

Alumnus' exhibit features Moody in landscapes of his youth

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The Ranger

Artist uses cats to represent Mexican-American immigrants.

By **Katya Harmel**

sac-ranger@alamo.edu

Former student Michael Menchaca is the mind behind the latest art exhibition, "Vignettes from San Antonio," on display at Ruiz-Healy Art, 201-A E. Olmos Drive.

The collection includes images of locations, events and scenes around the city that generate nostalgia for Menchaca, which include Brackenridge Park, the Battle of Flowers parade and Moody Learning Center.

"This is a very personal exhibit for me," he said March 30 in an interview. "It's more for looking at my upbringing in San Antonio."

He said he is introducing the viewer to his personality by sharing the landscapes that meant the most to him growing up.

He chose to include Moody in a large-scale collage that depicts a busy, festive day on campus. Menchaca attended this college 2003-2007.



"It's a very nostalgic landmark for me — the Moody Learning Center," he said.

He said the building always had the most students inside and around it, and the creative energy hanging in the air inspired him.

"It's nice to reconnect with that energy when I visit," he said.

Menchaca explained he wanted to depict Moody in a way people have not seen the building.

He said he wanted to showcase Moody in a stylized way and did so by using techniques of traditional ancient artworks, such as Aztec and Mayan codices and Byzantine manuscripts.

He explained the connection he made between the manuscripts that inspired him and video games because they both use three-fourths perspective.

He combined the two aesthetics to produce the style of his collection.

The use of three-fourths perspective creates intentional “wacky perspectives” that cause the space in the artwork to not make sense, he said.

“I did not want to just represent a location,” he said. “I wanted to play with optics.”

The figures in his artwork are flat and defined from the background. This technique is inspired by the techniques used in Mixtec codices.

“If a limb was in the way, they’d cut it off the figure,” he said. “In my art, you’ll notice a missing paw or missing hand.”

He explained he wants the viewer to see behind the figures in his artwork, so he excludes limbs if he needs to.

“Vignettes from San Antonio” depicts the Mexican-American culture of the city while addressing the current issue of illegal immigration.

The subjects in Menchaca’s “San Antonio College” are all cats.



"La Florona," 30-by-22-inch oil painting and mixed media on paper. *Courtesy*

He uses cats to represent Mexican-Americans and individuals who crossed the border illegally.

He explained there were two instances that sparked the idea.

The first instance was an encounter with a student while he attended Texas State University. He graduated in spring 2011 with a Bachelor of Fine Arts degree in studio art.

Menchaca explained a student asked him a racist question about one of the cats in his artwork.

“He asked me, ‘Why does that cat have a dirty, Mexican mustache?’” he said.

He said the comment took him aback and, for the first time, made him question his identity as a Mexican-American.

The second instance was his mother’s connection to the stray cats in her neighborhood.

“I had to warn her that if we kept feeding them, they wouldn’t go away — they won’t leave us alone,” he said. “They’re going to have babies and keep freeloading. It started to sound like the counter-immigrant argument.”

This realization confirmed the idea of using cats to represent Mexican-Americans and people who crossed the border illegally.

Menchaca said it was the perfect way to address serious immigration policy issues that have been prominent since 2011.

“There were articles coming out about anti-immigrant sentiment and racist police officers stopping people they thought were illegal,” he said.

He chose to represent the people in the stories he read as cartoon characters with an Aztec style.

“On the surface, it’s fun colors and silly cartoon graphics,” he said. “But if you stare a little longer, you realize this is talking about something else. That’s what I wanted.”

Menchaca explained the exhibit focuses more on his drawing, which he has not included in previous collections.

He shared the narrative of a drawing he enjoyed creating titled “H.E.BUDLIGHT,” which depicts a man carrying a case of Bud Light beer and a dozen roses.

“I was walking out of H-E-B and saw this guy carrying roses and Bud Light,” he said. “I thought he was so cool, and it was obvious he had a date that night.”

Menchaca said he carries a small sketchbook to jot down ideas or draw something hastily.

He said it was worth telling the story of the man and including it in his depiction of the city.

“Vignettes from San Antonio” is available to view 11 a.m.-4 p.m. Tuesday-Saturday until May 21 at Ruiz-Healy Art.

The gallery can be reached at 210-804-2219.