

Renowned Artist Jesse Treviño Shares “Mi Vida”



“Mi Vida” is the titular piece of a retrospective of the work of Jesse Treviño.

by Scott McNutt

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“Jesse Treviño: Mi Vida,” a retrospective of the work of the first Mexican-American artist to exhibit in the Smithsonian American Art Museum, runs through the end of February at the Museo Alameda in San Antonio, Texas. Treviño’s pieces, often large photorealistic portraits or building-sized murals of Mexican-Americans in daily San Antonio life, reflect the creator’s pride and passion for his heritage. The show’s titular piece is the artist’s vast 1972 masterpiece, “Mi Vida.”

With works in the Smithsonian’s permanent collection in Washington, D.C., Treviño’s career is a source of pride for the Mexican-American community at large and for his hometown of San Antonio. Treviño’s works should also be a source of pride and inspiration in the limbless community, for the artist lost his dominant right hand after being severely wounded by an explosive device in Vietnam. Yet, with his left hand, he remastered his craft.

Treviño was born in Monterrey, Mexico, and moved to San Antonio with his parents and many brothers and sisters when he was about 4 years old. After he won an art competition in the first grade, gaining recognition and affirmation for his talent, Treviño’s focus on his artwork rarely wavered.



Model for the mural, "Spirit of Healing"

"I was an artist before I lost my hand, and I was an artist after I lost my hand."

Throughout school, Treviño paid scant attention to academics or school activities, devoting himself to art classes. In high school, he'd spend half a day in a commercial art class then go home and work more on his art. Honing his talent, he won many competitions over the course of his school years.

"As a little guy, I was always constructing things – I was very two-handed in creating things," Treviño explains. "It felt natural, the brush in the hand. The brush was the link between the work and your hand. I won two scholarships in high school and that was with my right hand."

One of those scholarships was to the prestigious Art Students League in New York. In the mid '60s, the budding artist took his first airplane flight to attend the art school. There he met such luminaries as Salvador Dalí and studied under legendary portraitist William F. Draper.

Studying at the Art Students League during the day, earning money by sketching portraits at night, Treviño was immersed in art. But his life was about to take a dramatic new course. In 1966, he received his draft notice. Draper urged him to go to Paris to complete his art studies, but Treviño elected



Jesse Treviño in 1968

to report for duty, in part because, although a noncitizen, he had lived in the United States all his life and didn't want to give that up.

In early 1967, 3 months into his tour of duty in Vietnam, Treviño's platoon was pinned down by sniper fire in the Mekong Delta. Running for cover, Treviño and two others hit an explosive booby trap. Treviño's right leg and arm were horrifically damaged.

Although medics reached him and pumped him full of morphine, Treviño says, "the pain was worse than anything you could imagine." Waiting to be evacuated, his right limbs hanging limply and on fire with pain, Treviño hovered within the margin between life and death. In that gray place, his art illuminated his next steps.

"When I was lying in those rice paddies in the Mekong Delta thinking I was dying, I was thinking about my mother, my family," says Treviño. "I made a promise to myself that if I lived, I would paint the things important to me: my family, my neighborhood – my world. I would never have done it if not for that experience."

Treviño spent 2 years in hospitals recovering from his injuries. His right leg healed, but his lower right arm, paralyzed and in constant pain, was amputated. Although he was uncertain of his capabilities without his right hand, he remembered his promise to himself.

“When I lost my hand, I thought my life was over, but the best was yet to come,” explains Treviño. “I thought, ‘That’s it.’ I couldn’t even write my name with my left hand, you know. The thought was so strong; I was telling myself, ‘You can’t do it.’ But I came to realize that all the things in my mind were still there. If you can think it, you can do it. I had to think like an artist. So you find a way to do it with your mind.”



“La Raspa”

At first, though, Treviño was hesitant, the thought still strong that he could not work with his left hand as he had with his right. So, despite his youthful disdain for academics, his plan was to go to college and get a certificate to teach art.

“I went back to school and got my bachelor’s and my master’s,” says Treviño. “I had studied with teachers who were not great artists but were good teachers. So I thought maybe I could teach. As I was taking the art classes, working among beginners, it was very frustrating because I was an artist. But it was like physical therapy, and I began to regain my confidence and build my skill again. The loss of my hand was painful. My hand was very dear to me, it was a part of me, but its loss wasn’t the end of me. I was an artist before I lost my hand, and I was an artist after I lost my hand.”

So impressed with Treviño’s skill was the student assembly at Our Lady of the Lake University that in 1974 they asked him to compose a mural for the student union. The result was the massive, 100-foot piece, “La Historia Chicana,” which depicts the course of Mexican-American history. The work was eventually relocated to a place of honor specially designed for it in the university’s Sueltenfuss Library.

Over the next several years, Treviño executed several works that would become famous, including 1976’s “Los Camaradas del Barrio” and “La Raspa,” depicting, respectively, youths from his neighborhood and a snow-cone vendor, and 1982’s “Señora Dolores Treviño,” a portrait of his mother.

“I had to be true to what I saw in the people in my neighborhood,” says the artist. “I painted what was in my heart. I took the raspa man who sold snow cones and painted him in a way I had never painted before, and it kept the dignity of his presence, of him just being him, you know? This is what I did.”

As his reputation grew, Treviño was commissioned to do more large-scale pieces that would contribute to the civic fabric of San Antonio. He also found that, rather than hindering him, his right-arm prosthesis helped him.

In 1997, Treviño designed and executed one of the largest murals in North America, the “Spirit of Healing,” on the Santa Rosa Children’s Hospital, which has become a San Antonio landmark. The mural, standing at more than 90 feet, contains more than 150,000 pieces of hand-cut ceramic tile. Although students assisted Treviño with the mural, he cut most of the tiles himself.

“With my prosthesis, I could cut the tiles faster than them,” he says. “When you cut ceramic, it is sharp, so maybe you get cut. You have to be cautious. But I could just clamp it in my prosthesis, score it and break it. So I probably cut 90 percent of that tile alone.”

Scoring and breaking tiles is only a small part of the repertoire of tasks Treviño can complete with his prosthesis.

“It is amazing how you can adapt to using it for most any construction or how you learn to tie a shoelace or pick up something tiny to hold. I can pry a lid off a can of paint faster than a person with two hands can. I come with my own tools,” he says with a laugh. “Instead of a challenge, it becomes easy. Of course, anything is easy once you learn how to do it, right? So I can look back on it and say it’s easy, but I had to teach myself to do these things.”

In fact, Treviño’s prosthesis has its own place in his retrospective.

“I have to tell you how much my prosthesis has meant to me,” he says, his enthusiasm so vibrant that his words tumble out in a torrent, as if every thought fires him, as if every new pronouncement might serve as inspiration for his next work. “Mi Vida’ has my prosthesis in it. With a flag laminated on it, it’s all beat-up, and they have it in this case, and it says what it is and what I do with it. Forty years of my life I have lived with a prosthesis. The prosthesis enabled me to do all these things. That little guy who did all the construction and all the art, he did it with two hands. The pieces I created in New York, I did with two hands. I have created all these other works with my prosthesis, I have doneworks all over San Antonio and received so many awards and so much

recognition, and it was all with my prosthesis.”

While Treviño’s prosthesis takes pride of place in his life’s work, Treviño’s place of pride for his work will always be San Antonio.

“I could have gone back to New York,” Treviño muses. “You can live anywhere, you know. But I had done the art ‘scene,’ New York, those places, and I had – I had to be where the work was real. So I live in the west side of San Antonio now, the poorer part of town. I’ve embedded myself here and can work to make it a better place. I can’t talk the talk without – I have to live here. I am living the experience. With my works, I am trying to tell the audience, ‘Look at the Mexican-American – this is where they are; this is what they do; they are like everybody else.’ And I think I succeeded.”



Jesse Treviño in front of his self-portrait, “Mexicano, Chicano, Americano”
Photo courtesy of Tom Wright

Has Treviño’s career also succeeded in telling audiences something similar about people with limb loss or limb difference? For members of this community, Treviño shares some final thoughts.

“You don’t let anything stop you,” he says. “If there is a way to do it, you will figure it out.”

When I got out of the hospital, I wasn’t sure what I could do. I had to find a way to do the things I wanted to do. It was hard, and it hurt. But everything is hard at first, isn’t it? Little by little, I would learn to do things. Then I would get better at them. Everything is easy after you have learned it, and you don’t remember that learning it was hard. Learning to do it [use a prosthesis, do things one-handed] is hard. But didn’t you learn things that were hard before? The most important part is your attitude. You have to remember what learning is like.” ■

Photos and graphics provided by Gabriel Velasquez.

“Jesse Treviño: Mi Vida” runs through February 28, Museo Alameda, 101 S. Santa Rosa St., 210/299-4300, thealameda.org.