The grandson of Mexican immigrants and a native Texan who spent much of his life in New Mexico, Luis Alfonso Jimenez celebrated the vitality of the Southwest and its people. In prints and sculptures, he depicted them as figures at once muscular, sensuous, and dynamic. Although rooted in everyday experiences, Jimenez’s subjects and their arrangements are informed by art-historical precedents: the compositions of Renaissance devotional art, the American regionalist Thomas Hart Benton’s sinewy and rhythmic figures of the 1930s, the monumental scale and moral urgency of Mexican muralists such as Diego Rivera in that same decade, the embrace of everyday objects and materials characteristic of 1960s pop art, and the stylization of traditional Southwestern folk art.

Jimenez created broadly accessible vernacular art. He accomplished this not only through his readily recognizable subjects—honky-tonk bars, cowboys, lowriders—and bold style but also through his choice of materials. He cast a number of his public sculptures in industrial fiberglass and coated them in acrylic-urethane finishes, like those used on hot-rod cars, to achieve shiny surfaces that bore a familiar tactile appeal.

*Sodbuster: San Isidro* embodies these signature features. Massive in scale, bold in color and form, and with a smooth, highly polished surface, this sculpture depicts a farmer leading a team of oxen. Describing his stylistic approach here, Jimenez said:

“[I]t’s very much the way the folk art sculptures are done in New Mexico. The sweat beads are very much like the blood beads on the Christ figures here in New Mexico, and in Mexico, the same sort of emphasis on the man’s arms, the muscles, the same kind of exaggeration and distortion; obviously a lot of stylization but consistent with what happens with folk art.”

Jimenez underscored these associations by subtitling the sculpture *San Isidro*, the Catholic patron saint of farmers. Although aesthetically rooted in Southwestern religious folk art, the sculpture also honors the agrarian traditions of the Great Plains, where *sodbuster* was once a slang term for farmer. In fact, Jimenez first created *Sodbuster: San Isidro* in 1981 as a commission for the city of Fargo, North Dakota. Two years later, when the Ulrich Museum approached him about purchasing a work for its outdoor collection, Jimenez suggested that the museum consider his second casting of *Sodbuster*. Once the sculpture was acquired and installed, Wichita State University landscapers planted native Kansas prairie grasses at its base, underscoring an association with this region, its early prairie homesteaders, and the endurance of its farming communities.

Emily Stamey

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Art OF OUR TIME

SELECTIONS FROM THE ULRICH MUSEUM OF ART
WICHITA STATE UNIVERSITY

Patricia McDonnell and Emily Stamey

With contributions by
Toby Kamps, Laura Moriarty,
Antonya Nelson, Timothy R. Rodgers,
and Robert Silberman

Photo-essay by Larry Schwarm

Ulrich Museum of Art | Wichita State University
in association with the University of Washington Press
About the Contributors

Toby Kamps is senior curator at the Contemporary Arts Museum, Houston. He has organized exhibitions on the work of Vanessa Beecroft, Ellsworth Kelly, and Claes Oldenburg as well as such themed exhibitions as Small World: Dioramas in Contemporary Art (2000), Lateral Thinking: The Art of the 1990s (2002), and The Old, Weird America (2008).

Patricia McDonnell is director of the Ulrich Museum of Art. Her scholarly focus is upon European and American modernism, and she is a leading specialist on the painter Marsden Hartley. Her publications include Marsden Hartley: American Modern (1997), On the Edge of Your Seat: Popular Theater and Film in Early Twentieth-Century American Art (2002), and Painting Berlin Stories (2003).

Laura Moriarty is the author of three novels and the recipient of several literary awards. Before becoming a full-time writer, she was a social worker. Moriarty lives in Lawrence, Kansas, where she teaches creative writing at the University of Kansas.

Antonya Nelson has written three novels and published six short-story collections. She contributes often to the New Yorker and the New York Times Book Review. Nelson holds the Cullen Chair in Creative Writing at the University of Houston. Her award-winning novel, Living to Tell (2000), takes place in her hometown of Wichita, and her forthcoming novel, Bound, is set there as well.

Timothy R. Rodgers is director of the Scottsdale (Arizona) Museum of Contemporary Art. Formerly chief curator at the New Mexico Museum of Art, Santa Fe, he is involved in a range of writing and curatorial projects. His scholarly concentration is on American early modernism.

Robert Silberman is an associate professor of art history at the University of Minnesota’s Twin Cities campus. His chief scholarly interests have been photography, film, and contemporary art. Silberman collaborated with former New York Times photography critic Vicky Goldberg on the companion volume for the 1999 PBS series American Photography: A Century of Images.

Larry Schwarm is a professor of art at Emporia State University, Emporia, Kansas, and a nationally regarded photographer whose work has been shown at the Art Institute of Chicago and the Smithsonian American Art Museum, Washington, D.C. His 2003 book, On Fire: Larry Schwarm, won the Hendrickson Book Award and Prize.


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