

# JOSE ANTONIO BURCIAGA

Artist who depicted minority life in America, 56

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SAN JOSE — Among Latinos, Jose Antonio Burciaga was a giant. But, to the mainstream, his creations about minority life in America had an edge, often sharpened by satire, that made his art, his poetry and his prose too caustic.

However, when he died of cancer at age 56 Monday in a Monterey hospice, he was on the threshold, said at least one critic who had observed Mr. Burciaga's career for many years.

"The real tragedy of his death is that he was just beginning to be recognized in the broader community for his tremendous talents," said Charlie Erickson of Hispanic Link News Service, "and now he won't be around to enjoy what I'm sure will grow every year."

Mr. Burciaga won't soon be forgotten for his "Last Supper" mural depicting Cuban revolutionary Che Guevara as Jesus Christ — flanked in order of hero status by such "apostles" as labor leader Cesar Chavez, teacher Ernesto Galarza and playwright Luiz Valdez. It remains in Stern Hall, the dormitory at Stanford University where Mr. Burciaga was resident fellow for more than 10 years.

Nor will his wife, Cecilia, forget how her 20 years as a Stanford provost were ended. Budget reduction was the explanation. Her husband didn't buy it. Nor did the students in Casa Zapata, who staged a three-day hunger strike in protest. Afterward, Mr. Burciaga's acrostic in the *Mercury News* spelled The Farm this way: Self-righteous, Teu-

tonic, Arrogant, Narcissistic, Foot in mouth, Obnoxious, Rapacious, Desperate.

Nor will Mr. Burciaga's poetry in four languages fade from his cultural scene. He incorporated not only Spanish and English into the same work but also Nautl, spoken by the Mayans; and Calo, spoken on the street.

As recently as March, as he wasted away from inoperable metastatic stomach and liver cancer, Mr. Burciaga took on Republican presidential candidate Pat Buchanan in a *Los Angeles Times* commentary:

"WHOA! Did I hear somebody take my name in vain again? Pat Buchanan, said recently, 'Jose, we ain't gonna let you in again!' Buchanan has consistently, and with disrespect, used the name Jose as a catchword for all Mexicanos.

"Well, Señor Booshanan, as my father-in-law calls you, I want to clarify a few things.

"Numero uno, as we say, Aqui estamos y no nos vamos (we're here and we are not leaving).

"Numero dos, when you address me or any of my tocamos (people named like me), use our middle and last names, unless you really do intend to make a racist insult."

Tony Burciaga was born in El Paso, Texas, and grew up in a Jewish center. His father, Jose Cruz Burciaga, was a custodian at the synagogue, so his mother, Maria Guadalupe Burciaga, and his five brothers and sisters lived in the basement.

After military service, Mr. Burciaga earned a degree at the University of Texas at El Paso and tried to find a job, in Mineral Wells, Texas, in Long Beach, Calif., and in

Washington, D.C., where he finally became an illustrator for the CIA. He married in 1972, and two years later Cecilia Burciaga began her tenure at Stanford.

Within a week at Christmastime 1994, both Mr. Burciaga and his sister, Margarita, learned that they had cancer. She died in February.

After the Burciagas were dropped by Stanford, Cecilia became executive assistant at the new California State University Monterey Bay, and they set up two homes, in Carmel Highlands and in Menlo Park, where son Tono was finishing high school. At the same time, daughter Rebeca was nearing graduation from the University of California Santa Cruz.

Several uncompleted works dogged Mr. Burciaga during the 22 months he struggled with his disease.

"I always thought before I got sick that, if I got in such a predicament, I would hurry up and get a lot done," he told Jeordan Legon in an interview last summer. "But that's not the way it works. You have to be well enough spiritually and emotionally to put yourself down on paper and express yourself and have fun with it."

He did finish "Spilling the Beans," and his book on Mexican proverbs he called "Dichos" is in the final stages of preparation for publication.

But his novel "Temple Gang," playing on the incongruities of Mexican-American Catholics living in a synagogue, awaits more writing and editing, said Mr. Burciaga's brother Raul.

Raul Burciaga said his older brother's writing — "Restless Serpents," then "Weedee Peepo," "Undocumented Love" and "Drink Cultura," with its dust-cover adaptation of the Coca-Cola trademark — awakened his social consciousness. One day, he said, he hopes that the 18 months or more his brother put into "Temple Gang" will see print.

Mr. Burciaga had told Legon last year: "I'm willing to accept death, you know, but God helps those who help themselves, so I will fight, 'cause I also realize that I have a lot to say."

Gil Villagran, a friend of Mr. Burciaga for nearly 20 years, said he was energetic enough to challenge Latino youngsters at a forum in San Jose in April.

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