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Luis Jimenez

June 16 2006

Sculptor; Born July 30, 1940; Died June 13, 2006

Luis Jimenez, a successful but often controversial sculptor, has died after being struck by a falling part of one of his works.

Authorities described the incident as an industrial accident. A segment of a sculpture came loose while it was being moved with a hoist at Jimenez's New Mexico studio on Tuesday.

It struck the artist, pinning him against a steel support. The 65-year-old sculptor was taken to a hospital, where he was later pronounced dead.

"Luis Jimenez's loss to the United States, to New Mexico, to the Chicano community, is great," his friend David Hall told Albuquerque TV station KRQE.

"He was an icon, he was a very famous and well-respected artist. We will dearly miss him."

Jimenez, a native of El Paso, Texas, was known for his large and colourful fibreglass sculptures that depicted fiesta dancers, a mourning Aztec warrior, steelworkers and illegal immigrants. His work often started arguments and spurred emotions. "It is not my job to censor myself," Jimenez once said. "An artist's job is to constantly test the boundaries." Jimenez's Vaquero and Plaza de Los Lagartos sculptures became civic landmarks in El Paso, where he grew up learning to paint and fashion large works out of metal in his father's sign shop.

"I think Luis shared this border region with the world. Those images will continue to live on," El Paso art gallery owner Adair Margo said. "You look at the images he left us, and you realise he was a voice that mattered, that gave form to this region and communicated it with people."

Jimenez studied fine arts at the University of Texas in Austin and spent time working in New York. In 1969, he created Man on Fire, a sculpture of a man in flames that drew its inspiration both from Buddhist monks in South Vietnam who burned themselves and the Mexican story of Cuauhtemoc, set on fire by Spanish conquerors. The sculpture was displayed at the Smithsonian Museum.

Jimenez won numerous awards for his work. More recently, he completed a mud casting of firefighters and three fibreglass flames as part of a memorial for Cleveland. He was also working on a piece that was destined for Denver International Airport.

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