A Finding Aid to the Mel Casas Papers, 1963-1998, in the Archives of American Art

Sarah Mundy and Stephanie Ashley

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Collection Overview

Repository: Archives of American Art
Title: Mel Casas papers
Identifier: AAA.casamel
Date: 1963-1998
Extent: 1 Linear foot
Creator: Casas, Mel, 1929-2014
Language: English
Summary: The papers of San Antonio painter and educator Mel Casas measure 1 linear foot and date from 1963 to 1998. The collection is comprised of biographical material including files on the art collective Con Safo, correspondence regarding business and exhibitions, writings by Casas on Chicano art, printed materials documenting Casas's career and Con Safo events, and photographic materials, including photos and slides of Casas and others, his artwork, and an exhibition.

Administrative Information

Acquisition Information
The Mel Casas papers were donated by Mel Casas in 1981 and microfilmed as part of the Archives of American Art's Texas project. Additional papers were donated by Casas in 1999.

Related Materials
Also at the Archives of American Art is an interview of Mel Casas conducted August 14-16, 1996 by Paul Karlstrom for the Archives of American Art.

Available Formats
The collection was digitized in 2020 and is available on the Archives of American Art website.

A portion of the collection was microfilmed on reels 3316-3317 as part of the Archives of American Art's Texas project. The microfilm is only available for interlibrary loan. Researchers should note that the arrangement of material described in this finding aid does not reflect the order of the material on microfilm.

Processing Information
The collection was processed and a finding aid prepared by Sarah Mundy in 2018.

The collection was further processed for digitization and the finding aid updated by Stephanie Ashley in 2020.
Preferred Citation

Restrictions
This collection is open for research. Access to original papers requires an appointment and is limited to the Archives' Washington, D.C. Research Center.

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Biographical / Historical
Mel Casas (1929-2014) was a painter and educator in San Antonio, Texas.

Casas was born in El Paso in the historic El Segundo Barrio. After graduating from El Paso High School, he worked odd jobs before serving in the United States Army during the Korean War. Casas was wounded by a landmine in Korea and ultimately awarded the Purple Heart. After returning home he attended the University of Texas at El Paso and graduated in 1956. He subsequently earned a Master of Fine Art in 1958 from the University of the Americas in Mexico City.

Casas began his teaching career at Jefferson High School in El Paso where one of his students was artist Gaspar Enriquez. He went on to teach at San Antonio College and was chair of the art department there until his retirement in 1990.

Casas was a founder of the Chicano art movement and a key member of the art collective Con Safo with other founding members Felipe Reyes, Jose Esquivel, Rudy Treviño, and Roberto Ríos. Originally named El Grupo, the group's mission was to empower Chicano artists who were largely overlooked in the mainstream art world. In 1968 Casas penned the "Brown Paper Report," a manifesto explaining the meaning of Con Safo, Chicano, the "Brown Vision of America," and the group's use of the symbol "C/S." The report helped to define Con Safo as an organization and remains a fundamental document in the history of the Chicano art movement.

Casas is well-known for his series Humanscapes that includes 150 large-scale paintings produced between 1965 and 1989. This series, along with smaller works, has been exhibited throughout the United States and Mexico. Casas's work can be found in the permanent collections of the Smithsonian American Art Museum, the San Antonio Museum of Art, and other collections worldwide.

Casas died in San Antonio, Texas, in 2014.
Scope and Contents

The papers of San Antonio painter and educator Mel Casas measure 1 linear foot and date from 1963 to 1998. The collection is comprised of biographical material including files on the art collective Con Safo, correspondence regarding business and exhibitions, writings by Casas on Chicano art, printed materials documenting Casas's career and Con Safo events, and photographic materials, including photos and slides of Casas and others, his artwork, and an exhibition.

Of particular note are the files on Con Safo, including meeting minutes for two 1975 meetings, and copies of La Movida Con Safo numbers 1 and 2, which include records of the founding of the group and copies of defining documents of the Chicano art movement. Casas's writings, which express his ideas on Chicano art in diagrammatic form, are also of particular note.

Arrangement

The collection is arranged as five series.

- Series 1: Biographical Materials, 1975-1996 (Box 1; 4 folders)
- Series 2: Correspondence, 1975-1993 (Box 1; 4 folders)
- Series 3: Writings, 1973-1993 (Box 1; 0.9 folders)
- Series 4: Printed Materials, 1963-1998 (Box 1-2, OV 3-4; 0.7 linear feet)
- Series 5: Photographic Materials, circa 1977 (Box 2; 2 folders)

Names and Subject Terms

This collection is indexed in the online catalog of the Smithsonian Institution under the following terms:

Subjects:
- Chicano art movement
- Hispanic American artists
- Mexican American art
- Mexican American artists

Names:
- Con Safo (Group)

Occupations:
- Art teachers--Texas--San Antonio
- Painters--Texas--San Antonio
Container Listing

Series 1: Biographical Materials, circa 1968-1996

4 Folders (Box 1)

Biographical materials are comprised of Casas's certificate of appointment to the San Antonio Fine Arts Commission, and curriculum vitae and resumes, including a copy of a completed 1990 application for a listing in *Who's Who Among Hispanic Americans*. Also of significance are two files for the art collective Con Safo, which include minutes for the group’s 1975 meetings on July 7 and August 4, lists of members and officers, and copies of *La Movida Con Safo 1* and *La Movida Con Safo 2*, which document Con Safo's founding philosophies, principles, policies, and strategies.

Box 1, Folder 1  Certificate, Fine Arts Commission, City of San Antonio, 1988
                  Image(s)

Box 1, Folder 2  Con Safo, La Movida, Numbers 1-2, circa 1974-circa 1976
                  Image(s)

Box 1, Folder 3  Con Safo, Minutes of Meetings, circa 1975-1976
                  Image(s)

Box 1, Folder 4  Curriculum Vitae and Resumés, circa 1968-1996
                  Image(s)

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Series 2: Correspondence, circa 1975-1993

4 Folders (Box 1)

Four folders of correspondence primarily document exhibitions and other events Casas participated in. Correspondence related to his participation in symposia and other programs includes Arte-Arts regarding a 1984 symposium "Images for the '90s," San Antonio radio station KURU 89.1 FM, the San Antonio Art League, the San Antonio Women's Caucus for the Arts, and INTAR Gallery, where Casas served as a guest panelist for a 1986 symposium on Chicano/Mexican-American Art.

There are two letters from Shifra M. Goldman, one of which expresses her interest in writing about Casas, and correspondence from San Antonio College, including material related to Casas's receipt of an award at the Seventh Annual Tribute to the Chicano Arts recognizing "outstanding achievements of contemporary Hispanic artists."

Correspondence with galleries and museums relates to exhibitions with Aspen Art Museum, ¡Mira! Canadian Club Hispanic Art Tour, and Frito-Lay, Inc. Also found are correspondence, check lists, loan agreements, and material relating to the exhibition catalog essay, for Casas's retrospective at the Laguna Gloria Art Museum. Additional printed material for exhibitions can be found in Series 4: Printed Material.

Box 1, Folder 5  General Correspondence, circa 1975-1984
Image(s)

Box 1, Folder 6  General Correspondence, 1985-1987
Image(s)

Box 1, Folder 7  General Correspondence, 1988
Image(s)

Box 1, Folder 8  General Correspondence, 1989-1993
Image(s)
Series 3: Writings, 1973-1993

9 Folders (Box 1)

Writings by Casas include five diagrammatic presentations on Chicano art, at least one of which was presented at a 1976 "Humanities on the Border" conference at the University of Texas at El Paso. Also found are descriptions of individual paintings, 63-69, 71, and 73, from Casas's *Humanscape* series, and a few brief notes by Casas on a "Contemporary Art Month" calendar.

Writings by others include a student paper on Casas and the manuscript "Mexican and Chicano Workers in Visual Arts" by Shifra M. Goldman.

Box 1, Folder 9       By Casas, Annotated Calendar, 1993
                      Image(s)

Box 1, Folder 10      By Casas, "Art of the Southwest....Art on the Border", 1976
                      Image(s)

Box 1, Folder 11      By Casas, "Art on the Border", 1976
                      Image(s)

Box 1, Folder 12      By Casas, "Art Statement", circa 1973-circa 1976
                      Image(s)

Box 1, Folder 13      By Casas, "Chicano Art: A Saccadic Scanning", 1973
                      Image(s)

Box 1, Folder 14      By Casas, Diagrammatic Text on Chicano Art, circa 1973-circa 1976
                      Image(s)

Box 1, Folder 15      By Casas, *Humanscape* Series Descriptions, circa 1974
                      Image(s)

Box 1, Folder 16      By Others, "Mel Casas: Painting as Idea" by Carey Clements, 1975
                      Image(s)

Box 1, Folder 17      By Others, "Mexican and Chicano Workers in Visual Arts" by Shifra M. Goldman, 1982
                      Image(s)

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0.6 Linear feet (Boxes 1-2, OV3 3-4)

Printed material includes brochures, newspaper and magazine clippings, event programs, exhibition announcements and catalogs, invitations, and posters relating to Casas, his artwork, and exhibitions.

Clippings provide coverage of some of the main highlights of Casas's career from the 1960s to the 1990s. The history of Con Safo is also documented in clippings, announcements, and catalogs including a 1972 brochure for a group exhibition at the Mexican American Cultural Center in San Antonio, Texas, which includes the first appearance of Con Safo (C/S) Artists: A Contingency Factor.

There are posters for exhibitions including Humanscapes (1979) at San Antonio College Department of Art; Mel Casas: 22 Paintings at Texas Lutheran College, circa 1967; and a solo exhibition at Boehm Gallery, Palomar College (1973).

Also found is a press kit for the influential exhibition The Latin American Spirit: Art and Artists in the United States, 1920-1970; Casas was invited to lecture as part of a special program developed to accompany this exhibition at the El Paso Museum of Art.

Records are arranged by material type and chronologically thereafter.

Box 1, Folder 18  Brochures and Programs, 1986-1990  Image(s)
Box 1, Folder 19  Clippings, circa 1970s-circa 1990s  Image(s)
Box 1, Folder 20  Clippings, 1967-1971  Image(s)
Box 1, Folder 21  Clippings, 1975-1977  Image(s)
Box 1, Folder 22  Clippings, 1978-1979  Image(s)
Box 1, Folder 23  Clippings, 1980-1987  Image(s)
Box 2, Folder 1  Clippings, 1988-1989  Image(s)
Box 2, Folder 2  Clippings, 1990-1996  Image(s)
Box OV 3, Folder 1  Clippings, 1966, 1971, 1977-1979  Image(s)
Box OV 3, Folder 2  Clippings, 1980-1981
Box OV 3, Folder 3  Clippings, 1987-1998
Image(s)

Box 2, Folder 3  Con Safo Announcements and Catalogs, 1972-1977
Image(s)

Box 2, Folder 4  Con Safo Announcements and Catalogs, 1977-1978
Image(s)

Box 2, Folder 5  Exhibition Announcements and Catalogs, 1963-1968
Image(s)

Box 2, Folder 6  Exhibition Announcements and Catalogs, 1971-1974
Image(s)

Box 2, Folder 7  Exhibition Announcements and Catalogs, 1975-1976
Image(s)

Box 2, Folder 8  Exhibition Announcements and Catalogs, 1977-1979
Image(s)

Box 2, Folder 9  Exhibition Announcements and Catalogs, 1982-1986
Image(s)

Box 2, Folder 10  Exhibition Announcements and Catalogs, 1988-1989
Image(s)

Box 2, Folder 11  Exhibition Announcements and Catalogs, 1990-1995
Image(s)

Box OV 3, Folder 4  Exhibition Announcements and Catalogs, 1979, 1993
Image(s)

Box 2, Folder 12  Invitations, circa 1986
Image(s)

Image(s)

Box OV 4  Posters, circa 1967-1991
Image(s)

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Series 5: Photographic Materials, 1970s

2 Folders (Box 2)

Color and black and white photographic materials consist of eight photos and two slides which are portraits and snapshots of Casas, and Casas with others, as well as four snapshots from an exhibition of *Humanscape 55* in Houston, Texas.

Box 2, Folder 14  Photos of Exhibition *Humanscape 55* in Houston, Texas, circa 1976

  Image(s)

Box 2, Folder 15  Photos and Slides of Mel Casas, 1970s

  Image(s)