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Jesse Treviño's evolution shown at Museo Alameda

By [Elda Silva](#)- Express-News

In a sense, Jesse Treviño became a Chicano artist in Vietnam.

Hit by the blast of a booby trap and a sniper's bullet, the 19-year-old Treviño lay bleeding in a rice paddy, his body peppered with shrapnel. A medic injected him with morphine, he recalls, and as the drug began to kick in, he reflected on his life.

"I was thinking about my mother, my brothers, the barrio where I grew up and all those images — 'I want to paint them'," says Treviño, 62. "That's what I was thinking: 'If there's any way I can come out of this alive, I'm going to paint those places and those people.' "

He did, of course, survive, but ultimately Treviño lost his right arm to his injuries. He was right-handed, and he had to work through physical pain and depression to train himself to paint with his left. More than 40 years later, Treviño can look back on a battlefield promise to himself fulfilled.

The artist, best-known for his photorealist paintings of the West Side and murals such as the nine-story "Spirit of Healing" downtown, is having his first retrospective. "Jesse Treviño: Mi Vida" opens Thursday at the Museo Alameda.

"A retrospective is something that when you work hard, there's something there at the end for you that makes it worthwhile," Treviño says.

Curated by Ruben C. Cordova, the exhibit takes viewers through what Treviño calls his "journey of art," from a painting he made as a Christmas gift for a teacher in 1957 to his 2008 homage to Earl Abel's diner. The evolution of Treviño's content and style become apparent along the way.

The centerpiece of the exhibit is "Mi Vida," a mural Treviño painted on his bedroom wall in the early 1970s. Never exhibited publicly before, it is the first painting he attempted after his right arm was amputated.

Not only is the retrospective the first for Treviño, it is also the first for the Museo Alameda, which celebrated its second anniversary in April. In a way, it is fitting that the artist and Smithsonian affiliate share the milestone, given that Treviño was instrumental in early efforts to create the Latino arts and culture museum. It's also fitting given the artist's stature in the community.

"I'd say he's the best-known artist in San Antonio," says Cordova, an art historian whose book "Con Safo: The Chicano Art Group and the Politics of South Texas" was recently published by UCLA Chicano Studies

Research Center Press. "Is there anybody else that you would even say is nearly as well known as he is?"

A convincing argument can be made on the basis of Treviño's mural work alone. Across Milam Park from the Museo Alameda, "Spirit of Healing" towers high above the trees on the façade of the Christus Santa Rosa Children's Hospital. Since it was completed in 1997, the ceramic tile mural of a guardian angel comforting a child has become one of the city's best known landmarks. On the West Side, a few blocks from where Treviño lives, his "Our Lady of Guadalupe Veladora" sculptural mosaic adorns the Guadalupe Theater.

"My whole career as an artist is in terms of what kind of things I can do here in San Antonio to make it a much more beautiful place," Treviño says.

Even though Treviño's work has been exhibited at the Smithsonian Institution's National Museum of American Art and included in catalogs for high-profile traveling exhibits such as collector Cheech Marin's "Chicano Visions: American Painters on the Verge," the artist remains relatively unknown outside of his hometown, Cordova says.

"I hope we'll have a catalog or at least a book at some point, because I think that's what's really going to be necessary for Jesse to enter into art history," he says. "I think one of the problems is that even when his work has appeared in catalogs . . . (it hasn't been) discussed at all; that there isn't really an art historical literature, but that is the norm for Chicano artists."

Treviño's artistic legacy has also been, at times, overshadowed by his dramatic life story, Cordova says. With this retrospective, he's hoping to change that.

When Treviño was a student at Fox Tech High School, he won a scholarship to the Art Students League in New York. There, he studied with William F. Draper, a portrait painter and former combat artist. From Draper, Treviño learned to paint in broad, loose strokes, using patches of color to compose instead of outlines, Cordova says.

To earn money while going to school, Treviño got a job at a Greenwich Village portrait shop, earning up to \$200 a night. Among the works from Treviño's New York period, the exhibit includes a portrait of Ringo Starr he made to attract customers. There's a look of concentration in Starr's eyes, and his lips are slightly parted as if caught mid-sentence. The musician's portrait is one of the examples of pop culture and Americana in the show.

"I wanted to not simply look at (Treviño's work) through a Chicano lens, taking everything else out," Cordova says. "He's part of the American experience. The Chicano identity didn't come up until subsequently."

Treviño was happy in New York. But he had only been there a year when he was drafted into the army.

"I just had enough time to go from New York to San Antonio to see my mom, and then I went into training for Vietnam," he says.

Treviño arrived in Vietnam in December 1966. About two months later, he was wounded.

"When I got out, I didn't get out the same," he says. "What happened to me, I felt had ruined — completely taken — my career as an artist."

While Treviño was recuperating, fellow veteran Armando Albarran persuaded him to try drawing and painting with his left hand. The artist resisted at first but ultimately relented. A portrait of Albarran is

included in the exhibit.

In spite of some initial success, Treviño didn't believe he could become a professional artist. He enrolled at San Antonio College to become a teacher. One of his instructors was artist Mel Casas, known for his "Humanscape" paintings such as "Brownies of the Southwest."

While Draper is the teacher that is usually referenced in regard to Treviño, "he took nothing from the way of painting" he learned in New York when he came back to San Antonio," Cordova says. "He was painting in a very painterly style, kind of like John Singer Sargent, so it's the antithesis of what he's known for. I think it was an interesting experience, but I think it's really Mel Casas that made him an artist."

Casas, however, doesn't necessarily see it that way.

"Oh, I don't know about that," says the artist, 79. "I was one of the teachers. That's about it. One thing I'll say though, I think (the retrospective) is an honor that he should have had a long time ago. He's a very talented artist."

Treviño made the pop surrealist painting "Zapata" in 1969 for one of Casas' class assignments. The piece, painted with spray paint, combines images of the revolutionary leader, a Spiro Agnew watch and a food stamp coupon.

"It looks like a painting that could be done today," Cordova says.

Cordova also sees Casas' influence in "Mi Vida." Painted on a black background, like Casas' "Humanscapes," it is pop surrealist meditation on Treviño's life. At the center of the 8-by-14-foot mural is a Purple Heart dangling from a prosthetic hand. Other images surface from the inky depths of the painting: a spectral self-portrait of the artist in combat gear; the face of a young woman Treviño knew in high school; the Ford Mustang he purchased with his disability pay; a capsule of the painkiller Darvocet. Treviño painted it over the course of a year.

"That was one of my first pieces — which wasn't bad — I did with my left hand," he says. "I remember that as almost the beginning of my whole career."

"I think what's most amazing to me is how strong his works were immediately after losing his arm," Cordova says. "The paintings he did in the very late '60s and early '70s, they're pretty astonishing. I'm maybe most amazed by those because I would just assume that he'd need a long time to retrain. But it's just like he reloaded and came right out and painted better than ever."

With "Los Camaradas del Barrio," a portrait of a group of friends leaning against a '57 Chevy, Treviño began moving toward his signature photorealist style, Cordova says. These are the paintings that Treviño is known for, works such as "Guadalupe y Calaveras," "Mis Hermanos," and "Progreso" that show the people and places of the West Side.

"There isn't a bad painting he did in the '70s," Cordova says.

By the early '80s, however, Treviño had begun to move away from that type of hyper-realism. Paintings such as "Rosita," his portrait of legendary singer Rosita Fernandez from 2006, show looser, more painterly touches. In the painting, Fernandez stands on the River Walk at night. The strings of Christmas lights that hang from the trees behind her are haloed by soft blurs of color. Cordova points out the singer's jewelry and the details of her dress are rendered in thick daubs of paint.

Though Treviño continues to paint on canvas, his focus in recent years has been on public art.

"The public pieces, you don't have to go inside a building to see (them)," he says. "They're part of the landscape."

Currently, he is working on a Hispanic Veterans Memorial he designed with Gabriel Quintero Velasquez. Plans are to install the 130-foot steel sculpture on an island in the middle of Lake Elmendorf on the West Side. Treviño imagines it as a place where families will gather on holidays such as Veterans Day and the Mexican celebration of Día de los Muertos to honor family members.

"I'm always trying in some way to do things that bring honor to the veteran, because I'm a veteran," he says.


Treviño doesn't often talk about his experience in Vietnam, though he says it's impossible to separate what happened to him in the war and his art.

"Sometimes I look back and I think, 'Wow! How did I get that done?' Because I've done so much more now — this way — then when I had my right hand," he says. "And it all started with those paintings that I had run across my mind."

"Jesse Treviño: Mi Vida" continues through Feb. 28 at Museo Alameda, 101 S. Santa Rosa Ave. (210) 229-4300 or www.thealameda.org.

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