

**MILLOMB
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EARLY EXPLORERS

OF CHICAGO IDENTITY

**LOS
MAESTROS
2020
EARLY EXPLORERS** OF CHICANO IDENTITY

**HIGHLIGHTING THE ARTISTIC
CONTRIBUTIONS OF THREE
FOUNDERS OF SAN ANTONIO'S
CHICANO ARTS MOVEMENT OF
THE 1960s AND 1970s**

JESSE A. ALMAZÁN

JOSÉ ESQUIVEL

RUDY R. TREVIÑO

ESSAY BY ANN MARIE LEIMER, PH.D.

This publication accompanies the exhibition *Los Maestros: Early Explorers of Chicano Identity*. Presented by the City of San Antonio Department of Arts & Culture at Centro de Artes Gallery, San Antonio, Texas, February 13 - June 28, 2020.

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CITY OF SAN ANTONIO DEPARTMENT OF ARTS & CULTURE

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CONTENTS

- 2 FOREWORD**
Yadhira Lozano
Chair, Centro de Artes Committee
- 3 PREFACE**
Malena Gonzalez-Cid
Executive Director, Centro Cultural Aztlan
- 4 LOS MAESTROS DE SAN ANTONIO:
JESSE A. ALMAZÁN, JOSÉ ESQUIVEL,
AND RUDY R. TREVIÑO**
Ann Marie Leimer, Ph.D.
- 32 ENDNOTES**
- 33 WORKS CITED**
- 34 ABOUT CENTRO DE ARTES**

FOREWORD

The 1960's brought about the rise of protests by people of color demanding social change and left us with important legacies that must be shared and celebrated. People organized to demand civil rights and an end to rampant discrimination across every sector of life. The nation was electrified with protests led by the Black Panthers, United Farm Workers, the American Indian Movement, and el Movimiento Chicano. When we think of these movements, we think of big cities like New York, Los Angeles, and San Francisco, however, the history and legacy of these movements were nation-wide and in San Antonio. This legacy is seldom told and the people that lived it are leaving us as each year progresses. This exhibition comes at a time of intense political strife, yet again, in our country and it's time their story is told.

Los Maestros, curated by Centro Cultural Aztlan, under the direction of longtime arts advocate Malena Gonzalez-Cid, shines the spotlight on three important Chicano artists of the time. In it, we recognize the work, skills, techniques, and imagination of Jesse A. Almazán, José Esquivel, and Rudy R. Treviño. However, the take-away for visitors should be the challenges these artists faced to gain recognition, to show in important arts institutions, to be taken seriously as artists. Today, we have this beautiful large gallery space, Centro de Artes, where their art is shown side by side, in a lively downtown setting where tourists and locals can enter and enjoy. Yet, it was only a few years ago that the community lifted their voices to demand that this space be dedicated to showcasing Latino* art and history of the region. Not long before that, the City was considering use of the space for display and storage of the Daughters of the Republic of Texas archives. The community said no and thanks to the efforts of Councilman Roberto Treviño (CD1), community meetings were held and Centro de Artes now has a strategic plan and vision statement to guide the next phase of this space. We continue to fight battles for equality and representation almost 60 years later.

I would especially like to thank the Centro de Artes committee for reviewing and approving such profound and important exhibitions. We are charged with ensuring the community's voice is heard and we hope the results meet the set goals. Also, congratulations to Malena for so eloquently lifting her voice at countless community meetings and for the work she has done for over 30 years at Centro Cultural Aztlan. Without her foresight we would not have this and many other exhibitions to learn from and enjoy.

C/S,

Yadhira Lozano

Chair, Centro de Artes Committee

** to include binary and non-binary labels and various countries of origin.*

PREFACE

It is one of the great tragedies of transformative cultural movements that their most influential figures are rarely recognized during their lifetimes. This has been the case with many of the early leaders of the Chicano/a arts movement. When Centro Cultural Aztlan began to develop the concept for *Los Maestros: Early Explorers of Chicano Art*, we knew that it was essential to honor the work of artist Jesse Almazán (1937-2002). However, we also wanted to honor the work of living Chicano/a artists such as José Esquivel and Rudy R. Treviño. The opportunity to work with these artists and with Jesse's wife Maggie Almazán throughout the development of this exhibition has been a great honor. José, Rudy, and Maggie all contributed oral histories and archival documents to assist in capturing the history and context of the works included in the exhibition.

In some ways, the process of developing *Los Maestros* felt like time spent with family. The history of the Chicano/a arts movement in San Antonio is deeply intertwined with the history of Centro Cultural Aztlan. Our organization was born from the same roots as each of the artists featured in this exhibition and we have navigated many of the struggles and triumphs of our community side by side over the years. Founded in 1977, with a history spanning over four decades, Centro Cultural Aztlan is currently the longest-standing Chicano/a arts nonprofit in San Antonio. *Los Maestros* captures the essence of Centro's mission to preserve and promote Chicano/a, Latino/a, and Indigenous arts and culture. We invite you to visit Centro Cultural Aztlan and the Galeria Expresión, located in the Old Spanish Trail Cultural Corridor, where we serve this mission by presenting community-based arts and cultural programs year-round.

We hope that *Los Maestros* will be the first of many exhibitions at Centro de Artes to celebrate the legacy of Chicano/a arts in San Antonio. We have immense gratitude for the artists featured in this exhibition and the many others who have worked for decades to preserve and promote the unique and powerful legacy of our communities.

Malena Gonzalez-Cid

Executive Director | Centro Cultural Aztlan, Inc.

**LOS MAESTROS
DE SAN ANTONIO:**

JESSE A. ALMAZÁN

JOSÉ ESQUIVEL

RUDY R. TREVIÑO

ANN MARIE LEIMER, PH.D.

EL MOVIMIENTO CHICANO or the Chicano Movement arose in various local and regional centers throughout the United States during the mid-1960s, generated by the efforts of Chicana and Chicano political activists and artists in response to “segregation, poverty, and racism.”¹ One of the central documents that shaped the philosophy of this movement was *El Plan Espiritual de Aztlán* or The Spiritual Plan of *Aztlán*.² The manifesto was developed at the March 1969 Denver Youth Conference in Colorado, a conference sponsored by the Chicano organization *La Cruzada para la Justicia* (the Crusade for Justice) under the leadership of former boxer Rodolfo “Corky” González. The seven-point plan penned by González and the poet Alurista placed nationalism at the center of the struggle for social justice for Mexican-Americans, emphasized self-determination and control of neighborhoods, and called for bilingual education and the creation of a third political party. *El Plan* included a resounding call for artists to produce positive images of *La Raza* to counter the then-accepted racist stereotypes of Mexican-Americans. From the earliest moments of the Movement, political organizing for social justice and the production of art that supported and visualized its aims traveled hand-in-hand. In San Antonio, several political and community organizations were formed that addressed Movement concerns including the Mexican American Youth Organization (MAYO), the Mexican American Unity Council (MUAC), Barrios Unidos, the Mexican American Community Organization (MANCO), and a local chapter of the national organization, the Brown Berets, founded by Juan Guajardo.³ Local artists participated in the Movement and banded together in mutual support of creativity, economic sustainability, and the production and exhibition of art with political, social, and cultural content. The three artists we celebrate in “*Los Maestros: Early Explorers of Chicano Identity*” were members of the San Antonio-based *Con Safo*, seen as “one of the earliest and most significant...[and] longest-lived” Chicano art groups, whose influence we see in this exhibition with work ranging from the early 1970s to the present.⁴ The Spanish word *maestro* can be understood as master and as teacher and is an apt descriptor for Jesse A. Almazán, José Esquivel, and Rudy R. Treviño. Each of these artists have developed significant bodies of work, mastered multiple art media, techniques, and processes, contributed to the San Antonio arts scene, and helped inform, inspire, and educate generations of artists.



JESSE A. ALMAZÁN

Born in San Antonio, Texas, 1937-2002



JESSE ACOSTA ALMAZÁN was a native of San Antonio, Texas, and grew up on the city's West Side. His father was born in México and initially worked as an undertaker before coming to San Antonio, where he established a partnership in a pecan shelling factory. He returned to México for business purposes and died there when Almazán was quite young. His mother, a San Antonio native, lived with her father and step-mother after her husband's death and supported the family as a civil service employee. The late artist's second wife Maggie Almazán credits his high school art teacher for taking an interest in the young man, encouraging his evident art ability, and showing him the wonders of San Antonio's Marion Koogler McNay Art Museum.⁵ While still enrolled in Fox Technical High School where he studied commercial art, he also received early art training at the Michael Frary School of Art. After his high school graduation in 1955, Almazán continued his studies at the San Antonio Art Center School of Art and the San Antonio Art Institute before beginning a four-year period of study at the Warren Hunter School of Art from 1955 to 1959, these studies coinciding with those of fellow student and friend José Esquivel during the years 1955 and 1956. Almazán served in the United States Naval Reserve from 1955 to 1963 as a seaman, and began working as an illustrator for the United States Air Force Security Service in April of 1958, initiating his civil service career. Later, he would establish and operate the fine art gallery *Galerias Almazán* at 504 Villita Street from 1968 to 1971, which also served as a meeting site for *Con Safo* as well as a place for local Chicana and Chicano artists to show their work. A prodigious artist throughout his life, Almazán worked as an artist and an illustrator at the Headquarters of the Air Force Intelligence Command at Kelly Air Force Base for thirty-four years but retired early due to health concerns in June 1992. He worked in a highly-secured environment, receiving the "highest security clearance," which prevented him from discussing his work and which circumscribed his involvement with the Chicana and Chicano Movement. Maggie Almazán reflected that they had to "follow a fine line in terms of his job" because "his fulltime job was to be a patriotic American citizen," while at the same time he had the "utmost respect for those in the Movement."⁶ Due to the nature of his work he traveled to Europe many times, once for a six-month period, trips that provided exposure to the Old Masters and a range of artists found in European museums.

By all accounts Almazán was a master of a wide range of painting media, excelled in watercolor, acrylic, and oil, and developed a strong graphic sense evident in his poster designs, particularly in his award-winning 1990 *Tejano Conjunto Festival en San Antonio*. His subject matter centered on the Chicana and Chicano experience and he often depicted *pachucos*, highly stylized male figures with a long history in Mexican-American culture, that performed an "identity-in-difference," challenging dominant culture's established norms of dress and behavior, proclaiming a right to a self-defined identity and a territorial sense of place and belonging.⁷ In a painting from the early 1970s titled *Barrios*, Almazán reveals his love of geometric angularity using a bold but limited color palette to

indicate the vibrancy of Mexican-American neighborhoods and to envelope a suggested human figure interlocked within the composition (Fig. 1). The dynamic energy and sharp edges of the forms suggest a complex labyrinth that the figure must navigate. The use of blue, red, white, with gold and black may refer to colors that identify gangs associated with San Antonio neighborhoods such as Ghost Town and Alazán-Apache Courts, but also gestures to the color palette and geometric forms of Uruguayan modernist Joaquín Torres-García and his Universal Constructivism of the 1930s.⁸



Figure 1 Jesse A. Almazán, *Barrios*, 1970s



Figure 2 Jesse A. Almazán,
Los de Abajo, 1970s

The painter continues to use these visual strategies in *Los de Abajo*, also from the 1970s, which appears perhaps as a companion to *Barrios* with its selected use of color, jagged edges, and acute angles that produce a powerful graphic sense with stripped down and simplified forms (Fig. 2). The abstracted figure may be that of a *coyote* or a *lobo* (wolf) pictured looking upward with an open mouth at a yellow circle heavily outlined in green. Since both *coyotes* and wolves vocalize, we can easily imagine the sound of those eerie, echoing howls. In a seminal 1989 essay, Don Tomás Ybarra-Frausto developed the concept of *rasquachismo*, understood as an artistic sensibility, not “a style but more of an attitude or a taste” that developed out of “an underdog perspective—a view from *los de abajo*.”⁹ Almazán uses the phrase to title this work perhaps as a *double entendre*, the geometric figure is literally below the circle we read as moon, body arching upward into space toward the seemingly unattainable. The artist also suggests the “view from below” as metaphor for Chicanas and Chicanos in the early 1970s raising their voices in protest at the disparity they experienced in education, health care, and housing, as well as their near absence from positions of political power in mainstream culture. This notion is supported by art historian Ruben C. Cordova’s observation that Almazán’s impetus for the repeated reference to *coyote* in the painter’s work was generated by his awareness of the Spanish Colonial *casta* paintings, which depicted at least sixteen categories of national and ethnic mixing resulting from the Conquest that were used to reinforce colonial systems of power. Both *coyote* and *lobo* were terms used in this system to define people of “mixed-race” which then ranked them in a social hierarchy supported by the Enlightenment interest in classification by type.¹⁰

In his ongoing exploration and mastery of media, styles, and approaches, Almazán combined his interest in the performativity of the male human form, *pachuco* culture, and graphic patterning that emphasizes geometric shapes. In *Figure* (1998), a male form poses in a multiply-patterned zoot suit, with a repeating hard-edged, square-block design in blues, pinks, and golds in direct contrast to the luxurious flowing exterior curves of the high-waisted, pleated, wide-legged and pegged trousers and the heavily padded shoulders of the voluminous jacket that falls well below the figure's knees (Fig. 3). The starkly outlined oval that encircles the figure's head indicates more the movement of the long feather that would have graced his *tando* than what might appear as external contour of a hat. The painter restates the strongly articulated series of triangular shapes from *Los de Abajo* on the inside of the jacket, complicating the already rhythmic composition. The figure dominates the space implying power, possession, and control of somewhat amorphous surroundings.

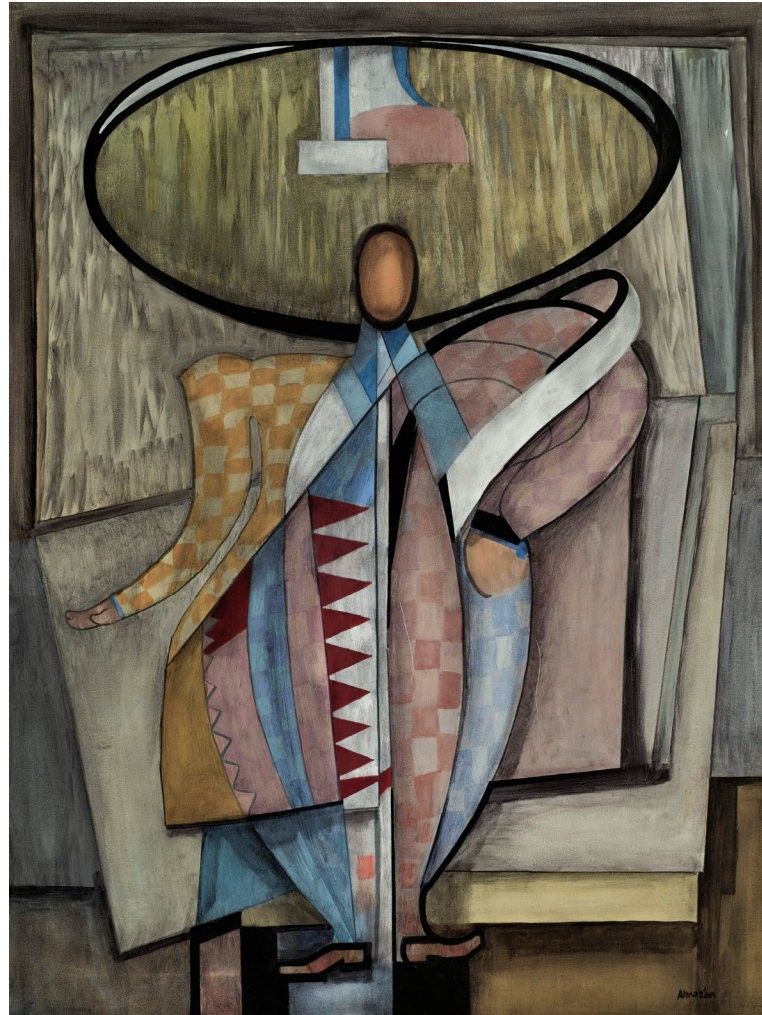


Figure 3 Jesse A. Almazán, *Figure*, 1998



Figure 4 Jesse A. Almazán, *Pound Puppies*, 1992

Almazán echoes this sense of public theatricality and of claiming urban terrain in the 1992 *Pound Puppies* from his Zoot Suit series, where he introduces an anthropomorphic duet of coyotes dressed in full zoot suit regalia (Fig. 4). The composition is formally balanced with each side repeating the same visual information as the coyotes stand facing each other performing a hand gesture associated with *pachucos*, looking ferocious with bared teeth. Almazán demonstrates his affection for the Impressionists and later twentieth-century art movements such as Fauvism when he uses the intense reds, blues, and greens found in the work of Henri Matisse.¹¹

While the influence of European artists such as Henri Matisse and Wassily Kandinsky can be seen in Almazán's work, his approach to form and color resembles Argentine modernist Xul Solar (1887-1863) with their shared inter-

est in watercolor, understood as Almazán's "favorite medium."¹² *Vato Walking II* (1996-1997) provides a third and perhaps larger perspective on the encounters of the Chicano with the world of Almazán's imagination (Fig. 5). While in *Barrios* the viewer received a sense of densely packed and interconnected local surroundings, in *Vato* we see a much more expansive notion of the world. The painter represents a solitary figure in the bottom right-hand side of the picture plane in the act of walking or even climbing. Immediately behind the figure a rectangular form extends upward diagonally to the left and might suggest a defined path the figure will travel, because the artist emphasizes this rectangle with the darkest colors and the largest form found in the composition. While the work clearly draws on abstraction, we still perceive the multiple references to sun, moon, stars, clouds, wind, and even water, placed throughout the visual field. Various sized circles indicating the solar system repeat on both sides of the work interspersed with a variety of linear elements resembling waves, mountains, and rays of the sun. Therefore, the painting suggests a cosmogram, Almazán's understanding of the universe, and the role of humans within it. Multiple pathways through the immediate area are possible but two intersecting rectangles that float in the upper left-hand corner above the central form might allude to the artist's deeply held religious convictions.¹³

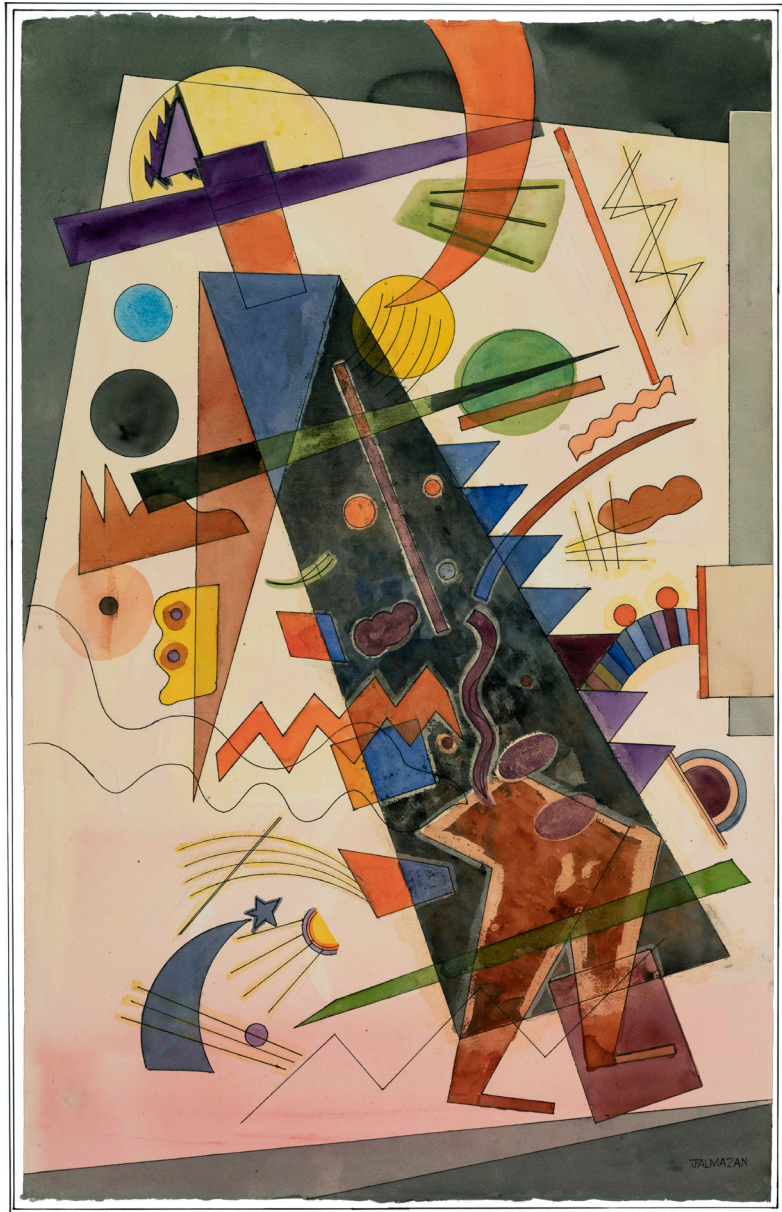


Figure 5 Jesse A. Almazán, *Vato Walking II*, 1996-1997



JOSÉ ESQUIVEL

Born in San Antonio, Texas, 1935-



In one of the foundational essays of Chicana and Chicano art historical scholarship, Don Tomás Ybarra-Frausto reflected upon the development of visuality in the early generations of Chicana and Chicano artists, considering how visual literacy and a visual sense of the world was formed. Ybarra-Frausto found that these artists' visual sense was shaped by the images found in their immediate environment and was enriched by daily encounters with what surrounded them in their homes and communities. These images were often both spiritual and cultural in nature. He refers to these visual depictions and objects as "nutrient traditions," or the influential sources for Chicana and Chicano art. According to Ybarra-Frausto, these sources include domestic or home altars, *ofrendas* or seasonal altars that commemorate a deceased loved one, *nichos y capillas* or outdoor shrines often found in the front yard, *cajas* or boxes similar to a religious reliquary for secular or spiritual purposes, holy cards with images of Catholic saints, and *calendarios* or calendars given annually to customers from local businesses often with chromolithographs by the legendary Mexican painter Jesús Helguera.¹⁴

San Antonio native **JOSÉ ESQUIVEL'S** experience bears this out in a unique way. His father was born in San Miguel de Bustamante, Nuevo León, México, and at the age of nine entered the United States from the Laredo, Texas border with his aunt Elenita Cruz, becoming as Esquivel puts it "one of the first dreamers."¹⁵ The family initially lived near the San Antonio landmark restaurant *Mi Tierra Café y Panadería* in Market Square, and later moved to a house on the city's West Side when Esquivel was three years old. This house had only exterior walls, with no insulation or plaster-board interior walls. Esquivel remembers gluing newspapers to the inside of the home to prevent outside air from entering.¹⁶ As a result, he was literally surrounded by a plethora of graphics and images from his earliest years. One can imagine the various shapes, styles, sizes, and formats of printed languages, as well as the black-and-white and color photographs of sports events, weather maps, social happenings, and the news events of the day that encapsulated the young boy. He later honored this home in the painting *Boxed in at 1638* (2001) and we see house as metaphor and repeating trope in his *Barrio USA* series.

Esquivel's mother worked in the elite Castle Hill area of San Antonio and saw the disparity between this largely Anglo community and their family's West Side neighborhood, instructing her son, "You gotta get out of here!" He credits his mother for creating a sense of order and for helping him develop a sense of responsibility when she cautioned, "Take care of whatever you have." This early counsel encouraged the stewardship of his talents and abilities that would emerge as a teenager. His father was a jack of all trades, and when Esquivel was fourteen years old a chance encounter yielded an unexpected outcome. He was performing yard work with his father at the home of Porfirio Salinas and noticed an easel inside the house holding a painting in progress. Esquivel's father mentioned his son's interest in art and, as a result, Salinas introduced Esquivel to easel painting. Like Almazán and Treviño, Esquivel attended Fox Technical High School, where he prospered under the encouragement of the art teacher Katherine Alsop when she entered his work in art competitions. He received scholarship offers from

both the McNay Art Institute and from the Warren Hunter School of Art. The young artist visited both schools, but because his family did not have a car, the two-hour trek on the bus from his West Side home to the McNay's Alamo Heights neighborhood prompted his decision to attend Warren Hunter, where he would study commercial art from 1951 to 1956.¹⁷



Figure 6 José Esquivel, *Farmworkers*, 1971

Esquivel received a meticulous and demanding art education at the Warren Hunter School of Art in *La Villita* that emphasized technical mastery and precise control of materials. He recalls that Warren Hunter insisted on beginning with basic proficiencies, such as knowing how to properly sharpen a pencil as the initial means of developing exacting hand control. There was no articulated program of progress through a defined curriculum at the Hunter School, with students of all levels, genders, ethnicities, and social classes working together in the same classroom. Hunter encouraged students to personally decide when they were ready to leave.¹⁸ Esquivel recognizes that the school's emphasis on commercial art produced "a posterized look" to his art that we see in *Alien Hand* (2008), *Como Una Flor* (2013), and *Dreamers in Space* (2014). Contemporary viewers may not remember a time before computer-generated graphic art and design, but Esquivel and his classmates produced everything by hand, painstakingly learning, practicing, and producing multiple calligraphic alphabets by hand, such as Roman, Gothic, Script, Old English, and Italic, and sequentially worked through the mediums of pencil, charcoal, and brush, before using color in pen and ink, watercolor, and oil. One can even see the enduring influence of this early training in his later signature, which he changed from a more cursive script to the sharp angular strokes evident on most of his work since the 1990s. For much of his life, he produced his commercial and fine art work at night while raising and supporting a family with a job at the City Public Service in downtown San Antonio. Esquivel acknowledges that the "secret of my success as an artist was the three a.m. deadlines" he faced for delivering his commercial work to hotels, conventions, and sign shops, because the businesses would use the work later that very day.¹⁹ His commitment to his family, like that of Almazán, limited his overt participation in the burgeoning Chicana and Chicano Movement and its local expressions. However, the subject matter of much of his work reflects his response to injustice - "This is how my work evolves. I hear something that disturbs me, then a painting is born."²⁰

Farmworkers (1971) reflects Esquivel's awareness of one of the central concerns addressed by the Chicana and Chicano Movement, the attempt to achieve equitable pay and decent working conditions for migrant farmworkers when most experienced the absence of clean drinking water, the lack of proper sanitation, and the nonexistence of rest areas protected from the impact of scorching sunlight (Fig. 6). The artist vividly portrays the realities of field work, the seemingly unending rows of crops, the punishing heat of the sun, and the physical vulnerability of workers' bodies. In this watercolor, he uses various shades of red-brown to indicate not only the soil the workers labor over, but also the skin color of many agricultural workers during the 1960s and 1970s. Small drops of water appear on both sides of the painting and allude to the tears and sweat of these laboring bodies. The central plant form divides the composition in half vertically and imprisons the workers, binding them to a life toiling on land they do not own.

Forty-five years later, Esquivel continued his exploration of the realities of field labor in a more visually layered painting. With the title *Las Nubes* (2016), the painter makes an inside cultural reference to the favorite song of United Farm Workers (UFW) co-founder César Chávez, written by Wally Armendariz and popularized by the legendary



Figure 7 José Esquivel, *Las Nubes*, 2016

Tejano music group Little Joe y *La Familia* (Fig. 7). The lilting and catchy melody of the song, which became the official anthem of the UFW, belies the pain, longing, and sorrow expressed in its lyrics. Not surprisingly, Esquivel has taken a geometric approach to his subject and organizes his canvas in a rectangular format with a grid composed of six columns and five rows of similarly-sized squares that quilt together images from the natural world with the faces of migrant workers. The artist celebrates the beauty of nature with depictions of insects, birds, and reptiles including a Monarch butterfly, a caterpillar, a snake, a red-winged blackbird, a grasshopper, and a lady bug, but contrasts this beauty with representations of the multiple crops workers will pick such as *uvas* (grapes), corn, cotton, lettuce, tomatoes, pears, and oranges that imply long hours of poorly paid and hard physical labor. References to the power of the sun repeat in three or more sections, while nine squares reflect the welcome cumulus clouds of the work's title that ameliorate some of the ever-present and oppressive heat. The artist depicts the faces of three people in the bottom left-hand side, perhaps suggesting the tripartite head repeatedly represented in early



Figure 8 José Esquivel,
El Mundo de Elenita Cruz, 2007

Chicana and Chicano art, which indicates the creation of the *mestiza* and *mestizo*. An elder migrant worker wearing a hat and a woman, with her face covered to protect her skin from the carcinogenic pesticides present on agricultural products and often sprayed on the fields while workers actively harvest crops, appear in the upper register. Significantly, the painter subtly indicates the exterior shape of the UFW flag in the first through fourth rows as an integral part of the geometric structure of the work, an image not readily apparent to the casual viewer. *Las Nubes* comprises one of Esquivel's more visually complex paintings with clear social, political, and spiritual messages, accentuated when he embeds a representation of *La Virgen de Guadalupe* in the center of the work, reminding us of Her presence at Movement rallies and marches and invoking Her sacred power as a protective element for the workers as well as providing hope for a better future.

El Mundo de Elenita Cruz (2007) is a portrait of the artist's grandmother that uses a series of symbolic references to indicate her view of the world (Fig. 8). Esquivel locates her in a dry, desert landscape with a mountain range in the far distance, signaling her home - the Mexican state of Nuevo León. Those familiar with this terrain will recognize the signature peak of the state's capital city, Monterrey, *el Cerro de la Silla*. The artist surrounds his *abuela* with four buttons of various sizes and colors that indicate one of the items she collected, and implies her knowledge of hand-sewing with small repeated lines resembling embroidery stitches which frame

her face. She wears a *rebozo* (shawl) or *velo* (veil) to modestly cover her long white hair and engages the viewer directly without additional adornment. In an interview from 2010, Esquivel describes Señora Cruz's ongoing cosmic battle with the Devil, and in the portrait he depicts Satan engulfed with flames immediately above his grandmother in direct contact with a peach-colored rose, a flower often understood as a stand-in for *La Virgen de Guadalupe*.²¹ Five drops of water (or tears) fall from the rose, perhaps suggesting the Five Holy Wounds of Christ, and appear directly above the Sacred Heart of Jesus, which might indicate Cruz's ritual participation in a series of devotional petitions known as the Litany of the Sacred Heart. The artist completes his portrayal of her spiritual world by illustrating *El Santo Niño de Atocha*, a reference to a version of the Christ Child associated with pilgrimage and miraculous intervention, and European *putti*, nude boy angels often depicted with only a child's face framed with wings that symbolize the Divine Presence of the Christian God.

Esquivel continues to explore the specifics of place in the series *Barrio USA*, an on-going group of works he considers his "logo" or "brand" that currently consists of several paintings including *Nuestra Señora* (1995), *Labor Day Celebration* (1997), *The Shrine* (2001), *Boxed in at 1638* (2001), *Jardin de San Juan* (2003), *Los Angelitos* (2011), *Cementario de Niños - American Jungle* (2015), *La Tiendita* (2017), and *El Dimo* (2017). *Boxed in at 1638* is one of at least three paintings where Esquivel visually explores his childhood home, the others being *Golden Hand* (undated) and *Pink Chair* (2009). Many of the works in the *Barrio USA* series



Figure 9 José Esquivel, *La Tiendita*, 2017

reflect home and place as a site of family celebrations, with laundry drying on the line, bountifully flowering South *Tejas* plants, and the family dog cavorting on the front porch tempted by the aromas emerging from a barbecue smoker. Outside shrines dedicated to *La Virgen de Guadalupe* or images of Her painted on the house often appear in the series in conjunction with the harsher realities of drug culture from the seemingly innocent *La Tiendita* (2017) to the starkly brutal *El Dime* (2017) (Figs. 9 and 10). In *La Tiendita*, the store suggests what was once and what still may be a family home with its exterior dog house, a proudly displayed American flag, a sheet-filled laundry line, and a welcoming front porch with twinkling lights. Esquivel includes a tiled walkway as a means to honor his father who was an accomplished tile setter and to evoke the ceramic tile frequently found throughout San Antonio.²² While the artist visually begins with the premise of a small neighborhood store offering Coke-a-Cola and other *abarrotos* (sundries) for sale, he transports the viewer into another reality when he includes the text “pot plants,” which indicates that the reference to “coke” may have a double-meaning. Esquivel sets the store in a tropical environment inhabited by flamingos in a flowering lotus pond, a black jaguar standing on the front porch with its spotted relative close by, and an elephant in the side yard as a metaphor for wildness, unpredictability, and disquieting unease. Two monkeys on the roof expand the jungle atmosphere but recall the phrase “to have a monkey on your back,” implying drug addiction. An image of *La Virgen de Guadalupe* greets customers as they enter the red-framed door, but the entire setting provokes the question, “What exactly is for sale in this little store?”

In *El Dime*, Esquivel exponentially increases his excoriating vision of the impact of drugs on San Antonio, where children deliver them on bicycles and the drug culture often claims their lives.¹ The “dime,” referred to in the title and literally placed in the upper left-hand corner, is ironically and metaphorically represented as a Winged Liberty Head dime, which was minted in the United States from 1916 until the end of World War II in 1945. Tragically, there is no liberty or freedom here. Immediately to the right of the coin three gun barrels emerge from foliage in a cloud of smoke that creates an ominous tension in this illusory peaceful and paradisiacal environment. Esquivel located one of these firearms, an automatic weapon, adjacent to the roofline of a small wooden-frame house in direct opposition to the Liberty Head dime. The painter uses the structure of the house’s front porch to frame a view looking eastward toward the San Antonio skyline indicating the location of this barrio house and then encloses the entire area with a congested tangle of flora and fauna, bracketing the house with a large tree on the left. On the wooden-planked porch, a black feline lounges languidly on a pink armchair. Immediately below, a sole snowy egret searches for its next meal in a tranquil pool among lily pads and three fully-open lotus blossoms, several other rainforest birds alight on branches above along with two butterflies, while a brilliant red cardinal perches directly under the dime amidst assorted undergrowth and a blue bird is pictured in flight. The jungle that we began to see in *La Tiendita* has now completely overtaken the area and a closer examination shows that the leaves of many plants painted by Esquivel resemble marijuana, further clarifying his use of the word “dime.” Nine bullet holes figuratively pierce the picture plane and four gun barrels interspersed among the leaves on the far left-hand side



Figure 10 José Esquivel, *El Dimo*, 2017

suggest an exchange of gunfire. The artist accentuates the rupture of this previously serene scene by emphasizing the bullet holes with concentric circles of blue, green, and yellow. He presents a diachronic visual narrative, gesturing to past and present events in the same image, when he indicates the results of the earlier crossfire with a *descanso* (the location where a person has died unexpectedly marked with personal objects) among the roots of the tree, complete with *velas* (candles), two crosses - one with a photograph of the lost family member who may be wearing a Boy Scout uniform, an image of La Virgen de Guadalupe, an American flag, and a small flowering plant. Esquivel indicates the loss as recent when he depicts a memorial plant with its accompanying white gift card, a floral funeral wreath comprised of pink roses and white lilies, and a floral cross arrangement, all of them in fresh bloom, not unlike the child whose innocence is symbolized by the lilies and whose life was so senselessly taken.



RUDY R. TREVIÑO

Born Eagle Pass, Texas, 1945-



RUDY TREVIÑO hails from the border town of Eagle Pass, Texas, located directly across the Río Grande from Piedras Negras, Coahuila, México, and close to the nearby town of Crystal City, Texas, a center of agricultural production and the site of high school student walk-outs by Chicana and Chicano youth in 1969. He attended elementary school in Crystal and began working in the fields picking cotton at age twelve. When Treviño was fourteen years old, his family moved to San Antonio, where he graduated from Fox Technical High School several years after Almazán and Esquivel. He credits a scholarship to a summer program at the McNay Art Institute with encouraging his pursuit of the fine arts after high school.²⁴ The budding artist then studied with noted painter Mel Casas (1929-2014) at San Antonio College where he earned his Associate of Arts degree. Casas has had an enduring influence on Treviño, because in addition to teaching him the “mechanics of artworks, the manipulation of media, Casas instilled more than knowing how to paint, you had a responsibility as an artist to portray whatever affects you as a people, as a culture.”²⁵ Treviño later pursued higher education at the University of Texas, Austin, receiving his BFA in 1973, and at the University of Texas, San Antonio, where he earned his MFA in 1976, the first student to do so.²⁶ In addition to his art production, he is recognized for co-founding the Texas Talent Musicians Association (TTMA) in 1980 with Gilbert Escobedo, the organization that produces the annual Tejano Music Awards, along with co-founding the Tejano Entertainers and Music Association (TEMA) in 1999. Treviño worked at San Antonio’s Sidney Lanier High School as an art teacher for twenty-three years, has had a lasting influence on generations of students, and has left his mark on the original Lanier campus, where he supervised an extensive mural program within the high school in the late 1970s. These young student muralists wanted to continue mural-making after graduation and Treviño, together with Anastacio “Tache” Torres, co-founded a non-profit organization dedicated to that purpose in 1979, the Community Cultural Art Organization, which “produced more than 200 murals” in the next thirteen years at West Side housing projects.²⁷ The original paintings created over forty years ago at Lanier High will be destroyed this year as part of a new building initiative, but the murals will be reproduced in the new school as part of Treviño’s continuing legacy.²⁸

Treviño began showing his work as early as 1964 and was published in one of the first surveys of Mexican-American art, Jacinto Quirarte’s 1973 *Mexican American Artists*.²⁹ Three years later, the artist participated in the 1976 touring exhibition “*Raíces antiguas, visiones nuevas* = Ancient Roots, New Visions” produced by Washington, D.C.’s *Fondo del Sol*, a show that traveled to ten locations and was touted as the “first major exhibition of works by contemporary artists of Hispanic descent from throughout the United States and Puerto Rico.”³⁰ He also received important early recognition when his work was included in the ground-breaking 1990 national touring exhibition “Chicano Art: Resistance and Affirmation, 1965-1985” (CARA). His *Lettuce on Ice* (1974) was seen by audiences in Los Angeles, Denver, Albuquerque, San Francisco, Fresno, Tucson, Washington D.C., El Paso, the Bronx, and San Antonio during the three-year period that the CARA exhibition traveled (Fig. 11). *Lettuce on Ice* refers to the issues raised by the United Farmworkers and reflects Treviño’s history of picking cotton in the fields

as a child, an experience he remembers as "very hard work" where he worked "from sun-up to sun-down" and "where the sun was your worst enemy."³¹

The artist maintains that *Lettuce on Ice* has two different and perhaps opposing meanings, one that emerges from formal considerations and a second that comes from social and political concerns. The formal simplicity of the painting and its subject matter, a head of iceberg lettuce resting on a champagne bucket filled with ice cubes, initially belies its powerful message. The artist shaped the lettuce like a rose, which gives the viewer the sense of something "nice and sweet," something delicate and beautiful. On the other hand, "knowing that lettuce has become a symbol of long working hours, oppression, and *Huelga* (strikes), we have a responsibility to visually show this to our people."³² Something associated with wealth, privilege, and elegance - the ice-filled champagne bucket - actually "symbolizes the exploitation of Chicano agricultural laborers" who produce "a delicacy to be consumed by the upper-class."³³



Figure 11 Rudy R. Treviño, *Lettuce on Ice*, 1974



Figure 12 Rudy R. Treviño, *Lettuce Field with Target and Skull*, 1975

The painter continues his visual investigation of field work and its consequences in *Lettuce Field with Target and Skull* (1975) (Fig. 12). Treviño divides his composition into two registers of unequal size, the lower register equates migrant labor with suffering and death which the artist portrays with a central skull flanked by two heads of iceberg lettuce. The upper register demonstrates the domain of this death with its lush, green, unending rows of lettuce framed by a rugged landscape and an enveloping blanket of clouds. An upside-down bullseye recalls the violence experienced by workers in their struggle to unionize and the heartrending scene in Tomás Rivera's *Y no se lo trago la tierra* when the boss murders a child working in the fields who simply wants a drink of water.³⁴

In a related work, *Lettuce Field on Moon* (1975), Treviño again portrays an expansive field of lettuce, but expands the scope of his vision to include the cosmos and reveals his then-burgeoning interest in Mesoamerican creation stories and architectural forms (Fig. 13). The lettuce field lays uneasily on the surface of the moon, craters visible on the right and the earth in the far distance sheltered by a massive blue and white pyramid. The artist began his study of *Mexica* (Aztec) culture in graduate school and it profoundly influenced his work at that time. The pyramid, a fundamental sacred architectural form of pre-contact Mesoamerican cultures, received repeated treatment in a number of his paintings from this period. Treviño sees the pyramid as a source of “life-supporting energy” and this positive, rather than destructive, energy comes from the sun.³⁵

In conjunction with his exploration of Mesoamerican architecture, Treviño also read accounts of the *La leyenda de los soles* or *The Legend of the Suns* that describe a series of five creation cycles known as suns with each cycle associated with one of the four elements, earth, water, fire, or wind (air).³⁶ Each successive sun is initially created and then destroyed by one of the gods, first giants are devoured by jaguars, then monkeys are “carried away by fierce winds,” next turkeys are burned in a rain of fire, and last, fish are eliminated by a flood so massive that

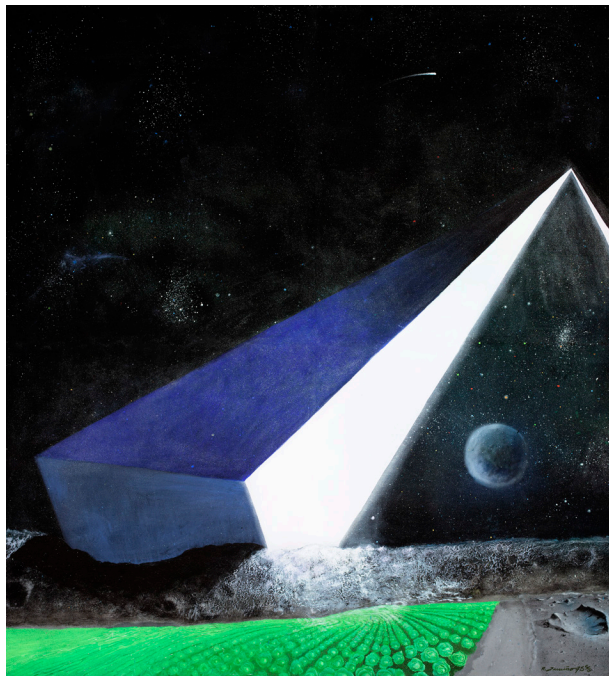


Figure 13 Rudy R. Treviño,
Lettuce Field on Moon, 1975



Figure 14 Rudy R. Treviño,
Fish Man, 1976



Figure 15 Rudy R. Treviño, *Bird Woman*, 1976

“the mountains are washed away, causing the heavens to crash down upon the earth.”³⁷ The artist, inspired by these creation stories of Nahuatl-speaking peoples, painted *Fish Man* (1976) and placed his version of the fourth cycle of creation, the Sun of Water, walking upright in profile against a background of rugged mountains suggesting the Valley of México (Fig. 14).

Another central aspect to *Fish Man* and its companion piece *Bird Woman* (1976) is the concept of transformation, what Treviño termed “mythological metamorphosis” in the artist’s statement that accompanied his MFA exhibition (Fig. 15).³⁸ People or creatures in the process of transformation have many artistic precedents in the art of the pre-contact Américas, beginning with the Olmec were-jaguar, a being understood as part human and part jaguar. This idea is born out in Treviño’s work where a man becomes a fish and a woman becomes a bird, pictured by the artist powerfully in flight ascending toward a sun. In these works, the artist sought to transform reality “to create magical images that express a mysterious significance” and to use imagination or fantasy, which he considered “the liberator of the human spirit,” to “view life from a different perspective.”³⁹

The artists honored in this exhibition have each received local, regional, and national recognition to varying degrees in careers spanning five decades. They have produced powerful bodies of work that reflect the experiences of Chicana and Chicano communities, that critique and challenge racist and hegemonic power structures, that transform the way we see our world, and that affirm the human spirit. These early explorers of Chicano identity have made enduring contributions to Chicana and Chicano art history and to American art history. This exhibition broadens and deepens these art histories because it brings the lives and the work of Jesse A. Almazán, José Esquivel, and Rudy R. Treviño to a new audience.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Ann Marie Leimer received her Ph.D. from the University of Texas at Austin, where she specialized in Contemporary Chicana and Chicano Art under the direction of Amelia Malagamba-Ansótegui and trained as a scholar of Latin American Art and Art of the Américas. She currently serves as Professor of Art History and Chair of the Juanita and Ralph Harvey School of Visual Arts at Midwestern State University in Wichita Falls, Texas. Her published work has appeared in the journals *Afterimage*, *Chicana/Latina Studies*, *JOLLAS*, and *Religion and the Arts* and in the books *Beyond Heritage*, *Border Crossings*, *Chican@ Critical Perspectives and Praxis*, *New Frontiers in Latin American Borderlands*, *Tina Fuentes: Marcando el relámpago*, *LatinX: Artistas de Tejas*, and *Voices in Concert: In the Spirit of Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz*. She is co-editor with Laura E. Pérez for the anthology *Consuelo Jimenez Underwood: Art, Vision, Weaving*. Dr. Leimer also serves on the National Advisory Council for *Rhizomes of Mexican American Art Since 1848*, a research initiative inaugurated by KarenMary Davalos in 2016 and co-directed by Constance Cortéz which will result in a digital portal of Mexican American art collections as well as a two-volume book *Adjacent Imaginaries*.

ENDNOTES

1. David Montejano, "Introduction," in *Quixote's Soldiers: A Local History of the Chicano Movement, 1966-1981*, (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 2010), 2.
2. "El Plan Espiritual de Aztlán," in *Aztlán: Essays on the Chicano Homeland*, edited by Rudolfo A. Anaya and Francisco A. Lomeli (Albuquerque, NM: Academic/El Norte Publications, 1989), 1-5.
3. David Montejano, "The Berets Rise Up," in *Quixote's Soldiers: A Local History of the Chicano Movement, 1966-1981*, (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 2010), 122-126. For an ethnographic account of the Southside Brown Berets in San Antonio, see David Montejano, *Quixote's Soldiers: A Local History of the Chicano Movement, 1966-1981*, (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 2010).
4. Ruben C. Cordova, *Con Safo: The Chicano Art Group and the Politics of South Texas*, (Los Angeles, CA: UCLA Chicano Studies Research Center Press, 2009), 1. Jesse Almazán, José Esquivel, and Rudy R. Treviño were part of *Con Safo*, first organized in 1968 by Felipe Reyes with Jesse Almazán and termed *El Grupo*, with Almazán and Esquivel as initial members along with José Garza, Jesse "Chista" Cantú, and Roberto Ríos. Treviño joined the group in 1973. Art historian Ruben C. Cordova has documented each member's relationship to and participation in this early San Antonio-based Chicano Art group. For additional art historical scholarship on *Con Safo*, see Ruben C. Cordova, "Homage to Jesse A. Almazán, Chicano Painter and Graphic Artist, June 2, 1937 - March 31, 2002," *Aztlán* Vol. 29, no. 1 (Spring 2004): 285-292.
5. Maggie Almazán, Interview by the author, San Antonio, Texas, June 13, 2019.
6. Ibid.
7. The term "identity-in-difference" was first introduced by Norma Alarcón in her 1990 essay "Chicana Feminism: In the Tracks of "the" Native Woman" and later developed by José Esteban Muñoz as part of his theory of disidentification. See Norma Alarcón, "Chicana Feminism: In the Tracks of "the" Native Woman," *Cultural Studies* Vol. 4, no. 3 (1990): 248-256 and José Esteban Muñoz, *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics*, (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1999). For an analysis of the ways that *pachucos* and zoot suiters resisted dominant societal norms, see Eduardo Obregón Pagán, *Murder at the Sleepy Lagoon: Zoot Suits, Race, and Riot in Wartime L.A.*, (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2003).
8. For more information about Joaquín Torres-García and his desire to create a universal art language, see Valerie Fletcher, "Joaquín Torres-García," in *Crosscurrents of Modernism: Four Latin American Pioneers - Diego Rivera, Joaquín Torres-García, Wilfredo Lam, Matta*, (Washington, DC: Hirshhorn Museum and Smithsonian Institution Press, 1992), 103-127.
9. Tomás Ybarra-Frausto, "Rasquachismo: A Chicano Sensibility," in *Chicano Aesthetics: Rasquachismo*, 5-8, Exh. cat., (Phoenix, AZ: MARS, Movimiento Artístico del Río Salado, 1989), 5.
10. Ruben C. Cordova, "Homage to Jesse A. Almazán," 286. For information on the *castas*, see Magali M. Carrera, *Imagining Identity in New Spain: Race, Lineage, and the Colonial Body in Portraiture and Casta Paintings*, (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 2003) and Ilona Katzew, *Casta Painting: Images of Race in Eighteenth-Century Mexico*, (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2004).
11. Maggie Almazán, Interview by the author, San Antonio, Texas, June 13, 2019. Ms. Almazán stated in this interview that Almazán was "very fond of the New York School and the German Expressionists. He was enamored of their techniques and their boldness. He loved Kandinsky and Miró and the French Impressionists. He adored them."
12. Ruben C. Cordova, "Homage to Jesse A. Almazán, Chicano Painter and Graphic Artist, June 2, 1937 - March 31, 2002," *Aztlán* Vol. 29, no. 1 (Spring 2004): 288. For information on Xul Solar, see Jacqueline Barnitz, "The Argentine Avant-Garde," in *Twentieth-Century Art of Latin America*, (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 2001), 64-74.
13. Maggie Almazán, Interview by the author, San Antonio, Texas, June 13, 2019. Ms. Almazán stated in this interview that her husband was "very spiritual and religious" having been baptized in the Catholic Church, but was also "well-versed in the Bible" and attended services at the Methodist church due to the influence and preference of his grandparents.
14. Tomás Ybarra-Frausto, "Cultural Context," in *Ceremony of Memory: New Expressions in Spirituality Among Contemporary Hispanic Artists*, (Santa Fe, NM: Center for Contemporary Arts of Santa Fe, 1988), 9-12. Please also see by the same author a related discussion in "The Chicano Movement/The Movement of Chicano Art," in *Exhibiting Cultures: The Poetics and Politics of Museum Display*, edited by Ivan Karp and Steven Levine, (Washington D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1991), 128-150.
15. José Esquivel, Interview by the author, San Antonio, Texas, June 12, 2019.
16. Ibid.
17. Ibid., the information and quotes in this paragraph are taken from the June 12, 2019 interview.
18. Ibid.
19. Ibid.
20. Ibid.
21. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_4motfG1tA
22. Interview, June 12, 2019, Op. cit.
23. Ibid.
24. Rudy R. Treviño, Interview by the author, San Antonio, Texas, June 14, 2019.
25. Ibid.
26. Frank Trejo, "Frank Talk Around the Plaza," *San Antonio Light*, July 7, 1976, 1-B.
27. *Handbook of Texas Online*, Teresa Palomo Acosta and Kendall Curlee, "CHICANO ART NETWORKS," accessed October 21, 2019, <http://www.tshaonline.org/handbook/online/articles/kjc04>.

28. Rudy R. Treviño, Interview by the author, San Antonio, Texas, June 14, 2019.
29. Jacinto Quirarte, "Rudy Trevino" in *Mexican American Artists*, (Austin, TX: University of Texas, 1973), 127-129.
30. "Blaffer Gallery," *Texas Monthly*, Vol. 6, no. 10 (October 1978): 78.
31. Rudy R. Treviño, Interview by the author, San Antonio, Texas, June 14, 2019.
32. Ibid.
33. Alicia Gaspar de Alba, *Chicano Art Inside and Outside the Masters House: Cultural Politics and the CARA Exhibition*, (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 1998), 85.
34. Tomás Rivera, *y no se lo trago la tierra/ And the Earth Did Not Devour Him*, translated by Herminio Rios, Berkeley, CA: Quinto Sol, 1971). The specific short story where this event takes place is titled "The Children Couldn't Wait."
35. Rudy R. Treviño, Unpublished artist's statement, 1976.
36. See *Leyenda de los soles* in *History and Mythology of the Aztecs: The Codex Chimalpopoca*, translated by John Bierhorst, (Tucson, AZ: University of Arizona Press, 1992).
37. Karl Taube, "Aztec Mythology," in *Aztec and Maya Myths*, (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 1993), 34 and 36.
38. Rudy R. Treviño, Unpublished artist's statement, 1976.
39. Rudy R. Treviño, Interview by the author, San Antonio, Texas, June 14, 2019.
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ABOUT CENTRO DE ARTES

Centro de Artes gallery is dedicated to showcasing San Antonio and South Texas Latino/a artists. Found in the heart of the Zona Cultural, an officially designated and state-recognized cultural district, Centro de Artes is dedicated to telling the story of the Latino experience with a focus on South Texas through local and regional art, history, and culture. As a space that is free and open to the public, and located in Historic Market Square - one of the most visited cultural venues in Texas - Centro de Artes is at the center of a cultural and historical crossroads, accessible to residents and visitors, alike.

Since October 2016, the City of San Antonio Department of Arts & Culture has managed Centro de Artes and showcased the works of more than 160 San Antonio artists. The City of San Antonio continues to support local artists and provide opportunities for them to show their works. Through a robust community-engaged process to develop the Centro de Artes Strategic Plan, the City of San Antonio set a framework, overseen by the Centro de Artes Committee so this mission of celebrating and honoring Latino arts and culture, with a priority on showcasing San Antonio and regional artists, continues.

In 2018, the City of San Antonio Department of Arts & Culture hosted a national open call for exhibitions and related programming for Centro de Artes as part of the strategic plan developed for the gallery in collaboration with the community in 2017. The Centro de Artes committee, a subcommittee of the San Antonio Arts Commission comprised of local community members, reviewed and scored the submitted qualified proposals. *Los Maestros: Early Explorers of Chicano Identity* was one of the ten exhibitions selected by the Centro de Artes Committee through the inaugural open call.

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The author would like to gratefully acknowledge the support and assistance of the following people during the production of this essay: Maggie Almazán, José Esquivel, Mario Esquivel, Jaeda Flores, Jesús Manuel Mena Garza, Malena González-Cid, Lara Herreid, George R. Negrete, Josie Mendez-Negrete, Robert Negrete, Rudy R. Treviño, and Lee Young.

