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VOLUPTUOUS CONNECTIONS

The Public Art of Luis Jiménez

A CONVERSATION
WITH DREXEL TURNER
AND BRUCE C. WEBB

The voluptuous sculptures, drawings, and prints of Luis Jiménez (born El Paso, Texas, 1940) are represented in the collections of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the Museum of Modern Art, the Art Institute of Chicago, the National Collection of Fine Arts, the National Museum of American Art, and the Hirshhorn Museum among others. One of his first commissions for a public sculpture was the "Vaquero" for Moody Park in Houston (1977).

Jiménez joined the faculty of the University of Houston as professor of fine art in 1994 and now divides his time between Houston and his studio and home in a converted six-room WPA elementary school in Hondo, New Mexico. His work was the subject of a retrospective exhibition and catalogue, "Luis Jiménez, Man on Fire" (Albuquerque Museum, 1994); the Moody Gallery of Houston exhibited a selection of his recent work in spring 1996. The following is excerpted from a conversation with Drexel Turner and Bruce Webb in February 1996.

Q: When you first became involved in art, was it through your father's work, or was it through school?

A: I've been making objects, what I thought was art, since I was a kid. I'm a good example of the son living out the father's dream. My father was a frustrated artist; he always wanted to do art himself but somehow felt that it wasn't a reasonable thing to pursue, based on his own experiences. I received a lot of encouragement early on to make artworks, and yet, when it was time to go to school, he was strongly opposed to my studying art. His feeling was that I should study something I could make a living with. There were some real contradictions.

I was raised in a neon-sign shop and was trained to be a sign man. And yet he felt that it was good to get an education. The question became, What would I study to be a sign man to take over the business? I studied architecture, but I had to make a decision about my focus. It was then that I began to turn my attention to sculpture. That seemed to be a way that I could work at everything I liked. I liked working in the trades with my hands — the physical aspect of it. I also was able to incorporate color and draw. So at that point, after I had gone to architecture school for about four years, I made a clear decision to focus instead on making sculpture.

Q: Were you exposed to art in elementary school?

A: When I went to first grade, I didn't

know how to speak English; both my parents' families were from the other side of the border. But the teachers took me to the second grade so I could show other students how to make a wolf out of clay. So evidently I was already fairly competent at making things, and other people seemed to reinforce it. That was gratifying.

Q: Did you get reinforcement from both of your parents?

A: No. I certainly had much more positive reinforcement from my moth-

er. There was never any real reinforcement from my father. He saw me as competition. It was a complex problem for him.

Q: What sort of art was available in El Paso for you growing up?

A: The Tom Lea mural on the Federal Building was the closest I came to seeing any art in El Paso firsthand. I was fortunate that my father had some art books around, and I remember spending a lot of time reading them. I remember he had a set of Muybridge's books of photographic motion studies.

My early exposure to art really wasn't in El Paso; it was down in Mexico. We had family in Mexico City, and we would go down every year. The year I turned six, we spent about three or four months there. I saw all the murals. We went to all the museums, including the archaeology museum. I saw more stuff firsthand in Mexico than I ever did in El Paso.

Q: What impressed you the most?

A: At that age? Probably the dinosaur bones.

Q: When you were growing up, was Tom Lea still a working artist?

A: He still is, though he's quite old now.

Q: Do you know him?

A: No, no. When I was about seven or eight years old, we moved from where I'd grown up, in the southern part of El Paso, to a house my parents bought in the central part that was across the street from Tom Lea's stepmother's house. We knew her and his stepsister, but I never knew him. I knew of him, of course, and I knew of the murals and couldn't help but be affected by them. But he was never a role model for me in the sense that some of the Mexican muralists were.

Q: Considering what El Paso was like then, you seem to have ambivalent feelings and some less-than-pleasant memories. What was it like growing up there?

A: You summed it up! In some ways you can only feel sorry for a city like El Paso. It had a rich Mexican heritage, as did San Antonio. Yet the city went to great lengths to cover that heritage up, instead of plugging into it. It had to do with racism — they didn't want to acknowledge that heritage. So in a sense we were left to grow up in a kind of vacuum, not acknowledging the Mexican side of our heritage. There were some real contradictions that I think El Paso still has trouble dealing with.

Q: Were there any particular mentors or teachers, other than your father, during this time?

A: There certainly were important mentors. My first-grade teacher came at a very important time for me, and I

have fond memories of her. She reinforced my ability to learn but also encouraged me artistically. I won a citywide first-grade art contest with a big rabbit or something like that. Throughout school there were teachers that were supportive. In junior high, I had an art teacher who was very supportive, but after that I was not allowed to take art. I had to take a more practical elective.

Q: And that was?

A: Mechanical drawing, of course. But I had a really outstanding teacher in junior high.

Q: Can you remember her name?

A: Her name was Ms. Sandrock. She was a divorcee, and in retrospect I think she probably had problems where she was teaching. She was seen as being maybe a little too progressive to be teaching in junior high; there were all these rumors. They finally hired somebody else, but I wasn't taking art anymore.

Going back to the early experiences, I also have to say that I had influences from my mother's side, not just from my father. My uncle, my mother's brother, also worked in the shop. It was a small shop, but the entire crew was like a big family; I started working there when I was six. At a certain point, because my father was always out anyway, he left me in the care of my uncle, a highly skilled metalworker. He made letters out of sheet metal for buildings like banks. I worked with him. That aspect of my education was really about craft. It was not making art necessarily, but it certainly was important.

Q: What does a six-year-old do in a shop that makes signs — or an eight- or ten-year-old?

A: Well, I helped my uncle. So I was raised with the traditional apprentice program, which is not very common in this country but was very common in Mexico. Every journeyman has a helper, and that helper starts out by sweeping the floors. It's like in Japan, you start sweeping the floor, then, eventually, you're like a gofer — you go bring things, you mark things. After a while, if the apprentice has been at it long enough, the journeyman is supervising the apprentice, and the apprentice is doing most of the work. I think by the time I was 16, I could do everything in the shop. I could spray, I could weld, I could bend sheet metal, I could bend the neon.

Q: Can you point out signs, say in El Paso, that are yours?

A: No, most of them have gone. I have one that I picked up out of the sign junkyard and kept — I'd worked on it when I was 16. It's a rooster. But what happens to buildings happens even more so with signs. Everybody wants

the new sign out there, and so most of the old signs are scrapped, even the ones that were really great. Some were made out of porcelain enamel and could've lasted forever, especially in that climate. They didn't wear out; they went out of fashion.

Q: When you go to the city, do you still pay particular attention to the signs?

A: No, I'm not totally conscious. I had a difficult problem with El Paso. I have very fond memories of the shop and the workers, but my feelings about my own father and about the sign business are conflicted. I was never in a position of collaborator in the business or in the design. That was always his thing.

Q: You went to architecture school?

A: Yes. I finished four years of a five-year program at the University of Texas at Austin.

Q: What led you to that? Was it the mechanical drawing teacher?

A: No, that was the training my father felt would be good for me. If I was going into the sign business, or if I was going to use my art ability, he felt it should be in something practical. I got out of high school and had to make some career choices, so he lined me up to talk to a commercial artist and some of his friends that were architects with the idea that "these are choices I'll support." Since I was a very obedient son, I talked to his friends and decided I didn't want to make commercial art. So the logical choice was architecture school. As I progressed I took mostly art courses as my electives. I finally decided not to continue with architecture. I made art objects even while I was in architecture school and even won a prize in an art contest at the university with a limestone carving.

Q: Did the design projects you did in architecture look like the work of someone interested in art? Were they different from those of the other students?

A: It was hard to be different because there was a lot of pressure to conform. There were a few instructors who were different. Mr. Montenegro, who taught design, was an artist who had gone to the Art Students League. He approached beginning design as if it were a three-dimensional art course. I was totally energized by that class — I felt as though I were doing art projects. But Montenegro was really an exception; most teachers thought like engineers.

Q: Were they doing orthodox modernism at that time?

A: Very. Frank Lloyd Wright was not okay — too far out.

Q: Who were the architects you were drawn to while you were a student?

A: Louis Kahn, Paul Rudolph. And I

liked Wright's work. I think he had a real special feeling for space. I was drawn to people like him and this crazy guy who lives out in the desert.

Q: Soleri?

A: Soleri. I even talked to some of his assistants. I was so frustrated, sometimes I would write these long letters to people like Soleri and Henry Moore.

Q: Did you send them?

A: No, I never did. Eventually I went to New York and worked as an assistant to a metal sculptor, Seymour Lipton. I called him and said, "I'd like to work with you." I guess everybody finds a role model, but, without seeming too cocky, I'm not sure I ever had one. I just wanted to do what I wanted to do.

Q: While you were working for Lipton, did you make friends with him or others in the art community?

A: Lipton, never. I went in as an apprentice; he never socialized with me; he was not particularly generous that way. He was very generous in terms of talking about his work and asking my opinions. He was not a very social person; I didn't get into the art community though him.

Q: Do you think it was time well spent?

A: It was important for me to see how an artist operated. His support system was very small — his wife and his assistants. Harry Rand, now curator at the National Museum of American Art, also worked as Lipton's assistant. He didn't work there at the same time, but I met him later and our experiences formed an interesting bond.

Q: At some point after New York you were a Rome Prize Fellow.

A: Not exactly. It was a mid-career grant, through the National Endowment for the Arts, for only three months. The grant included some travel money.

Q: Was that some kind of epiphany for you?

A: It really was. Before going to Europe, I had a very narrow focus, wanting to work only with American images. Going to Rome that very first time made me realize how universal so much of that imagery is.

Q: I saw your drawing of the elephant and obelisk.

A: Right, Bernini's elephant in S. Maria sopra Minerva.

Q: Were there other things that particularly attracted you while you were there?

A: When I went to school, Baroque was thought of as sort of the decadent period that followed the Renaissance. And when I went to Rome, where I was in a position to evaluate on my own, I

went crazy. I mean, my God, this guy Bernini was incredible. I saw every Bernini in Rome, which is not easy to do. I went into churches that were closed, even if I had to bribe people.

I had been in Rome three months, walking past the Pantheon all the time, which I never bothered to go into because in art history they said it was stripped. One day I finally decided to walk inside. And staring at the center of that space, it was just . . . my god. That space is just incredible. So yes, it was really an eye-opener. I haven't gone back to Rome, but I had a similar opportunity to go to France, and then from there to Spain and more of Italy. I'd like to see a lot more, but I have trouble making the time.

Q: Your first big splash was the series of sculptures with automobile-related imagery and things of that nature. Was that when you really found your voice — if that's a fair question?

A: I first, as you say, found my voice, with those series of shows in the late sixties in New York. The response within the art community was immediately very positive. A recent show in New York in November focused on the work I did in the sixties and seventies. After my first show, I got into two Whitney shows, which gave my work a lot of visibility. In fact, I got a lot of attention early on that I probably don't get now with the public art. The New York museum shows gave the work a kind of stamp of approval and visibility that public works don't necessarily get.

I left New York in the early seventies and came out west to develop a way of looking at public art. At that time there were not a lot of great examples of contemporary public artwork. The one that everybody can bring to mind is Alexander Calder's piece, *Flamingo*, from about 1968 for Grand Rapids, Michigan, but the response, even to that, was not overwhelming. I wanted to develop a new approach coming out of popular culture. The public pieces I do now speak in a kind of public language. That is where I've gotten attention in recent years.

Q: To what extent do you get involved with the siting of your public work — the Denver airport, for instance?

A: The spaces for art at Denver had already been planned out, so it didn't seem that interesting. They weren't where I would have put them — they weren't focal points, so I decided to go to the committee and tell them, "Look, I think what we really need is something going on outside."

I thought it would be nice to have something to identify the site out on the knoll, an important focal point as you're entering or leaving the airport. I said, "You've got a natural site here. What if we call it *Mustang Overlook* for the wild mustangs that use to be out here, and have a mustang sculpture

Mustang Overlook, Denver International Airport, proposal, 1992.



with eyes that light up?" I also wanted to have some historical plaques leading up a trail to the mustang. They liked the idea and went along with it.

Q: Had you thought about a sculpted interior design for the airport before they went along with the mustang?

A: I turned in some very preliminary drawings. I thought, "What could be more American than the corny stuff like cowboys and Indians and stuff like that?" So I thought on one side I would have a buffalo hunt, and on the other side I'd have a stampede with the cowboys. However, what I really wanted to make was a horse.

I used to tell people that my work was totally dictated by the site, but now I realize it's really not. I have a personal agenda — certain images that I want to work with. When I go to work somewhere, I'm sort of dovetailing my personal agenda with the character of the place and the site, and trying to make this all work together.

Q: Do you often feel constrained by the client or the audience for a public piece?

A: It's interesting that you refer to the client relationship with the artist. I've been very fortunate with public commissions, pieces funded with public money, because they were either NEA projects or General Services Administration. There was never any direction given to the artist, whom they trusted as a professional. They gave you the budget, and expected you to take the ball and run with it. What I do is work out drawings and models, then work with the community. I say, "Look, this is what I want to do, and what do you think?" At a certain point they do have to approve the project, but there's nobody there to say, "Gee, you have to make a big blue horse with eyes that light up."

Q: The piece of art that maybe has a little spunk, or has a tendency to engage you, may be much more controversial.

A: That's absolutely true, and the problem that we face as we run into more controversy is that there will be



Vaquero, Moody Park, Houston, 1977.

more generic work. I think that's really a danger.

Q: Your work seems to have a real spirit. But one person's idea of spirited can be provocative to another person, or even lurid. Some people have complained that in *Border Crossing* in San Diego, the skirt was too tight, the man's pants were bulging suggestively, and the color was not realistic. How do you respond to that sort of criticism?

A: I don't think that one work of art is going to do it for everybody. The solution is to have more art out there. When I talk to communities I say, "Look, not everybody's going to like it." Politicians are lucky if they get 51 percent of the vote. My works are not created with the intention of pleasing an audience. I think the worst thing that can happen is for a work to be ignored. Sometimes what initially repels people becomes something they later learn to embrace.

Q: We have this picture of a polar bear that looks like a soap carving. Could you tell us about it?

A: It's part of a sign my father made, and in fact when my dad was young, he

did a lot of soap carving. He won a national soap-carving contest sponsored by Proctor & Gamble with the models he made for that bear. He was supposed to win a scholarship to the Chicago Art Institute, but it was during the Depression, so he didn't get it.

Q: How do you distinguish between art and craft — between the polar bear carving and the polar bear sign?

A: It's in the perception of the viewer and in the perception of the person who makes it. A lot has to do with conditioning by society. For instance, in the 1500s or 1600s, Europeans were taking pre-Columbian works and melting them down. The artists that mentioned seeing them — Dürer was one of them — thought they were art. Everybody else thought they were just curious objects; they didn't see them as art at all.



Alligator pond, San Jacinto Plaza, El Paso, ca. 1910.



Luis Jiménez, Sr., sign for Crystal Cleaners, El Paso, 1985.

What I think distinguishes art is that it is not derivative. Art should be unique in some way. Now, I have seen other polar bears from the mid-1940s. In my father's case, I know the way he worked. He went to the library and found pictures of polar bears, then copied what he thought was the best one. He worked from pictures and didn't try to go beyond what he was looking at. Where he was really creative was, of course, in his use of neon for the northern lights behind the polar bear. Another time he made a washer-woman for a laundry and cleaning sign — she actually moved, scrubbing on a washboard. That was pretty creative and innovative. But is it art?

Q: You talked about your interest in images coming out of popular culture. At what point does that happen?

A: Now that you point out the bear

thing and my interest in popular images, I realize that I have tried to focus on what I thought were clichéd images that were clichéd because they struck a nerve with a lot of people. There is always a reason why people identify with certain images and they become popular. What I try to do is to make you look

at the cliché again. If you see one more bronze cowboy, it doesn't register anymore because you immediately classify it as bronze cowboy. I wanted to do something that not only made you look at the cliché again, but look at it in a new way.

Q: During the sixties and seventies, Andy Warhol's type of pop art came out of popular culture. Would something like that only interest you if it's been there long enough to be banal?

A: I would say pop art is, for lack of a better word, very cool. Of all the pop people, the ones I relate to, in terms of what I do, are Nancy and Ed Kienholz, because content was important for them. For most pop artists "the medium is the message" — the image, devoid of content, is the message. Whereas the content for Kienholz and for me is very important. That's a good distinction. I

will say that it was the pop artists who enabled a whole generation to accept images out of popular culture.

Q: The alligator fountain you did in El Paso — has that had an effect on the way the fountain is used or the way people regard it? Has it been a magnet?

A: When we unveiled that piece, there were a couple of thousand people there — people who had not stepped into that plaza for 20 or 30 years. But art can't do it all. This is not going to totally energize downtown El Paso, where six out of ten stores have folded because they relied on the peso. The alligator piece works really well in that space, even though it's an awkward piece on its own. A fog system is part of the project, so that the alligators sit in this mist or fog. In addition to doing something really nice visually — giving the alligators a kind of motion and activity — it cools the area off in the square, where it gets to be 110 degrees in the summer.

The day after we installed it, the mayor turned the water off because he was afraid of someone slipping on the tile and suing the city. I met with the city people, and we worked out a low-cost solution to use a swimming pool coating on the tiles that has grit. The mayor vetoed that idea.



Alligator fountain, El Paso, proposal, 1987.

What he wanted was a planter all the way around the piece. Reporters called and asked me about it, and I told them that my work was very much about making art accessible to the people. I'd rather run the risk of vandalism than create a barrier between the work and the people

Q: Are there alligator T-shirts? Have any of your pieces ever made it onto T-shirts?

A: Oh, yeah, we've gone that whole route. I once had a postcard of the Fargo piece sent to me from a collector in Arizona. There was no mention of the artist, it just said, "Sodbuster, Fargo, North Dakota." The sculpture has developed a life of its own.

Q: What sort of proprietary interest do you think the artist retains after a work has been put in place? What if the piece or its site is changed somehow?

A: About all an artist can do is remove his name from it, so it's not associated with him anymore. I had one piece like that — for Horton Plaza in San Diego. I was selected as the artist after a com-

petition. I proposed a piece that I would do as a collaboration with my dad — I wanted to do a piece with him before he died — and with the workers I grew up with in the shop. I proposed a 90-foot illuminated obelisk in the center of a fountain about 34 feet across. I wanted to have sea creatures from the area as a sculptural element that would support this very static obelisk, like Bernini's *Four Rivers* fountain in the Piazza Navona. My dad and I collaborated on the design of the obelisk, then he designed all the lighting for it, and the workers built it — they came in after their regular jobs and built it. This was really rewarding for me, and there were no problems — everything worked well.

This was a public piece, but the money came from the developer, and before I finished the project, he declared bankruptcy. I had to sue him, and I only got 80 percent of my money. Because he went bankrupt, all the electricity was never supplied to the site. The temporary line was left, but that was it, which means that all of the pumps can't run. If the pelicans that are supposed to be spraying water in are on, you can't have the center fountain on. There's not enough electricity to ever have the thing run properly. They don't maintain it, either, so I've never wanted my name out there. This was the most complex project I've ever done. It was very frustrating.

Q: Can I ask you how much a project like that costs?

A: Yes — \$150,000, which I felt like was a lot of money back then.

Q: You mean the materials, the building, everything for \$150,000?

A: I didn't make any money on that one.

Q: What do you submit to a competition like that? A drawing?

A: Drawings and a little model.

Q: Have you ever thought about making a truly kinetic piece, like the washerwoman your father did? Does a place like Las Vegas have any attraction for you?

A: As a matter of fact, I was called in to make a proposal for Las Vegas. It was a curious situation. They wanted a piece instantly. I told them I couldn't produce a piece instantly. They decided to buy a *Vaquero* to put a piece in right

away, while I made a larger piece. The way so many of these public things go, after they bought the *Vaquero*, they decided they didn't even want to see my proposal.

Q: Are there themes that you're playing with now that you're storing up in your image bank? Or themes you haven't had the opportunity to investigate yet?

A: Yes, that's true of any artist. Because every project takes so long, I'm always several years ahead in developing things. I've got the armature fabricated for the Denver project, but I haven't really started making it yet.

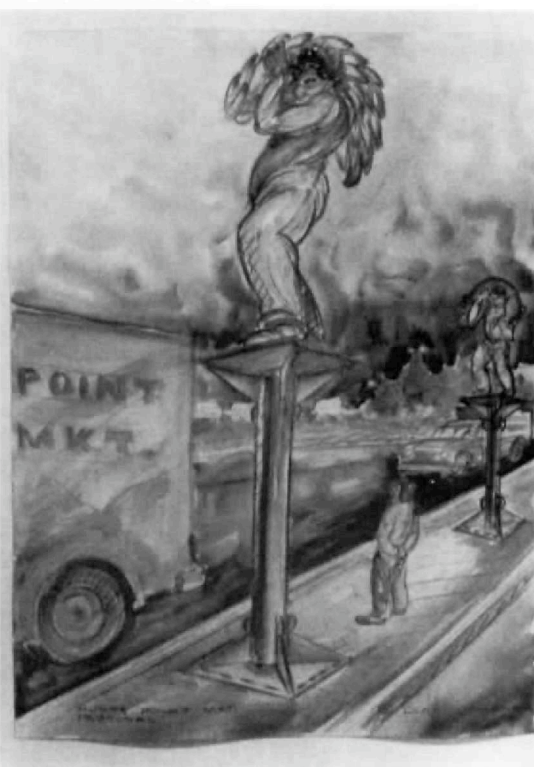
Q: What about the Firefighters' Memorial in Cleveland?

A: In Cleveland, Claes Oldenburg's *Free Stamp* is on one diagonal half of the park, and I have the other half. The courthouse sits on the west side, Lake Erie is on the north, and the Oldenburg sculpture, this three-story red object, sits in the southwest corner of the site. My half of this site drops off sharply toward the lake. And what I've designed is a somewhat triangular base with a triangular berm that goes around and drops off sharply. This is the main street grade. The Rock and Roll Hall of Fame sits between Lake Erie and the site. So this is a primary thoroughfare on the east side. The reason the base for the sculpture is triangular is that I want to have a triangular paved area that is bermed, going up to the sculpture. The firefighters will meet two or three times a year to have ceremonies at the memorial, so the sculpture has to function as a place to have these ceremonies right in front of it. The sculpture is actually a long flame that goes up, in fiberglass, with a firefighter at one end of the flame pointing to the Oldenburg sculpture and toward City Hall.

They have an okay budget to work with, but it's a real challenge to make the sculpture and elevate that end of the park. Now we've got to look at the money; the amount allocated was for the sculpture, not landscaping.

Q: How high is the flame?

A: Oh, probably about 30 feet, so visually it will work with the Oldenburg. The site is interesting because the grade is so steep. It's not the kind of grade you would normally walk up, but you can, from this walkway, which then



Colonnade of workers, Hunts Point Market, South Bronx, proposal, 1991.

opens up into the ceremonial area.

Q: I wonder whether you sense great differences among American cities. You talk about architecture as a sign, as a way of giving a place identity. When you go in and you're asked to make a piece for a city, you must develop a sense of the place, an idea of what the people are like.

A: When I was invited to propose a piece for Fargo, I was told, "You might not be interested in it because you aren't going to be dealing with any art people." In fact, my experience in Fargo was totally positive. They lived up to all their commitments. When I arrived, they said, "Oh, you want to see what the site looks like without snow?" They worked through that whole night with equipment to remove like 20 feet of snow off the site so I could see it. They were absolutely wonderful. When I said, "I think we need to go higher with the base," they said, "Doesn't it work better at this height?" And I said, "Yeah, but we have to think about vandalism." And they just looked at me and said, "Vandalism in Fargo?" They obviously don't have vandalism in Fargo. There I got a sense of the people and the city.

Q: Speaking of places where they do have vandalism, you're working in the South Bronx now too.

A: I was selected to do the Hunts Point Market there. They invited five artists to submit proposals and chose mine. But that's been on hold because of Mayor Giuliani's budget. It's all approved; I just can't start on it.

Q: What's it like?

A: A man carrying a pig. What I originally proposed was a colonnade of workers like the old Roman senators, but marching out of the market carrying foodstuffs. Most of the traffic is

vehicular now, and when we see food carried around, it's all in white boxes, whether it's beef or vegetables or whatever. But the people in the market said, "Oh, you can't leave those sculptures out there because somebody will steal them and sell them to the junkyards or something. You've got to get rid of the colonnade idea and maybe just bunch up one or two figures over here at the

entrance." By the time we reached the end of our conversation, I decided if they really didn't want the colonnade, I could put a couple of figures over at the entrance, which disappointed me, because I liked the idea of a colonnade somehow extending that experience. You know, like the old Burma Shave ads as you're traveling along the highway.

Q: A lot of your work in cities makes conditions visible that are under-recognized. The iconography of Pittsburgh wasn't about Joe Steelworker, and certainly the alligators aren't part of the iconography of El Paso. These are like hidden or lost parts of cities, the cultural connections back to the way something used to be — like the way food was delivered to the market in New York.

A: I try to connect with the myth; the images are not always reality. Myths may at some point grow out of reality. The image of the American cowboy has become mythical. For all the talk about cowboy hats and boots, there are no real cowboys in my part of the country. They all drive pickup trucks now. It's a business, like farming is now agribusiness; there's no longer a guy out there with his plow digging up the dirt. That's the myth, but somehow we all buy into it. ■