Edmundo “Mundo” Meza grew up in East L.A. and found his intellectual and creative home in the area’s avant-garde art scene during the late 1960s and early 1970s. Meza played an integral role in an emergent generation of Chicano conceptualists that included Robert Legorreta / Cyclona, Joey Terrill, Teddy Sandoval (1949-1995), Jack Vargas (1953-1995), and members of the collective Asco led by Harry Gamboa, Jr., Gronk, Willie Herrón, and Patssi Valdez. Thanks in part to Meza’s collaborations with these and other figures, his work was both deeply informed by and influential within a Chicano artistic community that is just beginning to receive more scholarly and public attention. Like many artists from his milieu, Meza’s work crossed multiple disciplines including performance, painting, design, and installation, responding to the social and political upheavals of the 1960s and 1970s with wit, panache, confrontational aesthetics, and a campy extravagance. With feet in both the Chicano and Gay Liberation movements, Meza’s artistic experiments were strongly shaped by cultural forces that were gathering momentum during this turbulent period in American life, which witnessed the Stonewall riots in 1969 and the Chicano Moratorium of 1969-1971.

Meza is perhaps best known for his collaborations with Gronk and Robert Legorreta/Cyclona during the late 1960s and early 70s on a number of confrontational performances in East Los Angeles, including Caca Roaches Have No Friends (1969), which has only quite recently been recognized as a canonical work of Los Angeles performance art. Meza’s early practice as an artist combined Chicano Nationalism with psychedelic experimentation and visual panache. Later works saw a continued focus on the figure, often in increasingly stylized and fantastical settings, with layered compositions and richly textured canvases.

In the late 1970s and early 1980s, Meza became increasingly involved in L.A.’s burgeoning alternative fashion culture. With collaborator Simon Doonan, Meza designed a number of surreal and shocking window displays in boutiques along Melrose Avenue. The parody, absurdist theatre, and satire of these displays resonated with the alternative boutiques’ posture against mass-consumption and commerce.

During the early 1980s, Meza’s painting became increasingly abstract and lyrical, utilizing reserved palettes of grey. In relation to Meza’s earlier works that understood the Chicano body as a site for play and subversion, these calm, simplified compositions signal a radical shift in tone. They are potently mournful of the body while reaching simultaneously, via the language of modernist abstraction, toward a new dialectic to figure queerness in the face of an impending epidemic. Meza died from complications due to AIDS in 1985.

Select Exhibitions

Posthumous Exhibition, Otis Parsons Gallery, Los Angeles, 1985
Cruising the Archive: Queer Art and Culture in Los Angeles, 1945-1980, ONE Archives, 2011
Window displays by Mundo Meza, some in collaboration with Simon Doonan, at Maxfield Bleu and Melons, both located on Melrose Avenue, c. early 1980s. All courtesy of ONE National Gay & Lesbian Archives at the USC Libraries.