

# Three Farmworker Projects & a Mural

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## Migrant Health

1976, silkscreen on paper (edition of ca. 200), 20.5 x 12.5 in.

With the exception of a course in book design, my graphic- and typographic-arts knowledge was gained through practice. When I was 16, I was designing newspaper ads and billboards for a men's clothing store, as my after-school and summer job. I went on to other graphic-arts jobs and eventually built and ran the Graphic Arts Dept. at Austin Community College.

I am happy to say that I have been able to use my skills in graphic arts to promote causes I believe in. This poster was created for the National Migrant Referral Project, which is still active, under the name National Center for Farmworker Health. It was meant to be put up in the health clinics throughout the country that served migrant farmworkers, so that farmworkers would see it and know that they were welcome.

I was inspired by the farmworkers who share their energy to feed the world. The overall form is reminiscent of the image of the Virgin of Guadalupe, who is so important to the Mexican migrant farmworkers. There are seven sets of branches in the plant form, representing the chakras. The geometric patterns are the light generating from the organic life form, just as, I believe, farmworkers give light and energy to the world.



### Hasta la Gloria

1977, silkscreen on paper (edition of 150, AP 20), 17.5 x 22.5 in.

2017, giclée on paper (40th Anniversary edition, of 40), 22.25 x 26.6 in.

The seventies were an exciting time to be a Chicano. We were asserting ourselves on many fronts. I think it was my work for the Raza Unida gubernatorial campaign that brought me to the attention of Rosa Cuéllar of the Texas Farm Workers Union, who asked me to create a poster documenting their March for Human Rights from the Rio Grande Valley of Texas to Washington, D.C.

I was teaching graphic arts at Austin Community College at the time. To discover the image I was to use, I took a long weekend and caught up with the farmworkers as they were approaching Lake Charles, Louisiana.

I marched and lived with them for a few days. I sketched and took photos of them. They were an inspiration. Claudio Ramírez carried the banner of Our Lady of San Juan all the way to Washington. He had a way of walking that was like gliding over the earth. This inspired me to try to show all the marchers as if they were floating. The farmworkers' way of being was a profound influence on my life and work.

Of course, there were many more marchers and supporters than I could include in the poster. I picked these seven—who have all passed away—for being the core of the marchers. Yet, as the standard-bearer is stepping out of the frame in front, a marcher is entering the frame in the back. This was my way of showing that there were many more marchers. I only wish I could have included them all.

This poster, as well as *Migrant Health*, is in the collection of the Smithsonian American Art Museum, acquired through the good offices of the curator E. Carmen Ramos and the curatorial assistant Claudia Zapata (another MACC Excellence Award recipient).



Texas Farmworker

1979, oil on canvas, 30 x 24 in., collection of Jerry and Linda Patchen

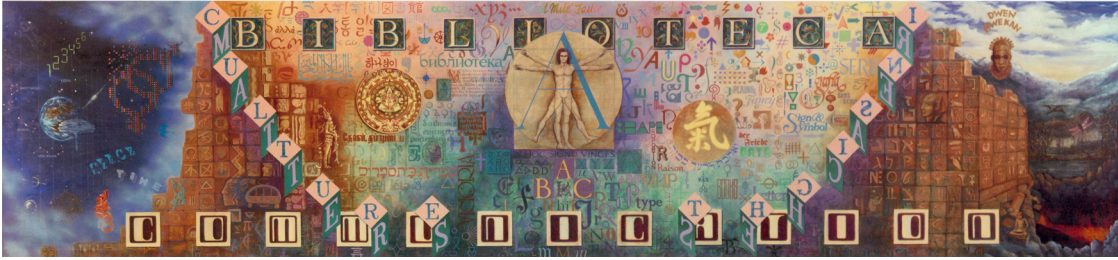
My experience in creating the *Hasta la Gloria* poster inspired me to create an iconic farmworker image, where I would not have the constraints of a commission.

I used one of the marchers, Julio Coreño, as my model for this painting. Julio, a two-spirit man, is the one holding the newspaper *El Cuhamil* in the poster. The words are from a local protest song of the time (for the letters, I took an existing typeface and customized it, converting it into an uncial). I also included the logo for the United Farm Workers along with that of the Texas Farm Workers, and an image of a Mexican pyramid, for good measure.

A few years later, I visited the Museum of Anthropology in Mexico City and realized that I had given the farmworker the same stance as that of the earth goddess Coatlicue. It was as if Coatlicue had been working through me to find expression in the farmworker movement.

For many years, this painting was on exhibit at Jerry Patchen's law firm, in Houston. Once, Jerry noticed one of his clients, a Mexican farmworker, looking at the painting, and asked him what he thought of it. The man answered, smiling, "Onion." I was gratified to learn that my depiction of an onion field had been successful.

This work is also featured in the definitive, two-volume *Contemporary Chicana and Chicano Art* (vol. 1, 2002).



### Homage to the Letterform

~ with students Armando García, Charlene Starr Jones, Celia Martínez, and Jean Page ~  
1984, acrylic on canvas mural, 5.5 x 25 ft., Northridge Campus Library, Austin Community College

The success of this library mural at Austin Community College is due to the great students I had. We were inspired by the power of the written word and libraries, our love of typography, and the values inherent in diversity, as exemplified by community colleges.

We painted the mural on canvas, setting up shop in the gym of the Ridgeview Campus, in East Austin. Created over the span of three or four semesters, the project involved many students. Often, we would even invite passing students to contribute ideas or words or ideograms.

I even got my brother Victor, who was working as an editor in New York City at the time, to help. Inspired by a passage in the Bhagavad Gita, he contributed “INSIGHT REACHES” to serve as a counterpart to my “CULTURE MATTERS.”

We finished the mural in 1984, and it was installed at the Ridgeview Campus Library. Soon after that, I left teaching to dedicate myself to my artwork, and set up a studio in Real de Catorce, in the magical Mexican Altiplano.

It was very fortunate that we had painted the mural on canvas—which is portable—because in 1989, the Ridgeview Campus was closed, and the mural was moved to the library of the new Northridge Campus.

The next time I came back to Austin, I went to visit the mural at the Northridge Campus. I was delighted to see that the library had been designed to accommodate the mural perfectly. And also, that the mural had north light, which is indirect and the most benign for the preservation of a painting.

I was also happy when the magazine *Choice: Current Reviews for Academic Libraries* featured it on their front cover (Feb. 1992).

