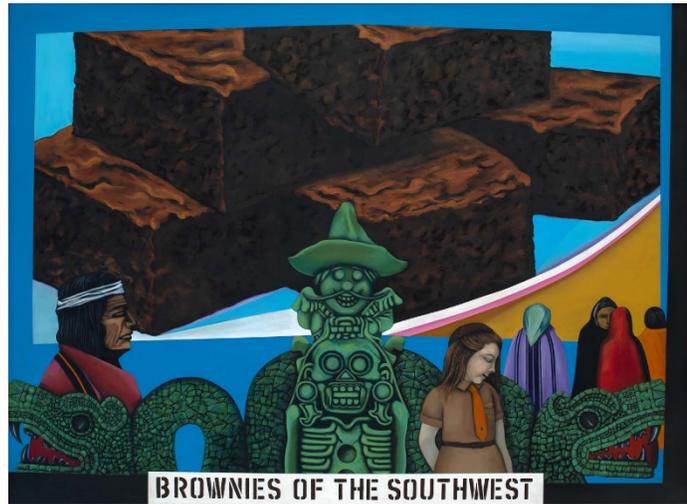


## Stereotypes and Popular Culture

American artists across time have turned to popular culture as a sign of the changing nature of contemporary life. They bring a unique perspective to this subject that is attuned to the vernacular traditions of urban, working-class communities. The two artists featured here examine objects of daily life, redefining imported traditions and iconographies in a new context, and often expanding notions of art making in the process. By actively mining the stuff of everyday life, they comment on the meaning of American popular culture.



*Humanscape 62*, 1970, Mel Casas, Smithsonian American Art Museum

Exactly how do contemporary artists like Mel Casas and Roger Shimomura address racial stereotypes in their artwork? How does popular culture influence this depiction? How does personal experience affect an artist's artwork? How do artists portray contemporary social, racial, and other concerns in their artwork? Both Latino artist Casas and Shimomura, an American artist of Japanese descent, tackle these questions and issues in their respective paintings, *Humanscape 62* and *Diary: December 12, 1941*.

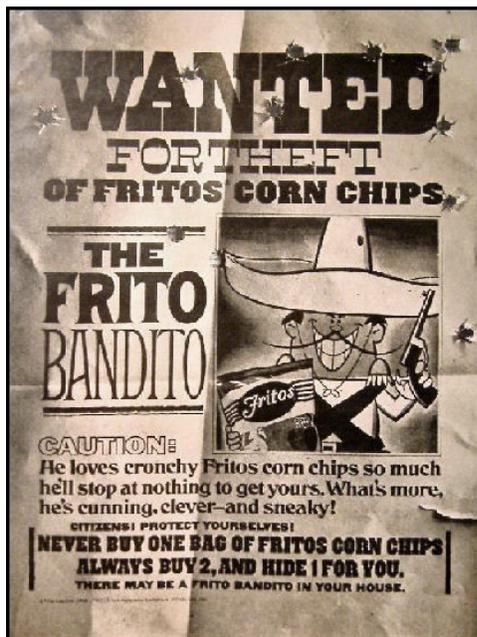
Each of these artworks are part of a larger series. The use of a series by these artists is indicative of the broader discussion required to understand the issues raised in the paintings. Both Casas and Shimomura have determined that a series of artworks was needed to expand on the themes and concerns they broach in their artwork – the issues are simply too important and complex to be devoted to a single canvas.

The oversized canvases in Casas' *Humanscape* series use symbolic images, magnified graphics, and text to comment on the divisions between races, genders, and cultures. When observing race, Casas often expresses his commentary in archetypes, exploring racism through the racist's point of view. Shimomura's "Diary" series expands on the artist's personal reminiscences as an internee in a World War II-era Japanese internment camp. Combining **Pop Art** aesthetics with cartoon imagery, Shimomura's series is based off of entries in the diary his grandmother Toku Shimomura kept while the family was interned at Camp Minidoka in Hunt, Idaho.

## *Humanscape 62*

Casas' *Humanscape 62* crystallizes many of the recurring concerns featured in **Chicano** art of the late 1960s and 1970s. Painted in 1970, this artwork is part of Casas' "Humanscape" series, each which feature a large central image that evokes a television or movie screen, populated with everyday life imagery. Casas recounts how he was inspired to create his large six-foot by eight-foot paintings mimic large, outdoor drive-in movie theater screens: "When I painted those six- by eight-footers, again it wasn't that I decided, "Oh, I'm going to paint six- by eight-footers." What happened was that I was imbued with the power of the outdoor theater-the movie theater-and the big screen. And in a sense I'm consciously I was mimicking that."

The images explore the artist's interest in psychology and popular media culture. Early "Humanscape" artworks explored how the media shapes our idea of beauty and desire – and the dominance of what Casas' called the "Barbie Doll Ideal," referencing the white female figure. Yet as his series developed, the issue of race began to take precedence in Casas' work and, not coincidentally, this development corresponded with the advent of the **Chicano Rights Movement** in the 1960s. The movement came to prevalence in the American consciousness thanks to the tireless efforts of rights leader **Cesar Chavez**. Chicanos were active across a broad section of issues including farm workers' rights, education, and voting and political rights. They also protested against the racial stereotypes portrayed in the media.



Frito Bandito print advertisement, 1968

One of the first protest campaigns to take on a specific stereotypical image was the campaign to eradicate the Frito Bandito, the sombrero-toting stereotypical mascot for Frito-Lay corn chips featured on television commercials. Speaking broken English and robbing unsuspecting bystanders of their Frito's corn chips, the Bandito character was drawn as a cartoon Mexican con man with a disheveled appearance and a gold tooth. The Bandito was also featured in several print ads which depicted the character on a wanted posters. The ad warns the consumer, "Caution: he loves crunchy Fritos corn ships so much he'll stop at nothing to get yours. What's more, he's cunning, clever – and sneaky!" The ad also warns citizens to protect themselves. The ad clearly labels the Bandito as not only a dangerous immigrant, but it reinforces the commonly held stereotype about Mexicans that they are lazy – the Bandito prefers to steal, rather than work.

Casas's *Humanscape 62* was created during the debate over Frito Bandito. Casas recalled, "I felt the need to express something about what was going on." In the painting, the artist has included an image of the Bandito in green in the center of the painting. Frito-Lay responded to public pressure and outrage by refining the Bandito's appearance, grooming his hair and giving him a friendlier expression. The change did not sit well with the public and ultimately Frito-Lay replaced Bandito with a new series of cartoon characters.

The Bandito in Casas' painting, as well as the other objects in the work, are all associated with **brown** culture, or share a connection to "brownness."

The term gained popularity in the 1960s and 1970s and increasingly signified Chicanos and their indigenous **Meso-American** ancestry. Casas has captured a group of trivialized snippets drawn from popular culture making "brown" references, including a junior Girl Scout (known as a Brownie), a jade mosaic sculpture of the Aztec deity Quetzalcoatl – the feathered serpent that extends the width of the lower register of the painting, a group of Mexican women, and a Native American in profile. Huge chocolate brownies occupy the majority of the top register, and are a nod to something both commonplace and historical. The popular cake-like brownies have their origin in Meso-America. Cacao beans, the source of chocolate, was a prized agricultural product of the



*Humanscape 62* (detail)

Aztecs in the fourteenth century and could only be grown in the highlands of central Mexico. The section containing the brownies is slightly bowed at each end, an allusion to the first television screens which were similarly bowed. Casas has merged these references with those of indigenous culture to question the ways in which mainstream American popular culture has demeaned brown cultures, whether they be Mexican American or indigenous.

Casas' personal experiences as a bilingual American also influenced his decision to tackle these issues in his artwork. The artist recalled:

*I realized that we had a bicultural problem. Meaning some of us were from a "Hispanic origin." Accidentally that's the way it happens. Some were from "Anglo." Both of them in quotation marks, whatever that means. And even though we all are Americans I found out I was less an American, and the reason I found out I was less an American is because I really spoke with an accent. Secondly, I was bilingual, and in America to be bilingual is to be suspect. We like to have all Americans speak only English.*

Casas struggled with and raised the important issue of ethnic identity in art. As an American artist of Mexican heritage, but one who did not self-identify with the term Chicano, he wondered: were his paintings considered Chicano art because he was Chicano? Or was it the subject matter that made the art Chicano art? In an interview, the artist recalled, "You have here-in quotes-"Chicano artists," "Chicano group," so therefore they paint "Chicano art." Well, what is Chicano art? Is it Chicano art because it's an ethnicity thing? Or is it a subject thing? Those are the kind of questions I had that people didn't want to deal with."

***Diary: December 12, 1941***

Having survived and largely repressed the trauma of his family's internment during World War II and a childhood spent in the racially insensitive environment characteristic of the United States in the 1950s, Roger Shimomura had learned to minimize his differences with mainstream white America. His discovery of a rich collection of family documents and memorabilia after the death of his grandparents inspired the artist to examine their lives as immigrants to the United States and, most importantly, the part of their lives he shared most intimately with them—the internment years at **Camp Minidoka** in Hunt, Idaho.

In keeping with mid-century American attitudes, Shimomura did not pursue formal training in the language or culture of his forebears. When he began to examine his grandmother's extensive series of diaries—there were more than fifty years of diaries beginning with her arrival from Japan in 1912 and continuing until her death in 1968—he required the services of a translator. The diaries from the war years proved to be especially evocative, reviving early memories for Mrs. Shimomura's grandson and inspiring in him both the desire to commemorate this reprehensible episode in our nation's history, and to share its lessons with a new generation of Americans.

Between 1980 and 1983, Shimomura completed twenty-five paintings in the "Diary" series, each paired with a specific diary excerpt. Uniform in size and style, these paintings constitute a powerful collection of formally and emotionally compelling images. The flat, hard-edged forms and bright colors Shimomura uses to depict his shoji screens and kimonoed figures derive from his familiarity with **ukiyo-e** woodcuts and his admiration for the slick Pop Art images of artists such as **Andy Warhol** and **Roy Lichtenstein**. Shimomura refers to this tendency as his "love of painting flat."

The painting entitled *Diary: December 12, 1941*, based on an entry dated five days after the **attack on Pearl Harbor**, is especially effective in suggesting the psychological dynamics of guilt, fear, and resignation involved in the Japanese-American dilemma created by that event. On December 12, 1941, Shimomura's grandmother wrote in her diary: "I spent all day at home.

Starting from today we were permitted to withdraw \$100 from the bank. This was for our sustenance of life, we who are enemy to them. I deeply felt America's largeheartedness in dealing with us." Her words express only sadness and gratitude towards the American authorities. Such an attitude is in keeping with the stoic behavior of the *Issei*, or first-generation Japanese immigrants. Shimomura uses the Japanese word *giri*, which means "hold it in and endure," to describe their way of coping. But in the painting, he emphasizes a growing feeling of isolation and confinement, symbolized by the disposition of the converging screens that barely allows enough space for the figure.



*Diary: December 12, 1941 (detail)*

The normally nonthreatening figure of **pop culture** icon Superman is transformed into a menacing shadow, looming over the figure of Shimomura's grandmother. The inclusion of Superman is a reference to Shimomura's love of comic books. The artist grew up in the 1940's and 1950's during the heyday of action comics and superheroes, avidly reading cartoons like *Dick Tracy*, *Superman*, and several Walt Disney comics and cartoons. The graphic tradition of comics employs the thick outlines and flat silhouettes Shimomura would later come to use in his artwork. Comic books are also stylistically similar to ukiyo-e prints; a connection Shimomura acknowledged once, saying, "I realized that the only difference between Minnie Mouse and [the women in ukiyo-e prints] was race."

Despite Superman's heroic persona in the comics, Shimomura interprets Superman in another way: "Superman is my response to the 'large hearted American'," a reference to his grandmother's December 12th diary entry. Superman is not the all-American hero as he appears in the comics. In Shimomura's artwork, he personifies a domineering American federal government, responsible for imprisoning nearly 120,000 Americans of Japanese ancestry during World War II.

The painting's crisp, colorful forms contradict its serious content and message. In the 1985 catalogue for an exhibition of the "Diary" series, Shimomura commented on this contradictory character, noting:

*The dichotomy between craft and subject [is probably] appropriate, like memory brought back into focus. . . . It has always been of paramount importance to me that my work, beyond anything else, have visual interest. [These] paintings . . . were the most exciting*

*to work on because I have to deal with the relationship between political (literal) and visual issues; in this case maybe a little like putting perfume over body odor.*

What lies beneath the surface of the canvas are serious issues of race, racism, assimilation, and the complex entanglement of issues one faces as an American of non-European descent.

Visual culture in contemporary art can be used to start discussions about how race and race relations are part of our daily lives. In particular, the artwork of contemporary artists of color asks viewers to consider the artist's social position in relation to our history, which has been shaped by our own experiences. The artwork of Casas and Shimomura urge us to consider multiple American realities and perspectives.

## **Glossary**

**Andy Warhol:** (1928-1987) American artist and filmmaker. He was a leading figure of the Pop Art movement, and is best known for his work exploring celebrity and consumer culture.

**attack on Pearl Harbor:** a surprise airstrike by the Japanese on the United States naval base at Pearl Harbor in Hawaii on December 7, 1941, which led directly to the United States' entry into World War II.

**brown:** a term used to denote a racial or ethnic classification. Generally, it is used to describe people with "brown" skin tone who are of Hispanic or native ancestry.

**Camp Minidoka:** one of ten internment camps Americans of Japanese descent were sent to after the bombing of Pearl Harbor. Camp Minidoka, located in Hunt, Idaho, was the camp to which artist Roger Shimomura and his family were assigned.

**Cesar Chavez:** (1927-1993) union leader and labor organizer. Founder of the NFWA (later the UFW), Chavez advocated for farm workers' rights and employed Gandhi's tradition of peaceful, non-violent social change.

**Chicano:** a chosen identity of an American of Mexican origin or descent. The term came to prominence during the Chicano Rights Movement. Some members of the community view the term with negative connotations, as it was used previously in a derogatory manner.

**Chicano Rights Movement:** a period of widespread social and political activism within the Mexican American community during the 1960s and 1970s.

**Meso-American:** (or Mesoamerican) of or relating to the people of Mesoamerica or their languages or cultures. Mesoamerica was the region and cultural area of the Americas

during the pre-Columbian era (pre-1492) which extended from central Mexico to Honduras and Nicaragua.

**Pop Art:** a style of art based on modern popular culture and the mass media, especially as a critical or ironic comment on traditional fine art values. The Pop Art movement began in the 1950s, reaching its peak in the 1960s. Major artists of the movement include Andy Warhol and Roy Lichtenstein.

**pop culture:** short for "popular culture," the term describes cultural activities or commercial products reflecting, suited to, or aimed at the tastes of the general mass populous.

**Roy Lichtenstein:** (1923-1997) American artist and illustrator. A leading figure of the Pop Art movement, he is best known for his boldly colored parodies of comic strips and advertisements.

**ukiyo-e:** a Japanese genre of art depicting subjects from everyday life, which flourished from the seventeenth to nineteenth centuries.