

# César Martínez's Retrospective Show: A Tribute To A Maestro Of Chicano Art



RICARDO ROMO, PH.D  
NOV 06, 2024

On October 24, 2024, the Ruiz-Healy Gallery in San Antonio opened a marvelous Chicano art exhibit, *César A. Martínez: Smoke & Mirrors*. The exhibit includes recent paintings by Martínez and drawings from the 1970s. César Martínez is a major Latino artist, among the founders of the Chicano Art Movement, and one of the few Latino-American artists whose work has been collected by major American museums including the Museum of Modern Art and Whitney Museum in New York City, The Los Angeles Museum of Art, and the Smithsonian American Art Museum in Washington, D.C.



*César Martínez bullfight collage at Ruiz Healy Gallery, San Antonio. Photo by Ricardo Romo.*

Growing up in his hometown of Laredo, Martínez dreamed that his training as a *matador* would one day place him in the center of the Nuevo Laredo bullring waving his red cape at a fierce charging bull. Although he never realized a starting *matador* role, his art over the next 50 years reflected his love of the bullring and Mexican cultural traditions. The Ruiz-Healy exhibit's drawings, paintings, collages, and linocut prints demonstrate how Mexican culture and the borderland environment have shaped Martínez's work.



*César Martínez serape paintings at Ruiz Healy Gallery, San Antonio. Photo by Ricardo Romo.*

During the first half of the 20th century, the Rio Grande River did not present a barrier to the residents of the twin cities of Nuevo Laredo, Mexico and Laredo, Texas. In his youth, Martínez crossed the international U.S.-Mexico border bridge nearly every weekend to visit family ranches and to shop at the *Mercado Malclovio Herrera*, an open-air market dating back to the 19th century. He also attended bullfights at the Plaza de Toros. Gallery owner Dr. Patricia Ruiz-Healy, who grew up in Sonora, Mexico, presents several of Martínez's drawings and paintings of *toros* and colorful collages including expired tickets to bullfights and bottle wrappings of popular Mexican beers.

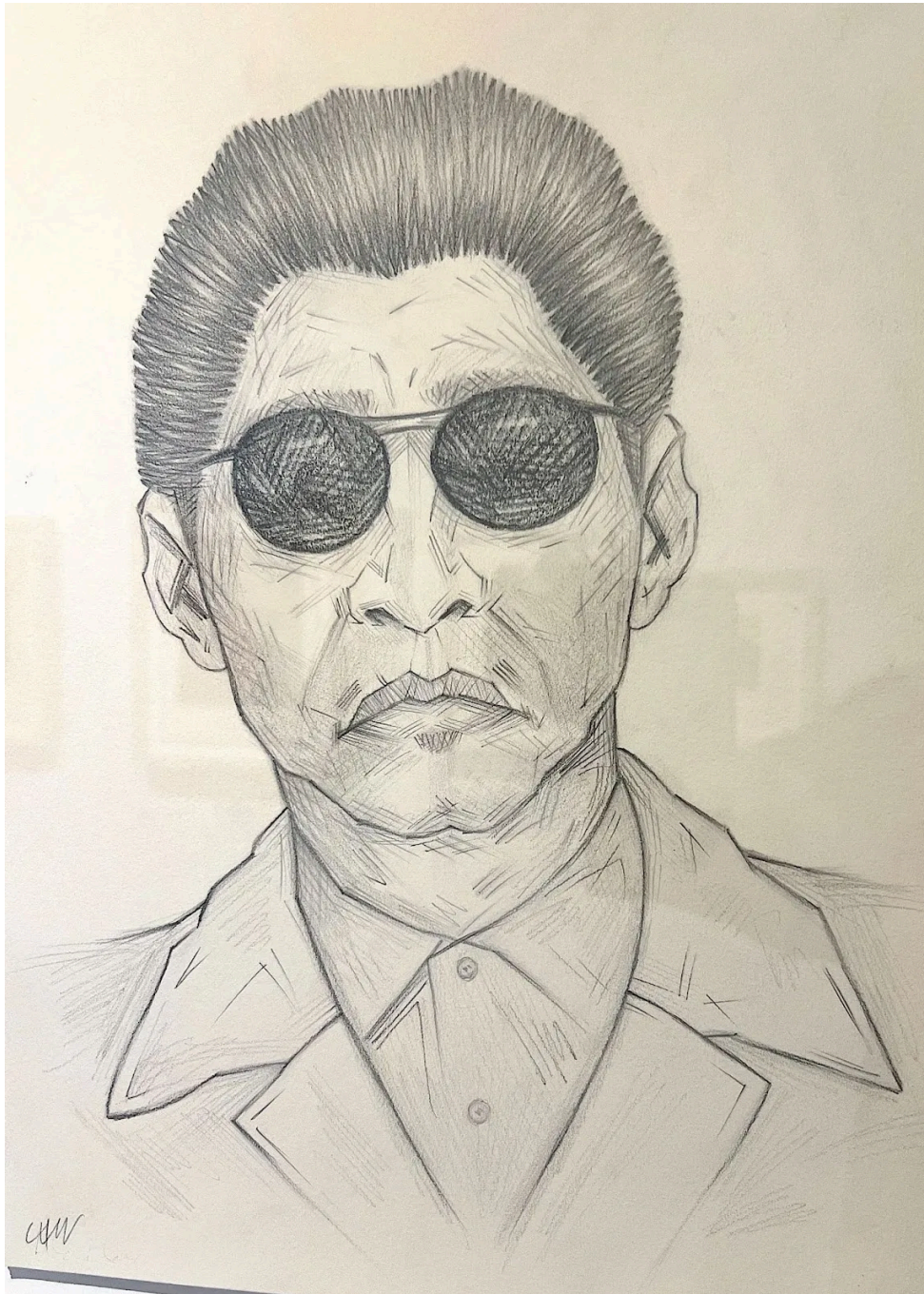


**César Martínez Bato paintings at Ruiz Healy Gallery, San Antonio. Photo by Ricardo Romo.**

Martínez enrolled at Texas A&M University at Kingsville in the mid-1960s and graduated with an art degree in 1968. At the Kingsville campus, he formed friendships with several Latino artists who like himself expressed South Texas experiences in their paintings and drawings. Together these South Texas artists constituted the early creative forces of the Texas Chicano art movement. In 1968, Martínez was preparing for his first solo show when the U.S. Army drafted him. Following an Honorable Discharge in 1971, he moved to San Antonio, Texas.

San Antonio artists played an important role in the initial years of the Texas Chicano Art Movement. San Antonio College art professor and artist Mel Casas recruited young artists like Martínez to join the famed *Con Safo* art group. *Con Safo* is widely considered the first Chicano

art organization in Texas. Martinez joined *Con Safo* in 1974. At Latino artists' meetings in San Antonio, Martinez met Santos Martinez, Jr., who later included César in the *Dale Gas* exhibit in Houston, Texas in 1977. The *Dale Gas* exhibit is considered one of the first Chicano art shows in the United States. The following year [1978], César Martinez began his *bato* and *pachuco* series.



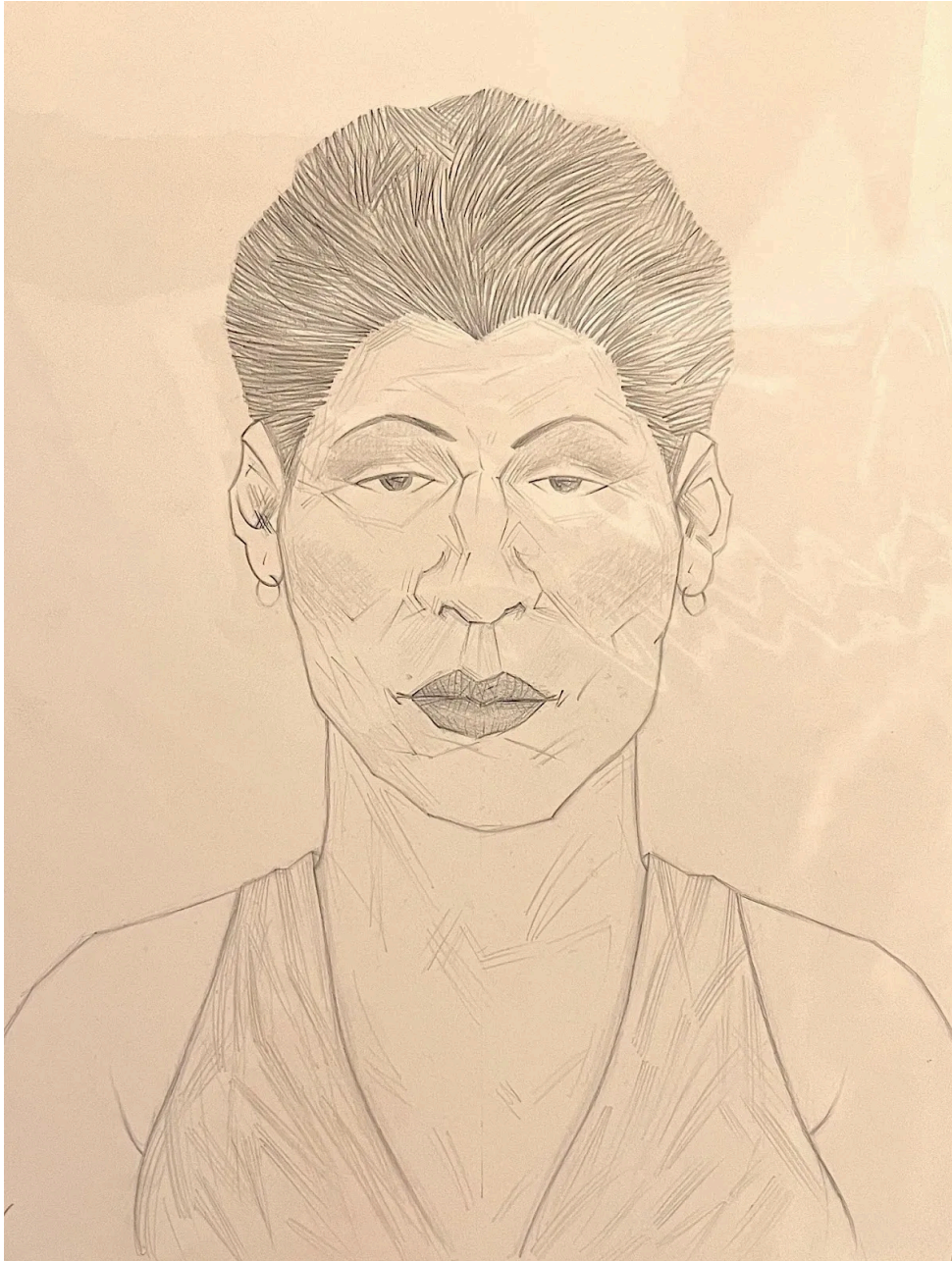
**César Martinez *Bato* drawing at Ruiz Healy Gallery, San Antonio. Photo by Ricardo Romo.**

In his paintings of *batos*, Martinez captures the essence of iconic figures from his barrio in Laredo at a time when “Pachuquismo,” a distinct type of dress and hairstyle represented in Chicano urban street culture, was in vogue in many of the borderland barrios. The *pachucos* and *pachucas* represented a 1940-1950 equivalent of “cool” or “hip” dudes and ladies.



*Works by César Martínez in his home studio. Photo by Ricardo Romo.*

Although the *Bato* series represents Martínez's signature paintings, his artistic versatility is evident in the many creative works he produced over his career, such as his *serape* and *Mestizo* series. In his *serape* pieces, Martínez returns to the Mexican mercados of the borderlands where vendors in Nuevo Laredo offered colorful long rectangular wool blankets or shawls for men to wrap around their shoulders. The *serape*, Mexico's most famous traditional symbol, was introduced to the art world by Diego Rivera's "Zapatista Landscape" painting of 1915, a Cubist abstract that captured symbols of the Mexican Revolution and Mexican Nationalism. The Museum of Modern Art in New York recently purchased three César Martínez *serape* paintings from Ruiz-Healy.



*César Martínez drawing at Ruiz Healy Gallery, San Antonio. Photo by Ricardo Romo.*

Over the years, Martínez returned to his interest in Indigenous identity [Mestizos] and culture [toros or bulls]. In earlier works, he painted a jaguar from pre-Columbian Indigenous culture confronting a bull representing Spanish newcomers to Mexico. In a self-portrait, Martínez's facial features are divided: one-half features a jaguar and the opposite half is that of a bull.



*César Martínez Jaguar and Bull Painting. Collection of Harriett and Ricardo Romo.*

Ellen Bernstein of the *Corpus Christi Caller* newspaper noted that in the mid-1980s, Martínez began producing works that were a “visual antithesis of his vividly colored” Chicano portraits. She wrote, “Employing a more subdued palette and working with a less representational imagery that is more subtle and elusive in both message and mood, the mixed-media works and paintings included in his South Texas and Mestizo series are consummately more biographical and personal.”



*César Martínez painting in his West San Antonio home studio. 2024. Photo by Ricardo Romo.*

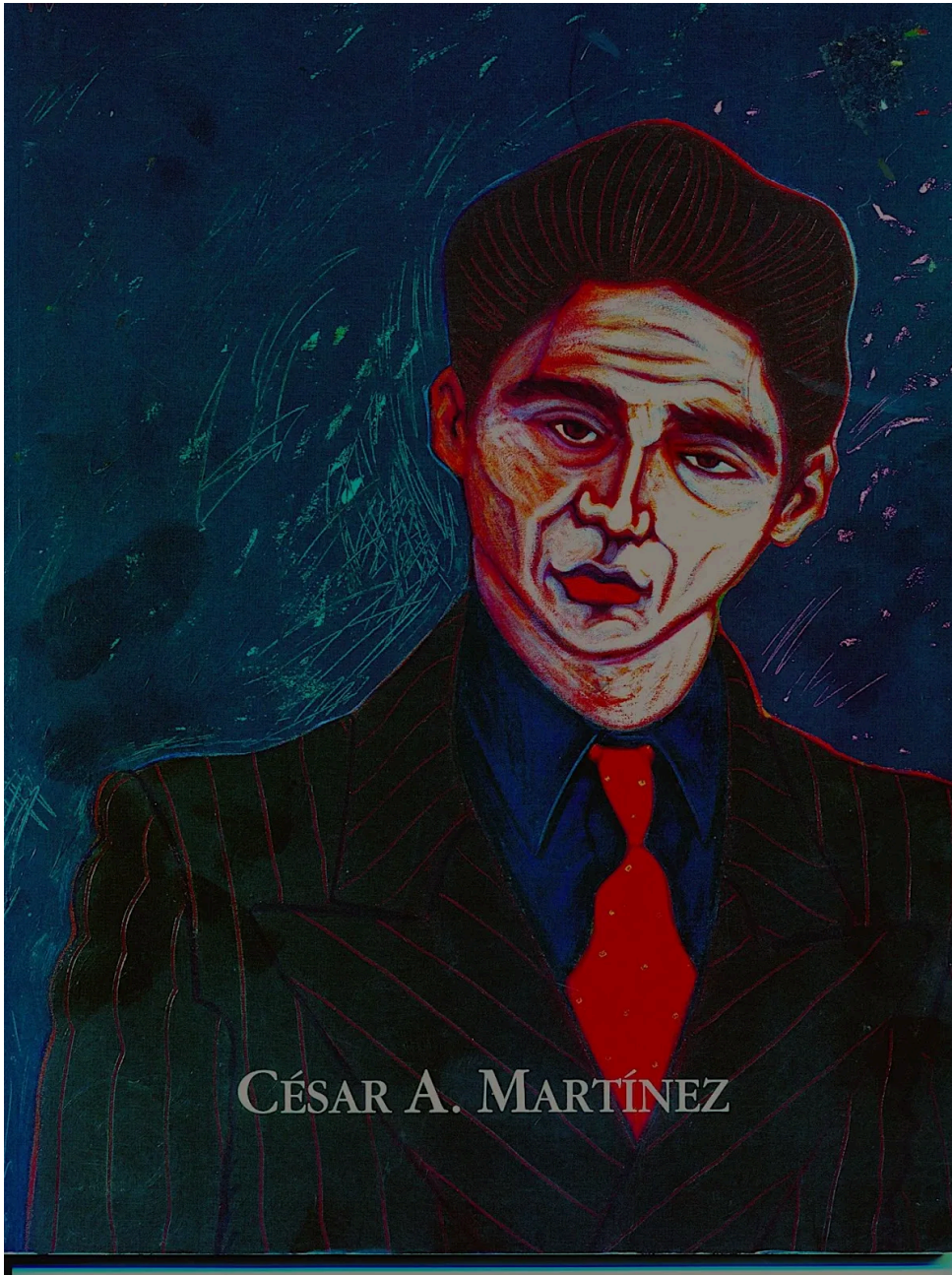
Santos G. Martínez, Jr., an organizer of the famed 1977 *Dale Gás Chicano* art exhibit in Houston, noted that Martínez's paintings "represent a cultural portrait of a working-class community often marginalized, and one which generally goes unnoticed." Over the last 40 years, César Martínez has also painted many female portraits. Some like "Sra. Rivas" are conceived from images found in dusty old high school yearbooks of the 1940s and 50s. He found other ideas for his paintings in the obituary pages of South Texas newspapers.





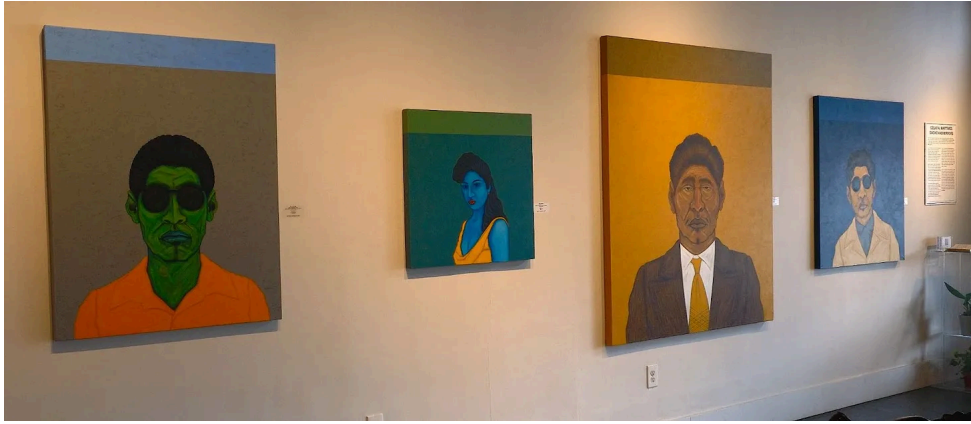
*César Martínez painting in his West San Antonio home studio. 2024. Photo by Ricardo Romo.*

Martínez works with paper, canvas, wood, and metal, and, although he mostly paints with acrylics, he also excels with pastels and watercolors. Several of his wood construction pieces have been included in museum exhibitions in Texas. The University of Houston's Downtown campus recently included several of his lithographs and watercolors in an exhibit of Latino art.



**César A. *Martínez*: A Retrospective. McNay Art Museum. San Antonio, Texas. 1999.**

As early collectors of his art, Harriett and I have witnessed the evolution of César Martínez as an artist. We bought two pastel portraits of women and a painting of a bull confronting a jaguar from Martínez in 1982. We recently acquired one of his serape pieces completed in 1980. I had the good fortune to arrange for the printing of a beautiful lithographic portrait, *Bato Azul*, which we donated to the Smithsonian Museum of American Art in D.C. several years ago. Martínez's artistic evolution is evident in these collages and new drawings in the show at Ruiz-Healy Gallery.



*César Martínez paintings at Ruiz Healy Gallery, San Antonio. Photo by Ricardo Romo.*

Martinez participated in numerous national exhibitions after winning the top award in the 1984 Chicano Art exhibit *Mira! The Canadian Club Hispanic Art Tour*. In 1997, Artpace awarded Martinez an International Artists' Residency, and the Artpace organization included Martinez in several exhibits.

Twenty-five years ago, the McNay Art Museum presented a solo exhibition, *César A. Martínez: A Retrospective*. Fourteen years later, he was featured as one of the artists in the *Estampas: Romo Collection McNay* exhibit. That exhibition has traveled to eight American cities. We were pleased that Patricia Ruiz-Healy brought Martinez back for a third show at her San Antonio and New York galleries.



*Dr. Patricia Ruiz-Healy at her San Antonio gallery. Photo by Ricardo Romo.*

Over the past ten years, Dr. Ruiz-Healy, who earned her PhD in Latin American Studies at UT Austin, has emerged as one of the nation's major power brokers for Latino art. The exhibition *César A. Martínez: Smoke & Mirrors* is on view at Ruiz-Healy Gallery in San Antonio from October 24th to November 30th, 2024.