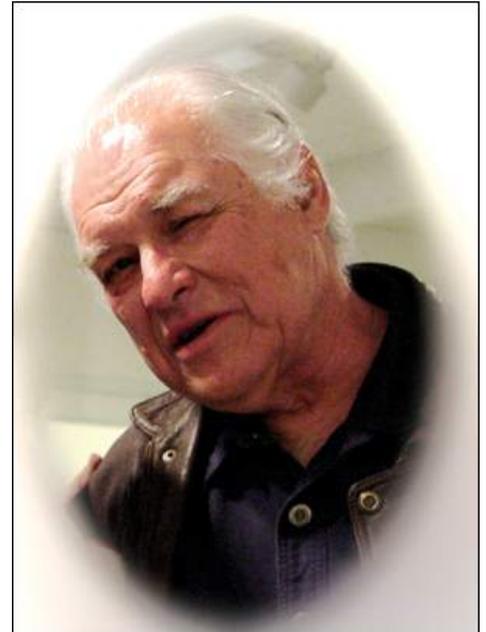


## THE ARTIST AS A COMMON MAN

PAMELA CROMWELL pcromwell@ruidosonews.com  
Jun 16, 2006, 02:48 am

If a great work of art reflects the spirit of the artist, it might be said that Luis Jimenez was as powerful, passionate and bold as any of his monumental sculptures that so mainstreamed Chicano culture.

In a career that spanned 30 years, Jimenez's original vision and candor took an authentic Southwest spirit into the world. Based in Hondo, the artist was a beloved member of the community, a treasure of New Mexico and a man who never lost touch with his roots. He was known for monumental sculptures that he insisted be placed where everyone, not just the privileged, could see them. He was an advocate of the common man, described by one friend as "the most human person" he'd ever met.



In 1992, the City of Denver commissioned Jimenez to create a 35-foot rearing horse to be placed at the Denver International Airport in 1996. Ten years past deadline, Jimenez was still struggling with the "Mustang," a wild and unwieldy sculpture that had become his albatross. Matters were complicated by health problems, which included losing the eye that had been damaged by a childhood accident with a BB gun. In recent months, however, Jimenez felt optimistic, friends reported. The work was constructed in several pieces at his Hondo studio, and the final pieces were nearly complete. It was coming together at last. But on Tuesday, the sculpture he'd poured so much of his life into crushed him to death.

### The Mustang

Luis Jimenez on Tuesday had been working on the "Mustang" up at the apple barn, his fiberglass studio in Hondo.

According to a press release from the Lincoln County Sheriff's Office, Hondo EMS responded at 11:50 a.m. to the Jimenez Studios at the intersection of Chavez Canyon Road and U.S. 70 for an apparent industrial accident.

According to Sheriff Rick Virden, detectives investigating the incident learned that Jimenez and two of his employees were moving a large piece of statuary with a hoist when the piece "got loose," striking Jimenez and pinning him to a steel support.

Monroy Montes, former Lincoln County Commissioner and a friend of Jimenez's, spent time with the family and some friends at the studio Wednesday. He told the *Ruidoso News* that Jimenez was straddling a beam as he and his employees were moving the hindquarters of the massive horse sculpture, using a hoist on top and a come-along at the bottom.

As they moved it one direction, it swung loose and crushed Jimenez's leg against the beam he was straddling. Medical investigator Danny Sisson said it's likely that the femoral artery was ripped open, which would cause rapid bleeding.



"They called 911," Montes said, "and they waited about five minutes, but his young daughter was there, and everyone felt so helpless, so they loaded him in a car thinking to meet the ambulance, about which time the ambulance arrived. He'd sustained a massive amount of bleeding by then."

The sheriff's office reported that Jimenez suffered severe trauma to the leg and was transported to the emergency room at Lincoln County Medical Center where he was pronounced dead from his injuries. The incident remains under investigation by sheriff's detectives and the Office of the Medical Investigator.

Jimenez is survived by his wife, Susan Jimenez, and their three children -- Adan, Orion and Xochil -- as well as his eldest child, Elisa Jimenez, and granddaughter Calliope.

"Mustang" is a huge fiberglass horse, painted in orange and blue, rearing defiantly, destined for the Denver International Airport.

A spokesperson for the Denver Office of Cultural Affairs, Pauline Herrera, said the city is still hopeful that the sculpture can be finished and delivered as Jimenez intended. He was also completing a firefighter sculpture for the City of Cleveland and a sculpture of Cesar Chavez for the City of Houston.

Jimenez's work has been displayed at the Smithsonian and the Museum of Modern Art as well as at the National Museum of American Art in Washington, D.C., where his sculpture "Vaquero" stood outside greeting visitors from across the country for many years.

Recent shows include "Luis Jimenez: Working Class Heroes: Images from a Popular Culture," which traveled on a three-year national tour after opening at The Dallas Museum of Art and "Luis Jimenez: Man on Fire," a retrospective with 331 works, which opened at The Albuquerque Museum in 1995 and traveled to The National Museum of American Art in Washington.

His work was also exhibited at the Museo de Arte Moderna in Mexico City's Chapultepec Park where Jimenez spent many hours as a young boy.

"He was a world-renowned artist, very eccentric," Montes said. "Now he belongs to history. Everything he did now has historical significance. He's bigger than us now."

## The Artist

Coming of age at the height of the Chicano Movement, Luis Jimenez's community activism was galvanized in New York City during the 1960s. The Texas-born artist worked as a studio assistant to sculptor Seymour Lipton, but getting attention for his own work wasn't easy.

Jimenez went so far as to mount his work in a gallery while the art dealer was busy in a back room. The put-upon gallery owner declined Jimenez's exhibit but referred him to the Graham Gallery, which eventually gave him a show. Soon after, the Whitney Museum of American Art also exhibited some of his work.

"I had to go the route I did to get my ideas fed into the art world," Jimenez said in a 1999 interview with Roswell's *FYI* magazine. "But I found I didn't like the limited audience that museums and galleries attracted. I wanted my work to be accessible and I wanted to be an integral part of society -- that's when I turned my attention to public art."

Today there are not many major U.S. cities that don't have a Luis Jimenez sculpture fronting some public building or holding a place of honor at a park or university.

Jimenez developed his public art prototypes during his years in the Roswell Artist-In-Residence (RAIR), which he entered in 1972. "Progress I" and "Progress II," which resulted from that residency, are exhibited at the Anderson Museum of Contemporary Art in Roswell (open 10 a.m. - 4 p.m., free admission).

Roswell Artist-In-Residence Program Director Stephen Fleming knew Jimenez as a fellow RAIR alum and an artist in the community who regularly attended art openings and dinners. He was also a friend.

"Luis was just a great guy," Fleming said. "We're going to miss him so much, not just because he was famous but just because he was a person we were always happy to see. It will leave a big hole in our lives to not be seeing him again."

Fleming said the value of Jimenez's work is huge. He had an original vision of his own culture and heritage. In the same way that he used a common industrial material -- fiberglass -- as a medium for high art, Jimenez elevated commercial and popular Chicano images to significant works of art. He was not only a pioneer in fiberglass sculpture, he created a unique fusion of Chicano and Anglo-American Pop art that advanced his humanistic concerns.

"He was a modernist without being so modern that regular people couldn't figure out what he was up to," Fleming said. "He managed to be wildly controversial just about everywhere he went, even with pieces that just by looking at the surface made you kind of wonder why people got worked up over it."

His sculptures depicted fiesta dancers, a mourning Aztec warrior, steelworkers and illegal immigrants crossing the border. For many, the sheer size of Jimenez's sculptures, the glossy bold colors (reminiscent of Chicano low-riders) and the "not-pretty" figures of people and animals, challenged sensibilities.

"His work challenged people and celebrated them at the same time," Fleming said. "They weren't mawkish works that said, 'Aren't we great.' They were works that questioned the nature of the current situation and celebrated the culture at the same time."

A prime example is "South-west Pieta," a monumental sculpture at Longfellow Park in Albuquerque, which was designated a national treasure. With this work, Jimenez recasts Michelangelo's famous sculpture depicting the body of Jesus in the arms of his mother Mary after the Crucifixion. The "Southwest Pieta" depicts an Aztec warrior cradling the body of his princess who took her life when she received word that her beloved had been killed in battle. The sculpture personifies the Mexican legend "Los Novios," the story of the creation of the volcanoes Popo-catepetl and Ixtaccihuatl, revered as gods by the Aztecs.

"Pieta caused problems even among the Hispanic community for a variety of reasons, one being that the figures weren't pretty enough," Fleming said. "They were too ordinary."

Fleming said Jimenez sensationalized his subjects, but he never sentimentalized them. Below the surface, his work made strong statements on social conditions, life on cultural borders and common people he described as working class heroes.

"People have often said to me that my work raises issues," Jimenez told *FYI*. "Maybe it does, but that's part of what artists, writers and musicians do. They expand the boundaries and raise the level of understanding among people. Art has an obligation to take us to a different place."

Despite the challenges present in his work, Jimenez's art also has a life-affirming quality.

"He had a quirky eccentricity that made his work distinctive," Fleming said. "It had a signature characteristic that made you love it and hate it at the same time."

Jimenez's work can be found in numerous public and private collections including The Metropolitan Museum of Art, The Hirshhorn Museum, The Art Institute of Chicago, the Rockefeller Foundation, the Roswell Museum and Art Center; and the Anderson Museum of Contemporary Art in Roswell.

He is the recipient of many awards and grants including: 1998 Texas Artist of the Year Award; 1998 "Distinguished Alumni" from the University of Texas in Austin; 1993 Governor's Award, New Mexico; 1990 La Napoule Art Foundation Residency Fellowship; 1989 Skowhegan Sculpture Award; National Endowment for the Arts 1979 and 1988 fellowship grants; 1977 Hassam Fund Purchase Award; and four NEA Art in Public Places commissions.

In his imagery and his personality, Jimenez identified with the common man, but "there was nothing common about Luis," Fleming said.

# The man

Luis Jimenez was born in El Paso, Texas, on July 30, 1940. His father was a Mexican immigrant, and the 1989 sculpture "Border Crossing" is Jimenez's tribute to his grandparents, who crossed the Rio Grande in 1924. Growing up, Jimenez worked with his father in a custom sign shop in El Paso, where he learned to fashion large works from metal.

"His dad made big, over-the-top neon hotel signs with giant vaqueros and all the clichés of the Southwest in the '50s built into them," AIR Director Fleming said.

"Luis went on to create monumental, epic works that used the most common imagery from calendars and Mexican commercial art."

In addition to his father's neon sign company, Jimenez was influenced by the Mexican muralists, including Diego Rivera. In 1960 he enrolled at the University of Texas at Austin, originally majoring in architecture but switching to fine art.

After introducing himself to New York, then refining his work at RAIR program, Jimenez made the Hondo Valley his home. The location kept him close to the blue-collar Hispanic community he loved, and it provided the solitude he needed for his work.

Montes describes Jimenez as a man of "liberal tendencies who stood up for other human beings."

"I just spoke to him the day of graduation," Montes said. "Our sons graduated together, they're friends. I'm bothered by very few things, but this one really did bother me. It's very tragic. He brought things to the Valley. I hope people remember him and respect him."

Montes said the people of the Valley liked Jimenez and were honored to have him in the area. He served on the Hondo school board and was at the forefront of the Valley's fight over the widening of U.S. 70.

"He represented the best of Chicano culture," Montes said. "He was humble. You never even knew he was around. He just did his work."

Unlike so many artists who went to the Southwest and became famous for Southwest-ern art, Jimenez was an artist raised in the Southwest who took his art to the world.

Sculptor Dave McGary, who also has a Ruidoso base and is familiar with the challenges of monumental-size sculpture, said, "I had such great admiration for him. You can tell his work from across the room or anywhere. He wrote his own music and danced to his own music.

"He was a true artist's artist, original in his approach."