. The tour concludes at the Blaffer Gallery, University of Houston [Jan. 23-Mar. 28]. The exhibition is accompanied by a catalogue with essays by Huerta, Michael Brenson and Dave Hickey.

Author: *Charles Dee Mitchell is a freelance critic based in Dallas.*

Fiesta Dancers (Jarabe), ***1996, fiberglass with urethane finish, 114 by 96 by 59 inches. Collection University of New Mexico, Albuquerque. Photo Mark Knoll.***



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TexasMonthly

ART

ART: Luis Jimenez

His sculpture is nothing less than a revisionist history of the American West.

By Michael Ennis

September 1998

THE SEVENTIES HAD JUST BEGUN, and El Paso native Luis Jimenez had already realized the dream of every Texas artist of his generation: making it in New York. Arriving there in 1966 with a stubbornly contrarian aesthetic—outspoken, neon-hued figurative sculpture in an era of mute minimalist abstraction—this UT-educated son of an illegal immigrant had hustled his way into a couple of critically praised one-man shows at a prominent New York gallery, doing well enough to quit his day job and buy a house in Maine. But in 1972, in a turnabout seemingly as improbable as his success, Jimenez came home.

"I realized I was reaching what I thought was a very limited audience—the gallery and museum world," recalls Jimenez, who is 58. "It's not like having the work out in public. And I wanted to move out in public." Working in a hangarlike studio in a former Works Progress Administration schoolhouse near Hondo, New Mexico (about three hours north of El Paso), Jimenez has done just that, moving his art into the public arena with an ambition and audacity unmatched by any American artist in the past two decades. From El Paso's San Jacinto Plaza to a California border crossing to the main street of Fargo, North Dakota, Jimenez's high-gloss, urethane-coated fiberglass monuments have challenged his audiences to take a fresh look at their history and myths.

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For a public that has progressed from classical bronzes of all-American icons to steel-and-marble corporate minimalism with little more than a yawn, a Jimenez can be an epiphany or, at times, an outrage. Adapted with equal enthusiasm from both high and popular art, Jimenez's figures combine the classical lines and rapturous Baroque energy of a Bernini with the pneumatic surrealism of Mexican calendar art—a potent mix derived from his own cultural hybridism.

"I never lost contact with the culture of Mexico," Jimenez says. "I remember when I was six years old spending a whole summer in Mexico City, going to the museums, seeing not only the work of the Mexican muralists but shows by artists like Henry Moore. I was exposed to a level of art that I never was in El Paso." But equally important was the culture in and around his father's custom neon-sign shop in El Paso's tough Segundo Barrio, where the lowriders cruised by while Jimenez helped assemble giant sheet-metal roosters and concrete-and-wire-mesh polar bears. As a teenager, Jimenez spray-painted hot rods in the shop after work, perfecting the automotive sheen he would later apply to his innovative fiberglass casts: "I decided that if my images were going to be taken from popular culture, I wanted a material that didn't carry the cultural baggage of marble or bronze."

But even more than the medium, it's the message that distinguishes Jimenez from his colleagues. At a time when most public art merely whispers carefully edited platitudes, Jimenez believes that his work should sound off. "The purpose of public art is to create a 'dialogue,'" he says. "I like that word better than 'controversy.'" And "dialogue" has indeed attended every Jimenez installation since his first public commission, *Vaquero*, was placed in Houston's Moody Park in 1981. Initially rejected for a site near city hall, the gunslinging Hispanic broncbuster was promptly attacked by a local Hispanic politician for allegedly inciting violence. Jimenez's intention, however, was to correct a historical oversight. "I wanted to do a cowboy for Texas," he explains, "and it's a historical fact that the American cowboy was a Mexican invention." It's also a fact that many in the West are still unable to accept; the commission for *Progress II*, a cow-roping vaquero planned for the gallery district in Scottsdale, Arizona, was shot down after concerted lobbying by the city's traditional Western art galleries.

But Jimenez's revisionist history of the American West isn't as simple as putting brown faces on the usual suspects. *Sodbuster, San Isidro*, on view at the Federal Reserve Bank in Dallas, casts the humble prairie plowman in the same heroic mold as Remington's

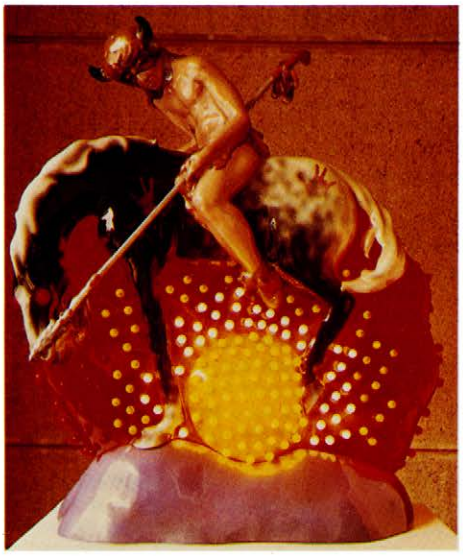
cowpunchers and cavalrymen. An even more heretical challenge to the accepted canons of Western art is Jimenez's portrayal of nature as an often-suffering protagonist rather than the malign adversary of Anglo-American progress. His buffalo, coyotes, alligators, and wild horses (the 32-foot-tall *Denver Mustang* taking shape in his studio will rear up next to the main terminal of the new Denver International Airport) eulogize a vanishing natural world while conjuring the powerful animistic spirits once worshiped by Native Americans. "I looked at a lot of art made in the American West when I started out," says Jimenez, "and it seemed our whole idea of progress was wrapped up in the notion of the killing of the beast. In all its variations, it has become a trite, hackneyed image."

The artist offers an equally provocative take on the new West. A citizen of the border (Luis Senior crossed illegally at age nine and was naturalized sixteen years later), Jimenez alludes to his own history in the impassioned *Border Crossing* (at Santa Fe's Museum of Fine Arts), which depicts a Mexican father carrying his family across the river on his shoulders: "I wanted to put a face on these people." His drawing of Esequiel Hernandez, Jr., the Redford teenager mistakenly shot dead by a Marine on border patrol (Jimenez depicts the youthful goatherd as a Christ-like shepherd), provoked a civil liberties showdown when the principal of a Presidio school ordered a teacher to remove a poster version—produced by the Border Rights Coalition, an immigrant advocacy organization—from her classroom; the poster came down. *Fiesta (I arabe)*, a pair of jarabe dancers installed at the San Diego International Crossing, drew its complaints from feminists who found the woman too wanton and from middle-class Hispanics who objected that her partner was too dark and paunchy. "These are ordinary people," Jimenez says of his working-class duo. "It's not some sort of idealized stereotype."

As unconcerned with the mandarin political correctness of today's art as he was with the social unconsciousness of his peers thirty years ago, Jimenez simply goes on showing us the true faces of the West—and rewriting nineteenth-century Western mythology for a twenty-first-century audience. "In redefining the myth we're really redefining ourselves," he says. "And I think it's important to keep redefining ourselves. That's something that artists have always done."

Ennis, Michael. "ART: Luis Jiménez." *Texas Monthly*, September 1998.

ARTFORUM



SIGNS: A CONVERSATION WITH LUIS JIMENEZ

AMY BAKER SANDBACK

Amy Baker Sandback: Your images are very much part of this country of immigrants and working people.

Luis Jimenez: If I was an outsider looking at America or the West—what would I see? What would I be looking at? It would be the strong and vibrant images that stand out, like the cowboy, not those coming out of the fine-art situation. It would be the motorcycle, the automobile; this is the important visible iconography of America, but it's not art in itself. The use of these popular images is part of the game: to take my work as close to the edge as I can, because then the challenge is greater, and so is the payoff.

I see myself as an image maker. Any image that you put out there is a statement, conscious, unconscious or self-conscious. Not making a statement is a statement.

ABS: Your *Vaquero* sculpture in Houston [1980] functions on different levels that are often referred to as separate: artistic and social.

LJ: It was my first public commission. When I started doing research into public art I realized that one of the most common forms of sculpture, certainly within the Western tradition, is the equestrian. So the challenge became: how can I make people look at it again and how can I do something with my material—fiberglass—that bronze can't do; that stone can't; that hasn't been done before? A lot of people don't even see the *Vaquero* as an equestrian. But it is, and the scale is much the same as if it were in Washington, D.C.

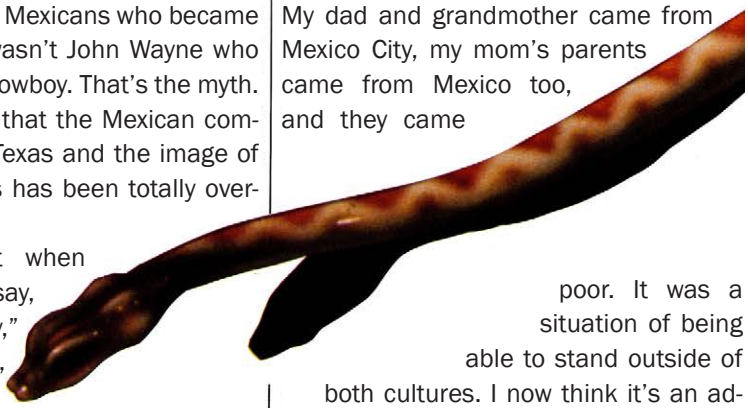
The *Vaquero* piece is a tribute to the Mexican origins of the American cowboy, a statement about Texas, and also about the Mexican community within Texas. If you think of words connected with cowboys, like rodeo, corral, remuda, lariat, those words are all Spanish. The cowboy was a Mexican invention. It was the Spaniards that brought the cows and the horses and it was Mexicans who became the cowboys. It wasn't John Wayne who was the original cowboy. That's the myth. This contribution that the Mexican community made to Texas and the image of the United States has been totally overlooked.

In the past when people would say, "You're a cowboy," I'd answer, "No, I'm not a redneck." To put this *Vaquero* in a Mexican community in Houston is a social statement.

ABS: He's angry. He's got a gun pointed up in the sky. Do you like unsettling people?

LJ: I'm redefining an image and a myth. I'm also coming out of the new spirit of the Mexican community of Texas. Not the old, "yes sir, no sir." That's not what won elections in places like San Antonio. It's an aggressive mood. The sculpture is aggressive. For me he represents this difference. Social changes haven't come about because people are willing to go along with the old situation. I also have the obligation to take a stand.

I grew up as a Chicano before it was a militant term. I'm comfortable with it. You needed a word because "Mexican" implied that you still had Mexican nationality. Mexicans don't really accept Chicanos, they see us as traitors, and Anglo-Americans don't quite accept Chicanos either. I come out of a minority within a minority, Mexican Protestants, which is a very small group with a strong sense of community, and of family. In New York I heard blacks talk about their sense of obligation to a larger community in whatever they did. I think that is there for me too. My dad and grandmother came from Mexico City, my mom's parents came from Mexico too, and they came poor. It was a situation of being able to stand outside of both cultures. I now think it's an advantage because that's the role that the artist has always been in.



The Mexican people have been very

Sandback, Amy Baker. "Signs: A Conversation with Luis Jiménez." *Artforum* 23, no. 1, September 1984, pp. 84–87.

poor but there's always been respect for the arts. You can see that in the crafts. The important thing is interest. When I was young I felt my, skill was inherent in being Chicano, inherent in being Mexican, and that every Mexican not only had ability but also appreciated art. It was a kind of fantasy, but certainly within the context a positive thing.

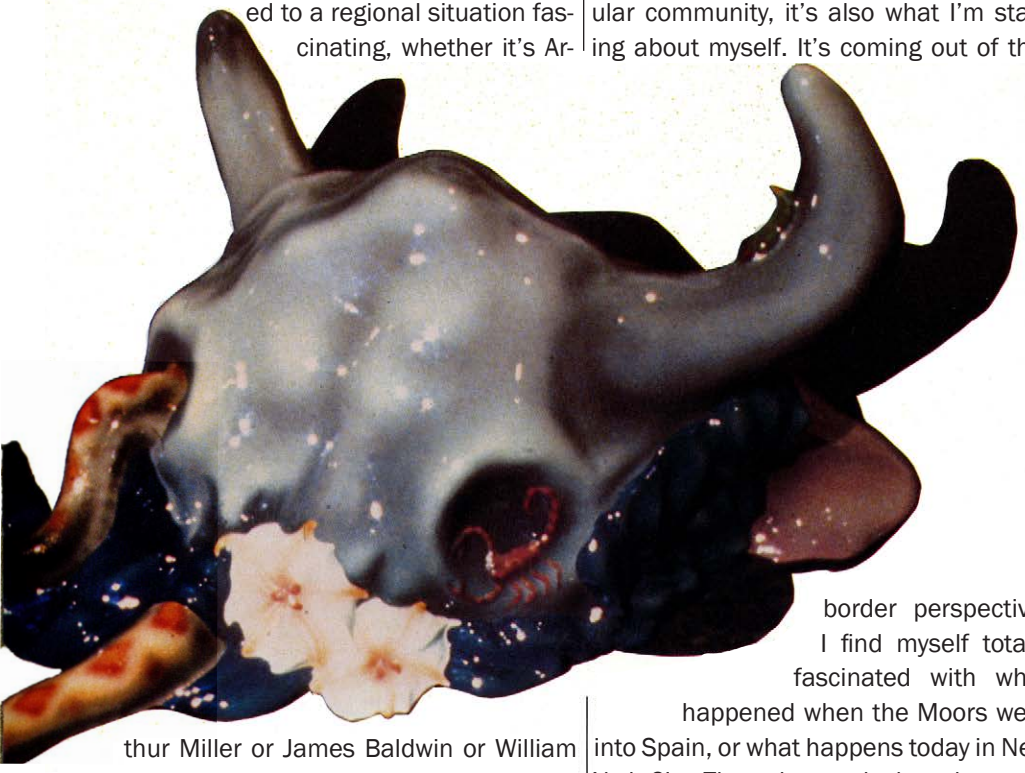
ABS: This type of reliance on personal context and sources, this sense of involvement with a particular place or society, has at times been labeled "regional art." You must have feelings about this phrase.

LJ: I've always found artists who responded to a regional situation fascinating, whether it's Arthur Miller or James Baldwin or William Faulkner; these writers have been important to me in developing concepts about what I want to do. Every one of them focused on a very particular isolated situation that they knew well, and in so doing spoke also to broader issues. I feel more of an affinity with contemporary artists like Ed Kienholz than, say, the obvious connection with Frederic Remington or Charles Russell.

ABS: There's a relation between an icon and a cliché that's really the clue here. Both you and Kienholz use "real" images that could be understood both ways.

LJ: I use material that's familiar to me, but the issues involved in the work go beyond personal or localized references. I am from the West and I'm an American, so that's going to be in the work whether I want it or not. Kienholz is also a Western product but he isn't making cliché "Western" art. I think he's always been a kind of outsider and like a writer he gets involved in personal subject matter that addresses broader issues.

What I'm doing is about ideas, and obviously everybody comes away with something different. Somebody can get involved at one level, or they can use that as an entry level to get more involved. It's not only what I'm stating about a particular community, it's also what I'm stating about myself. It's coming out of the border perspective. I find myself totally fascinated with what happened when the Moors went into Spain, or what happens today in New York City. The cultures clash and you get a hybrid vigor. You get flashy signs, you get bright color, energy. I might do the end of the trail as an electric sunset as a kind of tribute to the image of the end of the trail; however, the piece is also about my own feelings about what's happened with the American Indian.



ABS: You say that you have been influenced more by writers than by other artists.

LJ: Yes. The writers that attract me are those that are basically writing their autobiographies. They're writing about themselves and giving us a very personal idea of what it's like to be alive here and now. In the process they are making a statement about the general culture.

ABS: Is what you're doing also personal narrative?

LJ: I never thought of it that way, but I guess so. I hadn't defined it that way.

ABS: What about all the symbols in your pieces, or things that could be taken as symbols, like the snakes?

LJ: In New York a girl squatted down and hiked up her dress in front of one of the snakes. She laughed and ran out of the gallery giggling. I'm particularly fascinated with sexual symbols. I believed in the universality of certain images before I even knew who Carl Jung was yet it was a shock in 1980 to go to Italy six years after having made the *Progress I* sculpture to see the same theme in the sacrificial sculptures of the man cutting the bull's throat, with some of the same details, including the snake and the dog, that appeared in my piece. Certain things I grew up with that I had assumed were Mexican or American I saw were indeed universal.

ABS: By consciously making the decision to do public work, you've chosen a special relationship to the public—and to art's success in working with a community.

LJ: I want my art to be public, part of everyday life. I think most museums are essentially mausoleums, and that art seen there has been removed from any social context or interaction. Certainly only a

Far left: **Luis Jimenez, *End of Trail with Electric Sunset*, 1971.** Fiberglass with electric lights, 6'9" × 5'10" × 3'9".
Center: **Luis Jimenez, fragment from *Progress I*, 1974.** Fiberglass, 5'4½" × 31 × 18".
Right: **Luis Jimenez, *American Dream*, 1968.** Fiberglass, 4'10" × 2'10".

Sandback, Amy Baker. "Signs: A Conversation with Luis Jiménez." *Artforum* 23, no. 1, September 1984, pp. 84–87.

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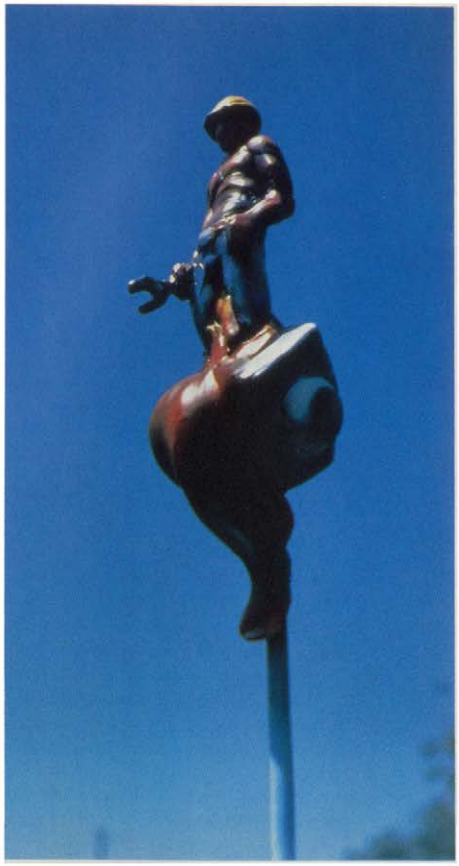
small percentage of Chicanos go. They're not made welcome. A project in Fargo, North Dakota, is an example of both my failure and my success in working with a community. I usually can't come up with quick solutions. North Dakota is far from anything I had ever known. I met with the local community, visited the area, and read history books about the region. I put up two shows at the local museum. It took time. For me, it's part of a subconscious process to digest the material.

There were also physical considerations. The main street of the town had been converted into a pedestrian mall with some vehicular traffic. There are overhead canopies for snow—in fact, the site was under twenty feet of snow when I first saw it. I realized that North Dakota is an environment that gets to fifty degrees below in the winter. The only reason people survive, the native Americans or the Scandinavians that followed, is their strong sense of community. With the settlers this was reflected in events like barn buildings which gathered the community together. My first idea was to come in with a barn dance. I have my own agenda for what I want to do, and for years I nave been wanting to do a dance piece. The "Honky Tonk" cut-outs [1982] were a way of pacifying myself. The idea of relating separate pieces to each other without them being physically connected fascinates me. It's a wonderful spatial problem. It would be a fun piece yet have serious implications. I explained all the formal reasons to the community and they were very polite. They approved it with only one dissenting vote. But I knew there was something wrong. Finally they said, you have to understand that we're Scandinavian Lutherans—no drinking, smoking, or dancing—and while all this went on, it's not the way we like to see ourselves. Although I had worked out a good piece, there would always be an ingrained resentment, so I went back to the drawing board. I did some sketches of the farmer, of the sodbuster. I had worked him out before with a tractor, but with oxen he became someone I could really feel. And of course, he was a logical progression after the *Vaquero* piece. I sent out a model. The piece [*The Sodbuster: San Isidro*] was approved unanimously this time.



Far left: **Luis Jimenez, *The Sodbuster: San Isidro*, 1982.** Above: fiberglass, 24′ × 5′3″ × 7′. In situ in Fargo, North Dakota. Below: clay model of work in progress (detail).
Near left: **Luis Jimenez, *Southwest Pieta*, 1983.** Above: fiberglass model, 16 × 9 × 14″. Below: working drawing, oilstick on paper, 10½ × 10′.

ABS: They were saying that they wanted a sign. And that makes you a sign maker. You brought it right back to the street. When we begin to talk about placing public sculpture, aren't the considerations close to those necessary in placing a commercial sign so it can be seen?

LJ: The formal problems are the same. I would be dishonest here if I didn't acknowledge that my dad influenced me. I grew up in a sign shop in El Paso, Texas. My dad got national prizes for his neon spectaculars. He sent neon signs to Las Vegas and all over. Sign men, like Barney Wise in New York, knew his work and would visit El Paso. My father wanted to be an artist. I've talked about this with Anton Van Dalen. We're both examples of the son living out the dream of the father. His became a high school principal, and an amateur artist. Mine found his outlet in the sign business. As far as I'm concerned my father made works of art—though they were considered popular culture, and therefore "low art." In the case of my Dad and me, there's a lot of mingling going on. When I was around 6 we made a concrete bear for a dry cleaning firm. When I was 16 we made a twenty-foot-high horse's head, with eyes that lit up, for a big drive-in. So basically I'm still doing the same things that I was doing then, and the kind of things he did in those spectaculars.

In North Dakota when they saw photos of the completed work they switched the site to their main intersection. My feeling is that in public pieces, I don't want to have a competitive relationship with a

Above: **Luis Jimenez, model for *Steel Worker*, 1983.** Fiberglass, 10″ high.
Below: **Luis Jimenez, *Bernini's Elephant*, 1980.** Color pencil on paper, 30 × 22″.

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building. There's no way I can win against a skyscraper. Sculpture has served for centuries as a way of humanizing urban spaces. It's one way of making art part of the world again instead of separating it off. People became familiar with the artwork as I worked with the community. I think that's an important part of the project. They put up with me even though I was two years late. The general consensus was that the piece was different, but they liked it. My assistant, Ted Kuykendall, heard two older women: one said, "I hate that piece." Ted went up to her and asked why. She said, "Because it reminds me of hard times."

I have also made a stand at certain times. For example, I was approached to do a piece for the tourist area of Albuquerque called Old Town. I didn't pick the site. Old Town was the original Albuquerque settlement and some people there identify themselves as being of Spanish versus Mexican descent. It's a class distinction and is used to divide the Hispanic community. They were the aristocracy, are conservative, and still are the political establishment. They do not see themselves as part of the larger Mexican-American community. So just the mere fact that I was selected put me in a difficult situation.

ABS: It must have been loaded.

LJ: I was in a no-win position since they have always lived in terror and fear of the invaders from the south. I could have tiptoed around their fears but I wanted to make a Chicano statement. I made that decision long ago. I don't feel that artists are in the business of making merchandise. I've been trying to make an alternative situation for myself, but I don't exist in a vacuum and recognize my need for dialogue. Going back out West in 1971 was a conscious decision to work on pieces that were public in scale and so had that special access. It was a question of developing a language, also a particular kind of technology, and it seemed to make more sense to go West to do it. It also was going back to those visual images I know best and to a relation to that landscape, and my own background. In Albuquerque I came in with the most common Mexican-American image, the Indian man holding an Indian woman, which goes back to the pre-Columbian myth of the two volcanoes visible outside of Mexico City. The active volcano is the male and the dormant volcano is female. That image was carried into the United States and is still seen on jackets and cars and murals from Texas to California. A partial explanation is that it is an archetypal image, a reverse pieta. Working with a community doesn't necessarily mean you always agree with it. Quickly rumors spread through the Spanish-American community that I was portraying an Indian woman who had been raped by a Spaniard. (In the 1500s the Spaniards were in fact accused of the rape of a Tiguex woman, and the Old Town park is called Tiguex Park.) There were six months of bad local press, with pictures of barrio murals with the same subject matter, which gave the impression that they were my drawings. That validated the use of the image for me. The most wonderful criticism they gave me was that the idea was too Mexican. Prior to the meeting for approval of the piece, I was told not to make the idea public, and to come in with a different idea. I invited two people in particular to the meeting, since it was supposed to be public. One was Vicente Ximenes, who has been politically active with the G.I. Forum for years, as well as having served as President Johnson's chairman of the cabinet committee on Mexican-American affairs. The other was the writer Rudy Anaya, who knows the local art community. They defended the piece because they understood where it was coming from. And the panel approved it. Then the mayor pressured the panel into rescinding their vote,which they did. It got that nasty. Next, people from other parts of the city came to the mayor to say that if Old Town didn't want it, they did. Frank Martinez asked if I would be willing to move the piece to Martineztown, a community settled by workers. He went to the mayor with signatures from the community, and so we reached a compromise. In the next mayoral election, Martinez is running against the incumbent mayor.

ABS: Who says that art doesn't affect politics?

LJ: It can. I do my work to make a difference. I'm doing a piece for Buffalo, New York, that's a steel worker. Ironically the steel plants are closing, and I've been asked about its relevancy. My answer is that the steel worker is still the strong image of the area and, again, its myth survives as the reality. (Our myths can only become myths when the reality is dead.) It is basically a blue-collar statement that is a tribute to those men. Like *The Sodbuster*.

ABS: I can't think of anybody that has influenced the way your art looks, and I don't see the work as being a continuation of the Ashcan School.

LJ: I don't either. But we have the same sources. I don't want to seem like I sprang up out of nowhere. What I really like is the old guys. In school I was taught that Bernini and the Baroque were decadent. But when I saw those Berninis, I loved the problems he set out for himself. His Piazza Navona sculpture in Rome, with the enormously complex base holding up the simple obelisk, is a complete reversal of the usual. But I don't want to get into the technical. I respond at a gut level, and when I see those pieces I get goose bumps. It's the same gut-level sensuality that I obviously appreciate. I love the material, and the feel of it. It's part of what it is to be alive; to enjoy eating or feeling or touching.

I guess the only way my work can be seen as new is the fact that it's being done now and with modern materials.

ABS: You've chosen to be a craftsman as well as an artist.

LJ: My father wanted to produce a super sign man. By the time I was 16 I could do everything in the plant. You asked me at one point about the cars and I dodged the question. But I grew up with cars. The first fiberglass I ever used was on a wrecked '53 Studebaker. I repaired it using fiberglass, but I never thought I would ever use fiberglass on art. When I was growing up, whether it was in the sign business or playing around with cars, the tour de force of a flawless surface was desirable. When I tell somebody who does fiberglass that I'm making a 50-section mold

they don't believe it, because in the car or boat business if you make a two- or three-piece mold it's already complicated.

I really need a material that is a statement in itself, one that can incorporate color and fluid form, the sensuality that I like. Somehow fiberglass seems to do that. Those people that I admire, like Alexander Calder and Julio González, made a very important statement in their use of iron and steel. In New York I worked as an assistant to Seymour Lipton. I could weld, it was just that simple. I was already doing my fiberglass pieces. He was very helpful to me in defining the role of the artist, as was the fact that he worked with symbols.

ABS: You said before that your work can be read in various ways. Are the pieces overblown caricatures? Are they three-dimensional cartoons?

LJ: No. When I was a kid going to the rodeo with my dad, he would say that the cowboy clowns were the best and most serious professionals. That rang true to me. Their job is to keep somebody from getting hurt. ■

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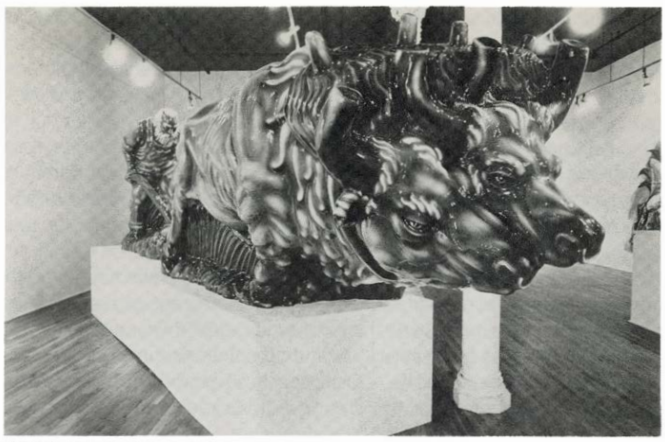

Luis Jimenez, *Sodbuster*, 1982, fiberglass and resin, 84 × 288 × 63".

LUIS JIMENEZ

There is a tendency to approach public art timidly. Scale can, of course, be inflated to bravado proportions, but other dimensions are often reduced. In the search for common themes and shared associations, many artists digress to a muddled, simplified esthetic. The intentions may be good, but the works are blandly uncommunicative. No-brand, generic public art ignores everything but an anticipated majority, but the idea of a public is an abstraction; "the public" does not really exist. "Public" implies a transcendence of pluralism toward a meaningless neutrality. Pollsters perpetuate the idea of "the public," but triumphant moments in art and elsewhere often involve unpredictable and surprising behavior and events, and we are refreshed by the revelation of the fallaciousness of our generalizations.

The bold work of Luis Jimenez has reconstituted and invigorated the concept of public art. Rather than straining for elusive commonalities, his work is episodic, focused, narrative, and mythological. The American West is his home and the source of his ideas; that landscape has long constituted a kind of geography of the American psyche. It is the crossroads of determination, insatiability, the beautiful, the unrefined, and the erotic, the psychological site of the American themes of progress and the frontier. Jimenez's work is infused by these myths, and, with big gestures, irony, and affection, he exposes the invented and inherited substance of the messages, and suggests why our mythological characters so often become shallow stereotypes.

In the museum space a large selection of Jimenez's drawings, from 1966 to 1983, demonstrated a vigorous proficiency with line and color, as well as the persistence and evolution of his ideas. The drawings are filled with gyrating bodies, big cars, leaping forms, horses, and steamy eroticism. *American Dream*, 1971, is a passionate hallucination, a thrusting car between the legs of a willing and weakened Western woman. Jimenez takes the automotive love affair literally but unseriously. In a small cutout study of a favorite theme, that of progress, passages are linearly represented by a Native American warrior, the white man discovering America, the conqueror turned cowboy, and a racing stagecoach with rifles firing back at the advancing past, all preceded by a locomotive/roadster/missile transfiguration. The cutout effectively recapitulates the textbook history that often mistakes the chronology of main events.

But Jimenez's enormous resin-and-fiberglass sculptures are the heart and guts of his work. He tells old stories with a new vision. These naturalistic compositions could almost be 19th-century commemorative statuary, but their sleek, brightly colored, high-gloss automotive finishes create a fusion of rugged regionalism, Pop art, and high tech which is heroic and honky-tonk.

Progress I, 1974, compresses a wounded bison and a warrior on a staggering horse in a primal

Phillips, Patricia C. "Luis Jiménez." *Artforum* 22, no. 10, Summer 1984, pp. 94–95.

struggle whose outcome is open to interpretation. The balance between human and natural forces in a sparse desert landscape suggests that progress falters as it advances. *Progress II*,1982, introduces new developments: a vaquero triumphantly ropes a panicky steer. Nothing contains the work's diverging internal forces, which seem to catapult beyond the taut lasso. Jimenez explores a more pastoral theme in *Sodbuster*, 1982, a two-part, 24-foot-long sculpture in which a farmer guides a spirited team of oxen through the heavy earth and swaying grass of the prairies. *Sodbuster* was created as an outdoor public work for Fargo, North Dakota, where the artist saw the work ethic still running strong and true in a vernacular landscape. The momentum of this monumental piece could have sent it blasting out of the gallery; it clearly needs an outdoor site.

Jimenez's work defies odds and conventional judgment. He employs narrative dreams, regional themes, and a naturalistic esthetic, and yet escapes sentimentality and the hackneyed. His work is gutsy and sweaty and has none of the icy intellectual distance that ironically informs so much current neoexpressionism; he has the vision and trust to believe that it has public presence. He understands that a pluralistic community can comprehend and delight in remote experiences and can give sympathetic viewing to the inflated content and diminished power of myths. Jimenez entrusts his audience with a venture of imaginative reassessment. His outdoor works confirm that things went awry when it was decided that the idiosyncratic, the controversial, and the boisterous have no place in public life and art.

—Patricia C. Phillips

Phillips, Patricia C. "Luis Jiménez." *Artforum* 22, no. 10, Summer 1984, pp. 94–95.

The New York Times

Art: Sculpture Emphasizing Poetry

By Hilton Kramer
May 2, 1970

THE sculpture of Saul Baizerman (1889–1957) is one of the strongest, most poetic, and most completely realized accomplishments in the Am erican art of this century. It is also one of the most important *unacknowledged* accomplishments in the American art of this century.

Critics, collectors, and museum curators have remained, for the most part, unresponsive to the large and powerful oeuvre Baizerman has left us, but this is only one more example of the inability of the art establishment to appreciate any achievement that does not conform to predictable historical categories.

Baizerman's greatest work is to be found in his enormous hammered metal figures — sculptures on the heroic scale of Rodin and Bourdelle which are freshly conceived and realized with a fullness of feeling that few of his contemporaries in this country could ever equal. Baizerman also produced a series of heroic portrait heads in the same hammered - metal medium, and these, too, at tained a rare expressive quality. The Zabriskie Gallery, 699 Madison Avenue at 63d Street, is showing 15 of these heads, dating from 1925 to 1956, together with two of the large figures.

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The miracle of these heads lies in their dazzling combination of character portrayal and sheer formal vitality. Baizerman belonged to a generation of artists who found in the human visage a profound source of poetic inspiration. Coming late to sculptural tradition that had grown stale in lesser hands, Baizerman was able to revitalize the heroic mode by conferring on it an immediacy and materiality that were truly new.

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By working directly in metal, hammering out every nuance of perception in the most direct and painstaking manner, he created an original body of work that has more in common with the formal purity of later sculp ture than with the earlier expression it superficially resembles.

The show at Zabriskie's is enormously moving. It reminds us of what art is capable of when it addresses itself directly to the most fundamental human emotions. But can we bear to look at art that addresses itself to life so nakedly? Apparently not. For Baizerman remains an unknown master.

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At the Graham Gallery, 1014 Madison Avenue at 78th Street, the exhibition of sculpture and drawings by Luis Jimenez is, in a very different manner, also a rather dazzling event. This is Mr. Jimenez's second one-man show in New York, and it establishes him as an artist of remarkable vitality. There is an animal heat and an erotic energy in his work— in the drawings as well as in the large polychrome-molded sculptures in fiberglass and epoxy— that fill the gallery in a way that few exhibitions do nowadays.

The emotions here are often cause, the imagery almost ostentatiously vulgar, the general spirit of the enterprise open, robust, and unrestrained. The purely artistic sources that have nourished the artist — the most outrageous of Gaston Lachaise's female figures, the mural art of the Mexicans, and the Pop art of Wessel mann and others—are all too evident. But for the moment, this doesn't matter a great deal. The unmistakable vitality is there in abundance.

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