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Michael Menchaca; S.A. artist, continues growth

By Ricardo Romo - April 5, 2018

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Michael Menchaca’s “Vignettes from San Antonio,” at Ruiz-Healy Art gallery in Olmos Park introduces new works dedicated to celebrating his memories, his Latino heritage, and vision of San Antonio. The large mixed media pieces also connect us with history, folklore, and popular culture.

Menchaca is a gifted graphic artist and printer, but in these new creations he has expanded his artistic creativity to collage and portraits. He considers his work a reflection of his upbringing, his home, his city and family. It is for him a personal story including nostalgic memories.

One cannot help but notice that San Antonio College (SAC) is the subject of three of his collages. This is not surprising. Menchaca's evolution as an artist began with his enrollment at SAC where he majored in Graphic design.

In three collages featured in the exhibit, there is a rich and colorful diversity of characters. In one, Menchaca shows a typical college day filled with characters coming and going from classes, socializing on the mall, and just relaxing on the campus grounds. Consistent with others of his earlier creations, Latino students are featured with facial cat characteristics.

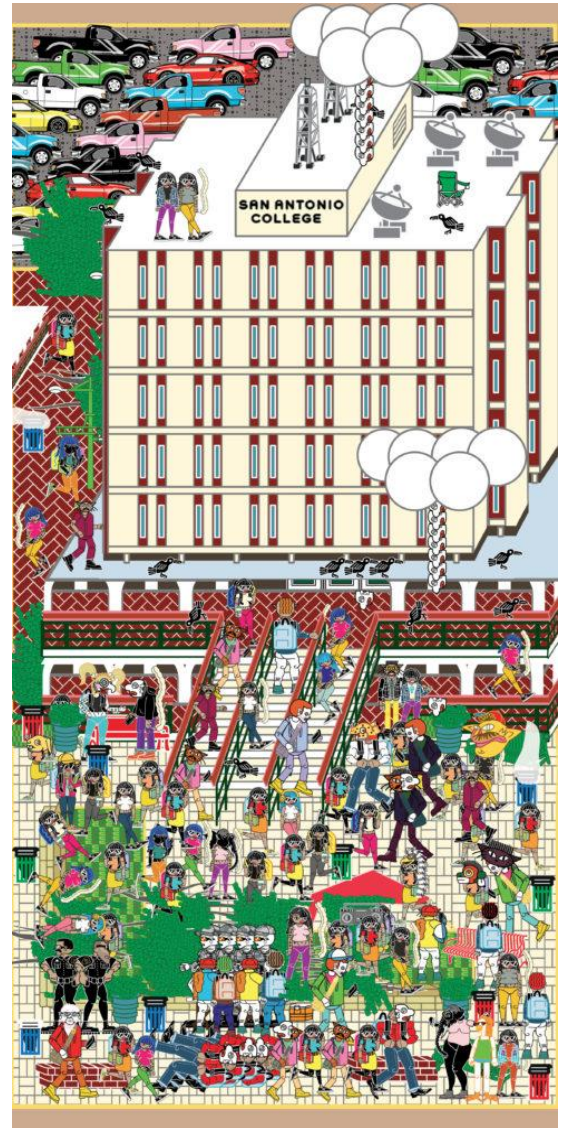
Menchaca enrolled at San Antonio College with the thought of a career in graphic designing. Mel Casas, the brilliant art professor at SAC, had passed away when Menchaca arrived on campus, but fortunately for the young artist, numerous art professors, including fine arts teacher Mark Pritchett, stepped up to help him expand his artistic range. Pritchett's mentoring led Menchaca to explore creativity beyond graphic designing.

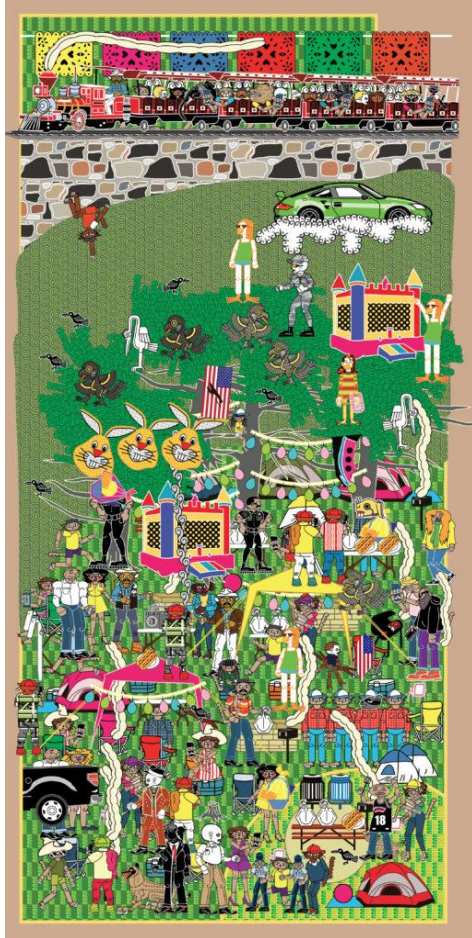
Upon receiving an Associate Degree from SAC, Menchaca enrolled at Texas State University with the intent of studying printmaking. At the San Marcos campus he also developed a greater interest in his Mexican American roots. Over time, Menchaca also developed an interest in pre-Colombian Mexican figures incorporated from the Aztec and Mayan codices.

Menchaca's artistic inspiration comes from many sources, but the visual narratives of artist Carmen Lomas Garza caught his eye early in his career. It should be noted that Garza also introduces folkloric interpretation in her work.

Menchaca's signature motif is a mustachioed cat that represents the artist and his Latino community. He chose a cat icon for many reasons, but he was particularly influenced by popular culture.

Growing up with television cartoons and video games, cats named Sylvester, Heathcliff and Garfield entertained him. He believed that the cat motif "could open the doors," in his words, for him to explore his cultural heritage, racial tensions, and stories of immigration. The cat motif would in the future dominate most of his printed visual interpretations.





In several of the collages for this show, Menchaca also seeks to bridge the modern with the ancient. Mass media and popular culture influenced his modern cat character, as did the real life cats that invaded his family backyard when he was growing up. For example, in his collage “Easter at Brackenridge Park,” Latino families, young and old, can be identified by cat facial characteristics.

With the addition in recent years of pre-Columbian images to his prints and collages, Menchaca pays tribute to his *Mestizo* heritage. Many of these figures, often featured with ancient masks, are an inspiration from Aztec and Mayan codices. These figures appear in all the collage works.

His images also celebrate the city of San Antonio. In looking at the past, as we are prone to do with a Tricentennial celebration, we find historical references of significance.

In a replica of a map of San Antonio’s *presidio* and missions drawn in 1764 by Menchaca’s namesake, Don Luis Antonio Menchaca, the young Michael Menchaca updates the map to include an Easter Sunday tent at Brackenridge Park, as well as a spectator’s folding chair at the Battle of Flowers parade.



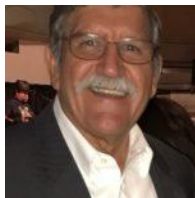
Growing up in San Antonio one of the modern events meant attending activities over a full week of Fiesta celebrations. No event is bigger than the Battle of Flowers parade, an annual event in San Antonio for more than a hundred years. In Menchaca’s image of the parade watchers, we see a rich blending of people of different backgrounds, ages and economic status.

The parade is a signature event for San Antonio and it attracts more than a half million spectators. Menchaca's collage of the Battle of Flowers parade captures the essence of watching, participating, and testing the spectators' limits of celebration. This is one of those nostalgic moments that Menchaca believes worthy of our attention.

Overall, the exhibit is thoughtfully arranged and viewers move through the visuals with ease. But all the images, especially the collages, require careful observation. Menchaca has developed a personal codex vocabulary that he utilizes to tell the narrative. Thus, in his works he presents us with images of animals, preColumbian figures and artifacts as well as modern architectural designs.

In 2012, Menchaca was one of the youngest artists chosen for the McNay's "*Estampas de la Raza*" exhibit.

The following year, the "State of the Art" Exhibition at new Crystal Bridges Museum of Art in Arkansas featured his work among 102 American artists, giving him national recognition. Menchaca has matured as an artist in a relatively short time and his creativity adds an exciting component to Latino art.



Ricardo Romo

Ricardo Romo, Ph.D., served as the fifth president of the University of Texas at San Antonio from 1999 to 2017. A recognized urban historian, he has taught and published in the field of civil rights, Mexican American history, and urban history. His book, *East Los Angeles: History of a Barrio*, is in its 9th edition. Romo currently serves as Executive Director of the SA Artistic Collective and is co-founder of the Tricentennial Art Project, both based in San Antonio, Texas.

