Luis Jiménez’s Art Creates Dialogue
By Ruth E. Vise with additional research by Justin Davila and Kevin Garcia

If you are a native El Pasoan or have lived here for any length of time, you’ve heard about the alligators that once lived at the downtown plaza. Since 1995, a big blue sculpture of four alligators has held court at the plaza to take the place of the real ones, long gone. Young students and others may not believe at first that reptiles actually had a home there but then realize that there must be a reason for that sculpture of alligators in a desert town. Don’t alligators need water?

Accounts of how and when the alligators got to the Plaza vary. According to El Paso Times reporter Art Leibson, local miner A. Munsenberger received six baby alligators from his friend in New Orleans in the 1890s and gave them to the city of El Paso, which found them a home in a then-newly built circular pond in San Jacinto Placita. The lethargic reptiles apparently enjoyed their life in the sun for decades. Children would watch them for hours even though the reptiles seldom moved.

While most El Pasosans and tourists simply enjoyed and marveled at the reptiles, others taunted and injured them and made them the target of pranks. One alligator even landed in the office of a Texas Western College professor! Two alligators died, one was shot with a BB gun and another lost an eye when a drunken soldier put out his cigarette on it, according to Paul Monerez Diaz, El Paso Times reporter. Others say a spike was driven through his eye. As a result, the remaining alligators were moved to the zoo in the 1960s. All that was left at the Plaza were memories of the unusual desert visitors and the unofficial name of Plaza de Los Lagartos (alligators). (See our 1995 article on the plaza in volume 13 online).

In the 1980s, the El Paso Art Alliance approached an artist known for public art to create a sculpture to honor the unusual feature of the Plaza. Although the real alligators were a whimsical gift between friends, the spectacular sculpture Los Lagartos is the work of noted artist Luis A. Jiménez, Jr., one of the children who sat and watched the alligators whenever he accompanied his grandmother downtown. It took him nine years to finish Los Lagartos, with the finished piece dedicated in June 1995.

Jiménez, whose works appear across the country in museums and galleries and outdoors in public places, including Washington, D.C.’s Smithsonian American Art Museum, was an El Paso native born on July 30, 1940. He was a pioneer proponent of public art, large pieces meant to be installed outside and made available for view by large audiences. He received criticism for sending mixed messages to various populations with some of his work, but he thought controversy about art was healthy. He once said the purpose of public art was to produce dialogue.

Jiménez’s life is a success story of a child of undocumented immigrants. In 1924, his father came from Mexico City to the U.S. when he was nine years old, wading across the Rio Grande with his mother, who wanted a better life for him. He married American-born Alicia Franco, whose family also came from Mexico, and the couple raised three children. Luis Sr. would become a naturalized citizen shortly after Luis Jr. was born.

As a young man, Luis Jiménez Sr. did many carvings and even won a national contest sponsored by Proctor & Gamble with models he had made of polar bears. One of the judges was the noted sculptor Alexander Archipenko. The prize was supposed to be a scholarship to the Chicago Art Institute, but the money dried up when the Depression hit, according to an oral history interview of Luis Jr. with Peter Bermingham in December 1985 for the Smithsonian Institution’s Archives of American Art. There would be no college education for the senior Jiménez.

In a Dallas Morning News article in 1999, Bill Marvel said the elder Jiménez had aspirations to be a professional artist himself, but circumstances prevented that. He found himself painting signs which then led him to make a living designing and making action filled neon signs. The elder Jiménez first worked in and later bought a commercial sign shop on Magoffin Street, the largest between Dallas and Phoenix. Jiménez told Bermingham that his father’s signs were well known in many major American cities, and the shop won at least one national prize for its design work. When the younger Jiménez went to New York much later, sign people still remembered his father’s work. Older El Pasosans may remember the concrete polar bear outside a cold storage business on Wyoming Avenue or the little blonde girl eating bread from the Sunbeam Bakery or the horse’s head from the Bronco Drive-in and others.

The younger Jiménez began working in his father’s shop when he was six and became familiar with industrial materials. Jiménez recalled that his work in the shop reflected a traditional apprenticeship, starting with sweeping the shop. An uncle on his mother’s side also worked there, and the shop had a family atmosphere about it. Most of the workers attended the same small Protestant church the Jiménez family did, and the shop workers and families socialized together. Jiménez was raised very strictly — no smoking, drinking or dancing. He had to be home by 9:00 p.m. and rarely dated, all behaviors Jiménez credited to the family’s religious beliefs.

By the time he was 16, he could do almost everything in the shop. Marvel indicated that is where Jiménez learned to use metal, a medium he used for early pieces. But it was fiberglass, a material more often used in automobiles, that fascinated the younger Jiménez.

As an elementary student, the younger Jiménez won art contests and had an especially supportive art teacher in junior high. He saw little art in El Paso but was impressed with Tom Lea’s mural in the Federal Building downtown and with Urbici Soler who designed the statue on top of Mount Cristo Rey. He also became familiar with the art books his father had in the shop. However, his family visited Mexico City every year and when he was six, they stayed for three or four months. Jiménez went to every art museum in the city and drank in the murals of Diego Rivera, David Alfaro Siqueiros, and José Clemente Orozco.

At 14, the boy was shot in the left eye with a BB gun, an injury that eventually cost him the sight in that eye. When he was about 18, he bought a Studebaker with a crushed front end and repaired it himself using fiberglass, his first experience working with that material, according to Bermingham, foreshadowing his massive sculptures-to-be. He won high school competitions in sculpture but took mechanical drawing courses instead of art, buying into his father’s philosophy that art was OK as a hobby, but a man needed a real profession.

After high school, Jiménez’s father decided his son needed to go to college and made it clear to Luis Jr. he would support his education if he majored in architecture, a practical subject from which he could make a living. After a year of basics at Texas Western College (now UTEP), Luis enrolled at the University of Texas at Austin and completed four years of the...
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five-year architectural program. In an interview in *Cite: The Architectural & Design Review of Houston*, Drexel Turner and Bruce C. Webb wrote that Jiménez had been taking art courses all along as electives. Then he took a design course in architecture with a professor who approached the class as if it were a 3-D art course, clearly a very different philosophy from that of most of the architecture professors Jiménez had taken who looked at courses from the engineer’s viewpoint.

When Jiménez changed his major to art, his father cut off all financial support and stopped speaking to him for five years. Graduating from UT in 1964, Luis went to Mexico City for a few months of graduate study. Jiménez told Birmingham that it was in Mexico that he realized he was of Mexican descent but he was American. The “pilgrimage” to the country of his ancestors was valuable in many ways, not the least of which was meeting many Mexican artists. He spent time with Francisco Zúñiga, one of Mexico’s greatest sculptors and muralists, and it was he who told Jiménez that he needed to go to New York to further his craft.

Jiménez had married another artist major he met in college, Vicky Balco, and they had a daughter whom they named Elisa Victoria. When his wife fell ill in Mexico, the couple returned to El Paso, where Jiménez took a job teaching to support his family. During that time, Jiménez suffered a broken back in a car accident and was paralyzed for a time. Father and son were able to reconnect, and the younger Jiménez actually did some work for his father. He tried to convince his wife to go with him to New York, but she would not go. Shortly after he moved there, the couple was divorced, Jiménez told Birmingham.

Finding a job in New York was made easier because he spoke Spanish, and he became a recruiter for Head Start and worked for a community program called Youth Board. Jiménez also became an assistant to the metal sculptor Seymour Lipton. He sent slides of his work to gallery after gallery with no luck. Jiménez told Birmingham that when he entered the prestigious Castelli Gallery between exhibitions and could not find anyone to talk to, he placed three of his sculptures he had in his pickup in the exhibition space without permission. This bold move impressed the director who referred him to the Graham Gallery, a prestigious gallery which specialized in modern art.

Jiménez had his first one-man show at the Graham Gallery and much to the surprise of the gallery owners, all of his drawings and sculptures sold. Luis Jiménez had made it in New York by 1969 — he was not yet 30! His parents flew to the city for the opening, and his father gave him a watch engraved with the words, “To My Son, the Artist.” The next year Jiménez had another show and then another.

But the Southwest began pulling him back. He discovered that his Mexican descent, the mixture of European and Indian peoples, as well as the land, the values, and so much more about who he was and where he came from were what he wanted to express in his art. His earliest pieces had as their subjects mainstream American images, almost always those of the working class. Turner would continue to celebrate the working class, but the images would come from Mexico and the American Southwest.

Even though he had established a reputation on the East Coast and had even bought a house in Maine, he realized that museums and galleries were not the place for his large fiberglass sculptures. They needed to be outdoors and available to everyone. He also used lithographs to reproduce his paintings and drawings to further make his art available to larger audiences. Jiménez spent five years in New York, returning to El Paso in 1971. He told Birmingham that although he had been promised money by the Graham Gallery to finish *End of the Trail (with Electric Sunset)*, about $5,000, it did not come through. Looking for money to complete the sculpture he already had in clay, Jiménez managed another audacious meeting with someone who could help him. He drove to Roswell, N. M., hoping to convince Donald Anderson, himself an artist and oilman, to help him. Anderson ran an Artist-in-Residence program connected to his art museum. Jiménez pulled up to his compound in a truck which had a sign in Spanish on it with the words “Electric Signs,” borrowed from his father. His own Volkswagen van had blown a motor.

He was mistaken for a repairman at first but eventually was able to speak to Anderson who wanted nothing to do with him until he saw some of Jiménez’s work, which Jiménez just “happened” to have with him. Anderson gave him the $5,000 so he could finish the iconic *End of the Trail*. Jiménez would stay in Roswell and work on his sculptures there for six years. Anderson would end up with a big collection of Jiménez’s work.

*End of the Trail (with Electric Sunset)* shows a Native American on a horse, making a viewer recall the source of this piece, the sculpture *End of the Trail* by James Earle Fraser, depicting the end of the fight of the Native American against the White settler and government. But the two pieces differ in many aspects, besides the fiberglass and neon lights. Jiménez’s Indian rider does not have his head down in defeat; he looks sideways as if to say “Don’t count me out, yet!” The horse also is not the exhausted creature he is in Fraser’s original. He is energized, one back foot off the ground, his eyes are bright red neon lights and the sunset looks like anything but a dying sun. It is round and shining bright and surrounded by neon lights, looking more like a sunrise than a sunset, a beginning rather than an end. Although the idea of Fraser’s vanquished Indian has become a cliché of American history, Jiménez’s version provides a different look at that “truth,” something Jiménez’s art would do more and more.

Jiménez’s *End of the Trail* was exhibited at the Whitney Museum in New York, and the Long Beach Museum bought it. As part of the agreement made with Anderson, Jiménez had the right to make a total of five castings, something he was able to do with each commissioned sculpture. Someone familiar with images of his *End of the Trail* may notice that each of the castings is different. There are differences in paint colors and surface texture, true for all of Jiménez’s commissioned sculptures.

*End of the Trail (with Electric Sunset)* can be viewed at UTEP. In a “Visit El Paso” post, prominent art dealer Adair Margo told the story of how UTEP acquired this iconic sculpture. In 1985, she discovered that Frederick Weisman of Los Angeles owned a large collection of American and European art which he loaned to American cities without charge, and in time, she arranged his collection to be exhibited in El Paso. Weisman came with the paintings and when he visited Margo’s gallery, he looked at pieces of local art being exhibited and especially at *End of the Trail (with Electric Sunset)*, a seven-foot fiberglass sculpture with blinking lights by Luis Jiménez. Not only did Weisman like it, he bought it! And then he asked Margo if she thought UTEP might accept it as a gift. Generous? Thoughtful? Someone who truly loved art and wanted as many people as possible to enjoy it, Weisman made the offer, President Diana Natalicio of UTEP enthusiastically accepted and the rest is history. *End of the Trail (with Electric Sunset)* was installed in 1988 on the second floor of the university library. It has traveled all over the world in exhibit and now makes its home on the first floor of the Chemistry and Computer Science Building, right across from Starbucks’. Jiménez might find this location a fitting place, his modern version of the “disappearing Native American” myth next to another modern American icon!

Although the downtown Museum of Art and UTEP have several pieces of Jiménez’s art, the second best known piece of his sculpture in El Paso might be *Vaquero*, a piece he completed in El Paso for a Houston park. Many El Pasoans will remember that a casting of this sculpture stood in front of the Museum of Art for more than 10 years. What many did not know was that the piece was only on loan. *Vaquero* shows a Mexican cowboy with raised hand clutching a pistol atop a blue bucking horse, with prickly pear cactus under and behind the front feet of the horse. Commissioned in 1974 by the city of Houston, the 16-foot figure celebrates the Mexican origins of the American cowboy (vaquero meaning “cowboy”). Jiménez told one author, “I’m defining an image and a myth.”

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a river, reminiscent of his own background. It was not a favorite of those against undocumented Mexican immigrants. Fiesta—Jarabe which the General Service Administration commissioned for the Otay Mesa border station near San Diego, Calif., shows a couple dancing the traditional Mexican hat dance. Critics said the woman’s dress was Spanish not Mexican and was too tight. Others criticized the man for being fat and too dark. Jiménez countered by saying he was showing “real people in a real situation,” according to the Smithsonian American Art Museum website.

In a Los Angeles Times article, Jiménez said that his sculpture was “Not cute… It’s not a Disneyland version.” Many other sculptures by Jiménez have had such criticism leveled at them, but cities kept commissioning the huge pieces and he kept making them. The faces were seldom pretty, but even though made of fiberglass, the human figures were realistic.

Even El Paso’s Los Lagartos became controversial when the city began drawing up plans to renovate the Plaza. The original plan called for the removal of the sculpture. Yes, it was in need of restoration, but much of the damage had been caused by the sun and neglect. Only through the work of community activists was the sculpture saved.

In 2013, Los Lagartos was transported to Oberlin, Ohio, where McKay Lodge Conservation Laboratory teamed with the coating and finishing division of PPG Industries to restore the sculpture. The company actually developed new methods of application of their most advanced finishing materials for the fiberglass piece. Typical deteriorations of such works include cracking, fading colors and disbonding of clear coatings. Coatings were designed to withstand sunlight and extreme temperatures, graffiti and chemicals. The sculpture only needs to be washed no more than once a year.

The sculpture only needs to be washed no more than once a year. A photo of Vaquero in front of the museum was featured on the dust cover of the Museum’s 1995 book National Museum of American Art, along with the photo and comments by the artist and author Rudolfo Anaya inside.

Many of Jiménez’s other sculptures were also controversial, such as Southwest Pieta, commissioned by the city of Albuquerque, originally for Old Town. The piece shows a kneeling young Indian with a feather in his hair and the body of a young woman lying across his lap, her long black hair cascading down a mountain. The piece reflects the Aztec story of two young lovers, Popo and Ixta. Through the treachery of a rival for her hand, Ixta believes Popo has died in war and she dies of grief at the arranged marriage to the rival. When Popo comes home and discovers she has died, he takes her body to the mountains where he holds her in his lap until the gods take pity and turn the two into mountains. Two volcanoes near Mexico City are named Popocatepetl and Ixtaccihuatl.

The sculpture met with disapproval by many residents who traced their ancestry back to Spain and felt the piece was “too Mexican.” The sculpture was moved to Martintzont Park in a working-class Mexican-American neighborhood where former First Lady Hillary Clinton came in 1999 to declare it a National Historic Treasure as part of her “Save America’s Treasures Tour.”

Other Jiménez sculptures creating controversy include Border Crossing showing a Mexican man carrying his wife and child across a river, reminiscent of his own background. It was not a favorite of those against undocumented Mexican immigrants. Fiesta—Jarabe which the General Service Administration commissioned for the Otay Mesa border station near San Diego, Calif., shows a couple dancing the traditional Mexican hat dance. Critics said the woman’s dress was Spanish not Mexican and was too tight. Others criticized the man for being fat and too dark. Jiménez countered by saying he was showing “real people in a real situation,” according to the Smithsonian American Art Museum website.

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