

Michael Menchaca on the Power of Visual Communication

“Right now, I’m figuring out the sadness that I have to express,” the artist told Wellesley student Caroline Hester. “But I don’t want to feed the beast, either.”



La Raza Cósmica 20XX, 2019. Suite of 16 screen prints. 21 by 22.5 in.

Michael Menchaca is a Mexican-American multidisciplinary visual artist whose work blends iconographies and materials to address historical and contemporary issues, from European conquest to Big Data surveillance. Students can view *Hasta La Casta* (2017), *Gotta Catch Em All!* (2017), and *America First* (2017) at the Davis Museum upon request. On November 17, 2025, I spoke with Michael to learn more about their work and influences. Our conversation has been edited for length and clarity.

Caroline Hester: Can you introduce your process and your relationship with technology?

Michael Menchaca: I guess it all starts digitally. I do digital drawings using Adobe Illustrator. As an extension of the way that I think now, I've almost depended on Illustrator to create spur-of-the-moment ideas. It's just a really efficient way for me to visualize things. I wasn't totally happy with a computer doing the printing for me, so the basic solution, when I was an undergrad at Texas State University, was to take my digital designs that I had learned prior. I was doing graphic design, and I learned that at San Antonio College.

I learned how to do these graphics, and I landed on this cat, and so I started screen printing this design. I thought there was something meaningful in the ethnic identity that I gave the cat via a mustache and the outfit and the hat. And for me, it symbolized a migrant, or a lost spirit in some case. So I kept playing with that analogy and created this new world, and a language for this character to exist.



Castigo, 2010. Screenprint. 26 by 40 in.

That branched out into animation when I went for my MFA in printmaking at RISD. I had access to a lot of emerging technology in the 2010s. So now I've been more interested in novel technologies and how they can help me tell my story, because I feel like the content is somewhat at odds with the presentation or the mediums that I use. They're really commercial, but the content that I feed it is not necessarily something that's trying to sell you a product. It's mostly trying to educate you, if anything.

CH: You reference casta paintings in many of your prints. How did you first learn about casta painting?

MM: I was going through the library in San Antonio, and I found this book called *Casta Painting* [by] Ilona Katzew. Ilona Katzew is the leading casta painting scholar, at least that I've found looking through libraries and doing research. But what stuck out to me was viscerally seeing the bizarreness of the poses [and] the class identities that were being depicted – everything was conspicuously placed, and telling you about the class status of the person. But also inherently, the racism involved – I get the same feeling looking through Western movie posters for research. It's junk food. And so looking at a lot of the casta paintings starts to feel so icky, because it's a racist visual practice that was someone's business. It makes me think of contemporary business practices that trade in racist stereotypes. I wanted to make those connections myself, and dress them up in conspicuously 21st-century accessories. But I just landed on that book, and it opened up a flood of thoughts that I hadn't ever had. I needed to redo it on my own, to understand these racial combinations, for one. And to try to undo the derogatory nature, if possible.

CH: Given that your work deals with these questions of past and present racist politics, has this current administration shaped your approach to your work?

MM: It's definitely upsetting to see so much of the country's legacy being torn to strands every day. I have made drawings, but I haven't landed on something I think is print-worthy. Usually I feel, amongst a sea of noise, something stands out that could stand on its own. Right now, I'm figuring out the sadness that I have to express. But I don't want to feed the beast, either, so I'm being very mindful of what I put out in the world. People don't think twice before they communicate online, unfortunately, and I really believe in the power of visual communication. There's bad medicine being practiced right now within the visual arts. AI has not been helpful in that regard. There should be some guardrails in place that are not there.

CH: Are you optimistic about the power of the visual arts to counter that?

MM: I'd say yes. But I'd be giving the visual arts more credit than most people do. People don't understand how much work is required to spend time creating something that you're passionate about, finding the materials, crafting it, and putting it out there, when at the same time, you have someone that could receive an award for Best Photo, and it's AI-generated. The cynical answer would be no – visual art is already being co-opted, and it's over for artists. But I feel like that's giving into the AI pipe machine. I refer to myself as AI agnostic, because I recognize that this is a religion that's being sold to us by the colonists of today. Zuckerberg is another Columbus, and he's selling us these ideas.

CH: Does the growth of this AI pipe machine affect your relationship with your practice?

MM: Around last year, or two years ago, when I started playing with Midjourney, I started seeing a necessity for AI literacy. I was interested because it's kind of another tool, but by no means is it something that's gonna make me complacent, and depend on it, like how I depend on Illustrator to generate a blank canvas on the screen. I feel like some artists may be shortcircuiting themselves and outsourcing some of the creative decisions to the machines. So I'm on a digital information diet, and I call it being a digital vegan or practicing digital veganism. Just being very mindful of what content I'm consuming.

It used to bother me when I would get an email from a colleague when I was at my master's program and there was a typo. But now, with algorithms, perfect email writing, and all that LLMs are helping out with, I feel like signs of humanity are an asset now, or they could even be traded or sold. Human error is a quality that I try to maintain in the studio, and AI is just not gonna help me be more human.