

# José Esquivel

## Artist and Revolutionary

by Dr. Ellen Riojas Clark, et al.

Artists are important to society. Art works are more than paints, canvases, and brushes. They are more than just pieces in museums, catalogues, books or on walls. They are sparks. Sparks that ignite fires—sparks, that ignite revolutions! Every major revolution began with art and books. Major religious, political, cultural, and social revolutions have been documented by artists. Powerful, world-changing art pieces did not

spontaneously appear. They were not conceived by committees, or others. They were created in one mind, by one artist. Greater than the desire to be an artist is the desire to paint something of consequence. To paint truth. Like the work of José Esquivel, who laid the foundation for Chicano art. It is an honor for mis C/S colegas—Santos Martínez, Cesar Martínez and I, Ellen Riojas Clark, to

Cesar Martínez: *José was an excellent, serious, low-key, very dignified man with an authentic vision of the culture of the barrio he grew up in and was a great influence for me as well as for many others who have pursued that type of art which came to be known as “Chicano Art”.*

speak about José Esquivel in this tribute, an artist of such passion, vision, and a true revolutionary.

The artistic revolution began with the artists and visionaries, José Esquivel, Jesse Almazán, Jesús María “Chista” Cantú, Felipe Reyes, José Garza, and Roberto Ríos. Cesar Martínez calls them the “original Westside artists” because they all came from the “pozo” and were of the same generation. First, it was simply *El Grupo*, according to both Cesar and Santos, then *Los Pintores de Aztlán*, then *Los Pintores de la Nueva Raza*, then finally *Con Safo*. In 1969, I met José Garza and Felipe Reyes, members of *Los Pintores*, in a Mexican American history class at SAC, where they ignited group discussions. Later in the fall of 1970 at Trinity University, I met Santos Martínez, who was already a member of *Los Pintores* and I was asked by José to join this group of excellent artists and visionaries. *Con Safo* kept expanding its membership, and the following artists joined the group: Mel Casas, Jesse Treviño, Rudy Treviño, Cesar Mar-

tínez, Carmen Lomas Garza, and Amado Peña. Then Kathy Vargas, Roberto Gonzáles, Rosario Ezquerra, Luis Jiménez, Rolando Briseño, etc. All of us under the guidance of the initial and subsequent leadership of, especially, José Esquivel.

It was a dynamic, intellectual time to be at the brink of a revolutionary time, to define Chicano Art. My role was to capture the thoughts, ideas, and vision of who and what was a Chicano artist and what was Chicano art: Was it a genre in itself? Imagine being involved in the discussions regarding the vision of the group, the development of the Brown Paper Report, and then the mission statement for Con Safo. José Esquivel was the framer of the C/S artistic quest in his quiet, dignified manner. Without raising his voice, he could quiet the forceful voices with his straight to the point questions or succinct points bringing us back to the question at hand. All of these artists, at those times including, José Esquivel, had never been invited to exhibit in any museum or major gallery. The proof is, all are

now recognized and exhibited in major institutions, museums, galleries nationally and internationally. It has almost taken, for some, a lifetime.

To quote Cesar Martínez, “José was an excellent, serious, low-key, very dignified man with an authentic vision of the culture of the barrio he grew up in and was a great influence for me as well as for many others who have pursued that type of art which came to be known as “Chicano Art.” He had encyclopedic knowledge of how San Antonio developed politically and socially and it

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Photo: Ricardo Romo



The book “Con Safo: The Chicano Art Group and the Politics of South Texas” features this 1972 photograph of the group, which included, from left, Santos Martínez, Jesse Almazán, Carlos Espinosa, Roberto Ríos, Felipe Reyes, José Esquivel, Vicente Velásquez, Mel Casas and José Garza. —Courtesy of Mel Casas Collection, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

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was this understanding that shaped his artistic storytelling.

According to Santos Martínez: “He was honest and gracious, exhibiting a kind and generous heart in his willingness to always help and be of assistance in whatever ways he could. He was a storyteller. Many of his works have a story behind them. I recall on several occasions José commenting on the profound impact and influence his grandmother and mother—both loving and nurturing but strong women—had on him. Given their importance, it is no coincidence he often references women in his artwork. Shaped by the forces of his surroundings, José Esquivel recalled his grandmother’s spirituality, and especially, his mother’s constant refrain urging him to one day find a way out of ‘este pozo.’”

Since the beginning, José understood the cultural richness of his barrio or “the community cultural wealth, cultural capital, or the counter stories” of his barrio long before academics coined these terms. He called it his “barrio, his “familia,” his reality. Esquivel became known for focusing on the neighbors he knew growing up in the barrio, the working-class residents and family caretakers who had not previously been considered worthy subjects of paintings. Santos Martínez writes the following: “In finding his creative voice, José would frequently convey his authentic self in his artistic expression. He intuitively had developed a distinctive—what I refer to as—a barrio sensibility; a tu sabes, straight from the

heart, raza/mi gente subject-matter for ‘fine art.’ In the process, he seldom wavered from his cultural roots, heritage, and identity. The barrio with its inherent challenges, the human condition, and strong women became recurrent themes throughout his body of work.”

José Esquivel was mi amigo y colega desde los 70s: un artista inolvidable, an archivist, and a dedicated family man. You were a natural teacher, a philosopher, a dedicated soul, un artista. I will miss our late-at-night long talks, as you waxed so eloquently about what is still needed for our communities, our future work—and kept urging me to write the “real” story of CS. I/we will write the “tu sabes” story, your story of CS. The monumental Chicano sculpture that you conceptualized so many years ago, telling the Chicano story reflecting our history, culture, and traditions will happen at the gateway to the Westside. We promise. It is so hard to believe that you are physically gone but I remember you daily when I go past your two works in our living room. We’re are so heartbroken. You left us as a strong artist, as a lover of you studios in the barrio and elsewhere, as a dedicated man



Artwork: Esquivel, “Nuestra Señora.” 16’x20’: Photo by Ricardo Romo

to his wife, family, and his community and always with a new artistic vision. We will miss you greatly but your work will live forever. You are a great artist y amigo. Ay, José, tantas memorias desde los C/S days.

*¡José Esquivel, C/S, Presente! ¡José Esquivel, C/S, Presente; ¡José Esquivel, C/S, Presente!*

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