

June 15, 2006, 9:43AM

Sculptor's project led to his death

Luis Jimenez, an artist with local ties, found art was in everything — even at the end

By PATRICIA C. JOHNSON Copyright 2006 Houston Chronicle

Artist Luis Jimenez came from his home in New Mexico every spring to teach sculpture, public art and life drawing at the University of Houston. On a recent visit to Houston, he was feeling especially good because he could see the end of a commission that had dogged him for more than a decade: the 30-foot *Mustang* to be installed at Denver International Airport.

On Tuesday, that project killed him.

The irony haunts his friends. "He had struggled with this for so long," said El Paso-based photographer Bruce Berman.

In 1992, Denver's public art program commissioned the brilliant blue sculpture of a rearing horse for \$300,000. But Jimenez missed the deadline by more than a decade.

Those years were a rough period in Jimenez's life. An old injury caused him to lose one eye, and he was struggling with a protracted divorce suit.

In 2003, the airport sued Jimenez for the return of its \$165,000 advance. The artist countersued, arguing that the airport planned to move the sculpture to an indoor location. The issues were settled in mediation in 2004: *Mustang* would be outdoors on the airport's Peña Boulevard, and the artist would meet deadlines or give the city a different sculpture.

Tuesday morning, Jimenez and two assistants were working on *Mustang* in his Hondo, N.M., studio. Photographer Delilah Montoya, Jimenez's close friend and UH colleague, said the horse's head was finished, and he was beginning to give the body its final coat of paint.

A piece of the sculpture came loose from a hoist, "striking Jimenez and pinning him to the steel support," the Lincoln County Sheriff's Office report said.

The autopsy has not yet been completed. However, close friends say the accident severed the artist's femoral artery. They say that as Jimenez was being taken by ambulance from Hondo to a hospital in Ruidoso, he called his brother, David, in Los Angeles via cell phone.

"I'm not going to make it," he said.

He was pronounced dead at the hospital.

Architect Reginald Richie, a lifelong friend and neighbor of the artist, said *Mustang* appears to be "relatively intact." The sculpture's future is unclear.

Representatives of the Denver airport were not available for comment.

'Powerful' man, works

Jimenez was renowned for monumental sculptures — dynamic blends of pop art and Mexican-inspired folk art — of vibrant palette and robust form. He often celebrated laborers in his massive public commissions:

Sodbuster in Fargo, N.D., *Steelworker* in Niagara, N.Y., and *Fire Fighters* in Cleveland. He treated immigrants with empathy in works such as *Border Crossing* at the Otis Art Institute in Los Angeles and *Southwest Pieta* in Albuquerque. (President Clinton declared the *Pieta* a national treasure in 1999.)

"Luis was personally as powerful and impressive a creative force as the people he drew and sculpted," said Peter C. Marzio, director of the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston. "He made me want to be a part of the world he depicted."

Vaquero, the 17-foot Mexican cowboy in Houston's Moody Park, made news in 1993 — more than a decade after its installation — when some residents of the largely Hispanic neighborhood said the gun-waving cowboy sent the "wrong message" about Hispanics.

Jimenez changed their minds when he spoke to a forum of neighborhood associations. "I consider myself to be a member of the Hispanic community in Texas," he said. "It's my heritage. And I see the *Vaquero* as retrieving part of the heritage that we lost. The cowboy is not a Hollywood invention. The vaquero is a historical figure."

Berman, who knew Jimenez for more than 30 years, summarized the artist's commitment to his ideals:

"El Paso is the Ellis Island of the South, and Luis was the native son who never failed to make the right choice."

Early inspirations

Born in El Paso in 1940 to Mexican immigrants, Jimenez learned his craft in his father's sign shop and was groomed to take over the business.

Childhood visits to his grandparents in Mexico City introduced him to the heroic murals by 20th-century masters, the image and scale of which, Jimenez said, impressed him profoundly.

At the University of Texas-Austin he earned bachelor's degrees in art and architecture. He moved to New York in the mid-1960s, supporting himself by working for a nonprofit that organized dances in impoverished Latino neighborhoods.

In New York, he began to exhibit his drawings and sculpture at Graham Gallery and with O.K. Harris. In the Southwest, Moody Gallery in Houston and Adair Margo Gallery in El Paso became his representatives.

National recognition

His work was celebrated in many exhibitions, including a 1994 major retrospective at the National Museum of American Art. He also received prestigious grants from the Rockefeller Foundation and the National Endowment for the Arts.

"Luis Jimenez is without parallel in American art," said MFAH curator Alison de Lima Greene. "He held up a mirror to our times and found a means to speak to the joys and sorrows of life ..."

"He helped put Chicano culture on the map of America, and led many young artists forward through years of teaching and mentorship.

"I never knew a kinder nor more generous artist, and I will miss him profoundly."

In addition to his brother, Jimenez is survived by four children and a sister, Irene Branson, of El Paso. Funeral arrangements are pending.