eric firestone gallery

For Immediate Release:

Mel Casas: Double Feature

40 Great Jones Street, New York
November 11, 2026– January 10, 2027
Opening Reception: Wednesday, November 11, 2026 | 6–8PM

Eric Firestone Gallery is delighted to present *Mel Casas: Double Feature,* an exhibition of Mel Casas's *Humanscape* paintings. Mel Casas (b. 1929, El Paso, TX; d. 2014, San Antonio, TX) was a pioneering member of the Chicano Arts Movement who is best known for his *Humanscapes*, a sweeping series made between 1965 and 1989 that address various aspects of U.S. visual culture and identity through biting humor, stereotypes, and pop imagery.

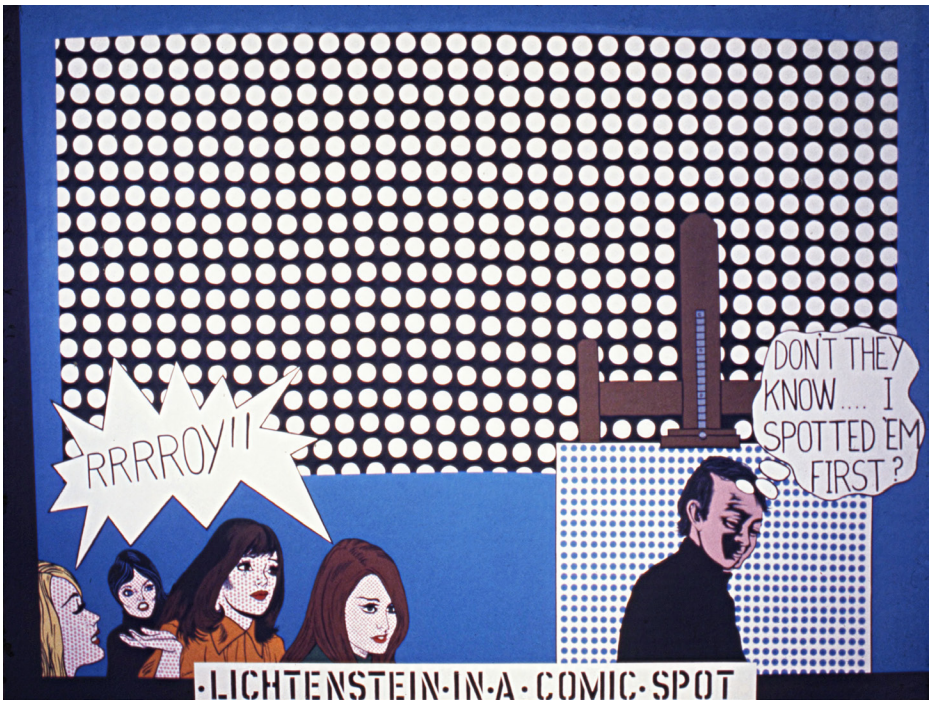


Mel Casas, *Carnival (Humanscape No. 48)*, 1968
acrylic on canvas
72 x 96 in.

The exhibition will be the artist's first show with the gallery and his first-ever solo exhibition in New York. Casas's *Humanscapes* take the form of theater scenes, with a large image in the background acting as a movie screen and related action in the foreground. Focusing on these works, the gallery presentation invites visitors to step inside Casas's theater and experience these radical paintings. Just like the double feature, a movie industry practice that brought film-goers into two films for the price of one, Casas offers viewers more than they bargained for: he lures you in with seductive imagery, then gets you to stay with visual puns, prescient truths, and quick wit.

The notion of the double is central to Casas's *Humanscapes*. The artist got inspired to work with movie theater imagery while frequently passing the San Pedro Drive-In Theater in San Antonio in the early 1960s. Casas described seeing the screen from the freeway as "surreal," explaining that "it was another reality. So I began to play with the idea and I began to refine it." In 1965, Casas began his *Humanscape* series by representing darkened scenes showing a screen and an audience. Some of these early works are set in drive-ins, while others are in theaters. By 1967, Casas established parameters for the series, working at a monumental scale of 6 x 8 feet and setting the 'screen' into an azure background with figures or scenic elements in the lower register of the painting. By contrasting the 'projected' image of the screen with the 'real' scene of the foreground, Casas points to the unreality





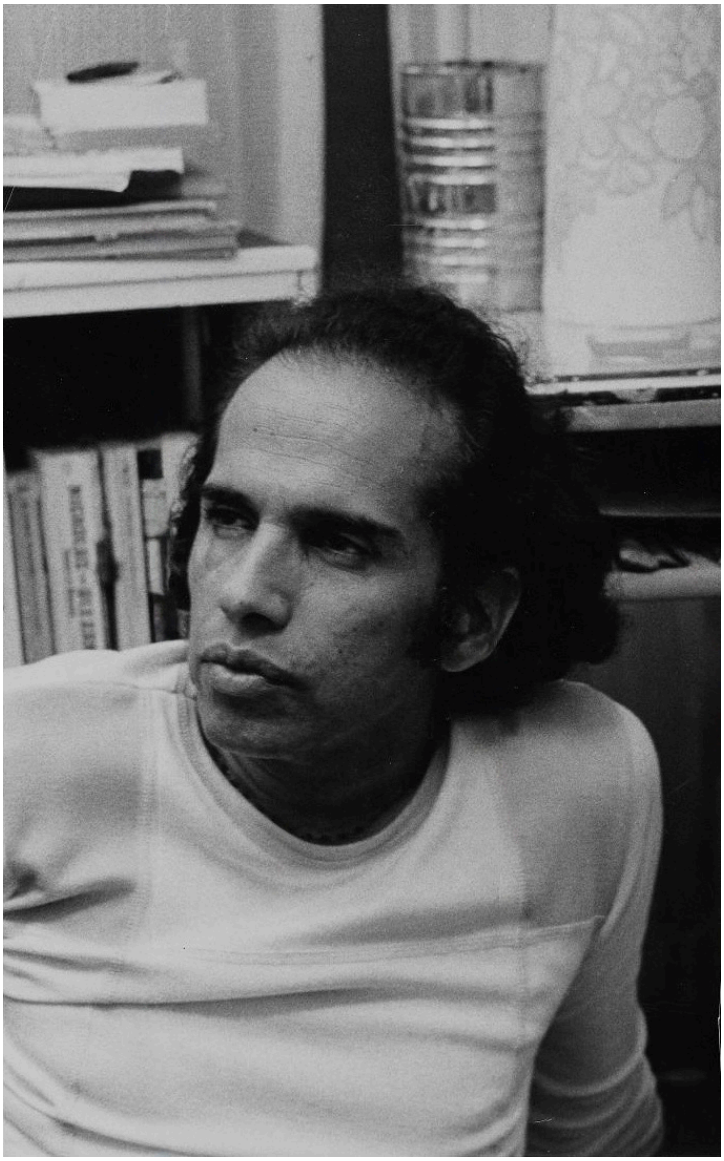
T-B: Mel Casas, *Greening of America (Humanscape No. 64),* 1971, acrylic on canvas, 72 x 96 in.
Mel Casas, *Lichtenstein in a Comic Spot (No. Humanscape 75),* 1975, acrylic on canvas, 72 x 96 in.

of the entire painting and the viewer's spectatorship.

Casas also deals with the duality of his Chicano identity. He often presents stereotypes of Mexican-Americans, clichés associated with indigenous peoples, or signifiers of mainstream popular culture in unexpected situations. He grew up in El Paso's El Segundo Barrio neighborhood, close to the US-Mexican border. He worked for the Pacific Fruit Express railroad as an iceman, initiating an early interest in labor concerns, which would become a central focus of the Chicano Movement. Drafted into military service, Casas served in the US Army during the Korean War. When he returned to Texas, he began his formal art education using the G.I. Bill. He earned a BA in art from Texas Western College, before pursuing his MFA at the University of the Americas in Mexico City, where he encountered modernist and deeply political Mexican murals, as well as Abstract Expressionism.

Casas is widely recognized as a leader of the Chicano Arts Movement and mentor to a generation of artists in San Antonio. By the late 1960s, Casas had broken into the mainstream. While his work held a nascent critique of mass culture, it was not yet explicitly about identity. In 1970, a former student asked Casas to help organize a new group for Chicano artists. With a group of younger artists, Casas became a leader of Con Safo (C/S), an organization that sought to define a Chicano aesthetic as well as advocate for the inclusion of Chicano artists in mainstream institutions. In 1971, Casas wrote "Artists are bound to the obligation of interpreting their environment and reacting to it. Chicano artists are duty bound to act as spokesmen and give visual reality to the Chicano vision. We are iconoclasts, not by choice but by circumstances - out to destroy stereotypes and demolish visual clichés." Casas responded to his bifurcated identity as an American who was always seen as an outsider because of his ancestry. From his involvement with C/S onward, Casas dealt with stereotypes of Mexican-American and indigenous people, often approaching painful topics with humor.

Casas took inspiration from Marshall McLuhan's *Mechanical Bride: Folklore of Industrial Man*, which offers a theory that through analyzing examples of mass culture like advertisements, comic strips, and newspaper layouts, readers can escape their numbing effects. Casas uses the language of popular culture but invites his viewers to see past the titillating imagery of consumerism. In a 1967 artist's statement, Casas wrote "I use the black of the movie house (anonymity) and the persistence of vision (the projected image) to probe into the most compulsive mysteries of its effects." Casas often used the subject of the nude, an archetype of Western art history and a dominant image of mass culture. He stated that he would "… divide the picture plane of my painting formats so as to force the spectator into the role of 'voyeur' thus acquiring an identity through participation." Focusing on the idealized white nude while forcing the viewer to confront their looking, Casas critiques both the dominant white culture and patriarchy.



Mel Casas, c. 1970.

In recent years, Casas's *Humanscapes* have been on view in major museums and exhibitions. In 2025, The Whitney Museum of American Art featured *Humanscape #56 (San Antonio Circus)* as part of its landmark *Sixties Surreal* exhibition, acquiring this work from the exhibition. The work has also been acquired recently by Crystal Bridges Museum of American Art, where it was on view as part of *Men of Steel, Women of Wonder: Modern American Superheroes in Contemporary Art* in 2019. The Smithsonian American Art Museum holds two works from the series, one of which is currently on view in the institution's permanent collection galleries. A significant work, *Humanscape 86 (Kitchen Spanish)* was also acquired this month by the Museum of Modern Art.

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For further information, contact: press@ericfirestonegallery.com