

OBITUARIES

Luis Jimenez Jr., 65; Artist Whose Sculptures Are on Public Display Nationwide

By Jocelyn Y. Stewart, Times Staff Writer
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The art of Luis Jimenez Jr. possesses a presence.

Displayed in parks, museums and other public spaces around the nation, his massive fiberglass sculptures add beauty, provoke discussion and sometimes spark controversy. His art has been described as dominant, raw and passionate.

Such work — and the emotion he poured into it — earned Jimenez international recognition, including exhibitions at the Smithsonian American Art Museum.

"He was a man who couldn't quit working and it was the work that eventually took his life," said his widow, Susan Brockman.

On Tuesday, Jimenez and two employees were working in his Hondo, N.M., studio moving part of a sculpture of a mustang designed for Denver International Airport. They were moving "the statuary with a hoist when the artpiece got loose," said officials with the Lincoln County Sheriff's Department. The piece fell on Jimenez and pinned him to a steel support. The 65-year-old artist suffered severe trauma to his leg and was pronounced dead at Lincoln County Medical Center.

Stuart Ashman, secretary of the New Mexico Department of Cultural Affairs, called Jimenez "the most important Chicano artist in the United States. His talents as an innovator, great draftsman and social commentator, particularly on social issues of the Mexican American Chicano community, made great contributions to contemporary art in America."

Adolfo Nodal, the former head of the Los Angeles Cultural Affairs Department, said Jimenez found success with his Mexican and Mexican American themed art at a time when few others did.

"He was really a major American artist who did work that was recognized by institutions and curators around the country before everybody got interested in Latino art," said Nodal, who arranged an installation of a Jimenez sculpture in Los Angeles in 1989. "He was a precursor to that movement."

Jimenez prided himself on creating art that was accessible in its location and theme by depicting scenes from the life of the common man.

"He wanted his pieces to be where people enjoyed them and loved them," said gallery owner and longtime friend Adair Margo of El Paso. "He also did lithographs to make work more affordable to more people. That was very important to him."

Experiences from both sides of the border shaped the themes of his art.

Jimenez was born July 30, 1940, in El Paso. His father, Luis Jimenez, was an undocumented immigrant; his mother, Alicia Franco, was born in the U.S. As a child, Jimenez was struck in the eye with a BB gun pellet, which eventually cost him the vision in that eye.

Growing up, Jimenez worked with his father in a custom sign shop in El Paso, where he learned to fashion large works from metal.

While a student at the University of Texas at Austin, Jimenez studied architecture, then changed his major to art.

"My father did not speak to me for several years," Jimenez told the Dallas Morning News in 1997.

After graduating, Jimenez eventually moved to New York, where in 1969 he had his first exhibition, and success followed. In 1972 he moved back to El Paso.

"I realized I was reaching what I thought was a very limited audience — the gallery and the museum world," he told Texas Monthly in 1998.

In the arena of public art, Jimenez found success as well, working in fiberglass, a distinctive characteristic of his work.

"I decided that if my images were going to be taken from popular culture, I wanted a material that didn't carry the cultural baggage of marble or bronze," Jimenez told Texas Monthly in 1998.

"Border Crossing" is a 10 1/2 -foot-tall fiberglass sculpture of an immigrant carrying a woman holding a baby on his back. In 1989, the piece was installed on the island in MacArthur Park.

Nodal, who at the time was working with an art institute that arranged the installation, said Jimenez "really understood the issues and was able to think about them and ... really address what people are feeling."

Jimenez described the work as archetypal and personal, given his father's experience as an undocumented immigrant.

"Vaquero," a sculpture depicting a Mexican cowboy on horseback waving a pistol, was installed in Houston's Moody Park in 1981. It was opposed by some in the Latino community concerned with violence.

Other pieces, such as the seemingly benign "Fiesta Jarabe," have sparked discussion as well. The piece, which depicts a man and woman dancing the *jarabe*, or Mexican hat dance, was criticized by feminists, who said the woman was depicted too wantonly, and some Latinos who said the man was too dark and paunchy.

Controversy did not bother Jimenez.

"The purpose of public art is to create a dialogue," Jimenez said.

In addition to his wife, Jimenez is survived by his children Elisa Jimenez of New York; and Luis Adan Jimenez, Juan Orion Jimenez and Sarah Alicia Xochil Jimenez, all of Hondo; a brother, David Jimenez of Hondo and a sister, Irene Branson of El Paso.