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Iconic Mustang Sculpture Returns to OU Art Museum

NORMAN – He’s back! After more than a year’s absence from his post on Boyd Street, the University of Oklahoma’s 8-foot mustang sculpture has returned to his stomping grounds. *Mesteño* (Mustang), a fiberglass sculpture created by New Mexico artist Luis Jiménez (1940-2006) in 1997, now is on display inside the Fred Jones Jr. Museum of Art.

Perhaps best known for its bright, glowing red eyes and towering pose, *Mesteño* depicts the spirit of the untamed American West in the form of a powerful, midnight-blue stallion.

Ghislain d’Humières, the Wylodean and Bill Saxon director of the Fred Jones Jr. Museum of Art, said the sculpture’s return is a joyful one for the university community.

“A tangible hole was left on the campus when *Mesteño* was relocated for conservation,” he said. “We are most grateful that this important gift from Mr. and Mrs. Westheimer is back on display for our visitors to enjoy. We are excited about the return of one of our favorite sculptures and look forward to a longer, brighter future for it inside the museum’s walls.”

*Mesteño* was given to the art museum in 1998 by major benefactors Jerome M. and Wanda Otey Westheimer. The Westheimer family has been a generous supporter of the museum for decades, and *Mesteño* was one of their most prominent and important gifts.

During the past year, the horse sculpture underwent conservation as a result of its outdoor locations for 12 of the past 15 years. The work required rewiring and structural repair to both its framework and fiberglass body, so the piece was moved to an off-site location, where OU sculpture graduate student Christopher
Fleming began work on the sculpture, under the direction of Paul Moore, artist-in-residence at the OU School of Art and Art History.

_Mesteño_ was originally installed on the corner of Boyd Street and Elm Avenue in July of 1998. It was removed from that location in 2002 and placed inside the museum in advance of the museum’s first major expansion. Following the completion of the Lester Wing, _Mesteño_ was reinstalled outside the museum in February 2005. _Mesteño_ was removed on Feb. 20, 2012, for conservation.

The work returned to museum on May 6 and will now be on view in the Cy and Lissa Wagner Gallery. Given the unpredictability of Oklahoma weather, university administration and museum staff decided that it would be in the sculpture’s best interests to relocate it permanently inside the museum in order to preserve it for future generations.

Although it is no longer outside, it can still be seen in its prominent location through the windows on the museum’s north side, just steps away from its former outdoor location on Boyd Street. Inside, visitors can get a closer view of the work and discover details and textures not previously viewable by walking or driving by outside.

In the early 1960s, sculptor Jiménez apprenticed in his father’s neon sign shop and gravitated toward fiberglass as a medium, partly because of his experience making carnival figures, racecar bodies and airplane fuselages while studying at the University of Texas. He began making large-scale figurative pieces that focused on culturally relevant, politicized themes of the Southwestern, Mexican-American working class. Jiménez created _Mesteño_ in 1997 in homage to his own Appaloosa stallion, Blackjack. It also was a one-quarter model for the 32-foot sculpture now seen at the Denver International Airport.

Today, the works of Jiménez can be found in numerous museum and private collections around the United States.

_“Mesteño is a significant work for the university, as well as Norman and the state of Oklahoma,”_ said Mark White, the Eugene B. Adkins and Chief Curator for the FJJMA. _“Jiménez was one of the most prominent contemporary sculptors in the United States before his untimely death in 2006. _Mesteño_ relates directly to the history and spirit of the American West in its depiction of the rearing stallion looming over both the skull of an ancestor and a broken spur.”_  

_“The University of Oklahoma has always been devoted to the study of the American West, so it seems particularly fitting that one of the icons of the West would have a place of prominence at the FJJMA,”_ he said. _“It is worth noting that the U.S. Congress recognized mustangs in 1971 as ‘living symbols of the historic_
and pioneer spirit of the West.’ Oklahomans have always been proud of their Western heritage, and the mustang seems an appropriate symbol of that past.”

Much like the sculptor Jiménez himself, Fleming is an accomplished artist with experience, specifically in auto body and fiberglass. Outside of his art studies, Fleming restores classic cars and builds traditional 1950s and ‘60s hot rods and custom cars. In preparing for conservation of Mesteño, Fleming researched what other museums had done for similar works and called on the advice of other automotive body specialists and restorers he had met in the field.

Fleming said his work on the sculpture affected his view of the piece.

“I always thought Mesteño was cool, but I never really knew the reason behind its red eyes and bright colors,” Fleming said. “In researching his work, I found that Luis was a talented sculptor who built art from his personal heritage and culture, and I believe that’s one of the strongest places from which artists can pull. From now to eternity, Mesteño will have an extremely important place in my heart.”

The Fred Jones Jr. Museum of Art is located in the OU Arts District on the corner of Elm Avenue and Boyd Street, at 555 Elm Ave., on the OU Norman campus. Admission to the museum is complimentary to all visitors, thanks to a generous gift from the OU Athletics Department. The museum is closed on Mondays. Information and accommodations on the basis of disability are available by calling (405) 325-4938 or visiting www.ou.edu/fjjma.

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**IMAGE CREDIT**

Mesteño, the iconic 8-foot sculpture of a wild blue stallion with glowing red eyes, has returned to the University of Oklahoma’s Fred Jones Jr. Museum of Art after more than a year off-site. The large work by Luis Jiménez underwent a year of conservation for interior wiring and structure repair.

Luis Jiménez (U.S., 1940-2006)
*Mesteño (Mustang)*, 1997
Fiberglass, H. 8 ft.
Gift of Wanda Otey and Jerome M. Westheimer Sr., 1998
Fred Jones Jr. Museum of Art; The University of Oklahoma, Norman