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Petaluma Arts Center hosts show by acclaimed Venezuelan-born artist



CLARK MILLER
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For artist Richard Merchán, the Feb. 8 opening of his new exhibition at the Petaluma Arts Center will be a chance for the painter-sculptor to become reacquainted with the community, including local artists. Merchán lived here for five years in the 1990s before moving on, but returned to settle in 2016.

“The show will be a mishmash of works from my career, both recent and older,” Merchán said. “I’ve been away from the community and the local art scene for a while, so this is sort of a homecoming.”

The show will feature 29 works, including six sculptures, from more than three decades of artistic growth. Over the year, Merchán has continually expanded the range of his subjects, materials and styles. While there is a “Merchán” look — representational art that borrows from the emotionality and freeness of abstract expressionism — the portraits, landscapes, animal and marine studies, sculpture and so on bespeak an artist with few boundaries. Among the local landscapes in the show, viewers may recognize Helen Putnam Regional Park, Bodega Bay and Rodeo Beach.

A Merchán painting typically begins with superb drawing in the realistic vein. With this foundation, he is free to paint with a vigor verging on abandon, thanks in part to a year he once spent doing abstract expressionism.

“I had to go there to try to understand its language, which is all about emotion,” he said. “I found that the language was too big for me. I couldn’t get my brain to think like that, but the effort gave me freedom. My stillness and motion. It is both clearly figurative and recklessly moody.

“That’s how I underpaint,” Merchán said in reference to Ella. “That’s how many paintings look before I begin to paint. I like it when my colors contaminate.”

Interruptions are important to Merchán because without them, he won’t stop working. He goes into a zone that can last all day.

“I don’t stop,” he said. “I don’t think about anything. Do I have the courage to go on? But, of course, you have to know when to stop for the sake of the work.”

To achieve a feeling of spontaneity, Merchán will sometimes use a dirty brush from the previous canvas. He sometimes begins a painting by covering the canvas with a dirty yellow-brown wash, very wet. “Then I take paper towels and wipe clear the spaces for drawing,” he said. Next, he works on the background, progressing toward the subject.

But “background” is a misleading term in many of Merchán’s portraits, especially his paintings of women reclining on a sofa or chair. These pieces of furniture are often integral to the final work.

“I spend time in fabric stores, and I collect patterns online,” he reveals.

Merchán’s use of color is so bold it might surprise viewers to learn that he only uses about six colors, mainly black, white, red, yellow, blue.

“I don’t buy colors. I can do anything with the six,” he said. “It gets complicated if you use too many of them. It’s like playing music with five musicians versus a whole orchestra.” (Musical references are natural to Merchán. He also plays and collects guitars.)

Merchán sometimes paints on wood or other hard materials such as Lucite boards. Besides the advantage of not having to stretch the canvas, Merchán like the less-absorbent surface.

“It almost repels the paint,” he said. “It gives me a hard time. The hard surface allows accidents to happen. I want my work to look loose. I hate perfection.”

While his work as a painter and sculptor keeps him busy, Merchán dreams of someday making films. Hence, there is a cinematic element to his work.

“I definitely want to tell a story with each work,” he said. “I’m a closet cinematographer. But I want the viewer to finish the story.”

For example, one of the portraits in the show, Aminta, appears at first to be a straightforward headshot of a woman. But as you lock eyes with her, you begin to feel that she has something to say — or maybe something she refuses to say. Her pallor and disheveled hair offer hints. And the brushstrokes — rich, loose, almost reckless — bring her vividly to life.

In another portrait in the show, Dude, the young man seems to have the same urge to speak. He will hear you out, but once you are finished, it’s going to be his turn.

Clues to Merchán’s protean productivity lie in his past. For many years, he pursued a successful career in commercial magazine work. He learned to collaborate, an invaluable skill for an artist who enjoys doing commissioned work.

“Many artists don’t want to do commissions. They can become weird,” he said. “But I’m very open to them. I like collaboration. Maybe 20% of my work is now commissioned.”

When he is not in Petaluma, Merchán is likely to be found a few miles from Minneapolis. He has deep ties to the Twin Cities. In 1976, after high school in Miami — he was 15 when his family emigrated from Maracaibo, Venezuela — he studied graphic design and commercial illustration at the Minneapolis College of Art and Design.

While Ric Michel Fine Art in New York City is his long-time dealer, Merchán has a special relationship with an unusual team of art dealers in Minneapolis, Hollie Blanchard and Kelly Netishen of Art Girls Minneapolis. Rather than a gallery, this “concierge” business connects artists and collectors in the region.

His partner, Barbara Dunlay, maintains a house and studio near Lake Minnetonka, not far from Minneapolis. The couple float back and forth between the two domiciles, not to avoid the harsh winter — Merchán admits he likes it — but as the spirit moves them.

Merchán enjoys the back-and-forth between Petaluma and Minnesota. Arriving at either place seems to revitalize his imagination and energy.

“We still feel new in Petaluma and we like exploring the area,” he said. “It has changed so much since the ‘90s.”

Merchán’s advice to young painters: Don’t be afraid. Cover the canvas. Draw a lot. And most important, observe. He recommends that young artists go into nature with no art supplies, observe intently for 10-20 minutes, then return to the studio to draw what they saw.

In 2017, Merchán published “Richard Merchán: Selected Works 1984-2017,” a coffee table book containing roughly 200 color reproductions of his work. Visitors to the Arts Center show will be able to peruse the book to gain a larger view of his output. Many of his works can also be viewed at his website, richardmerchan.com.

PLANNING TO GO?

What: Richard Merchán Paintings and Sculpture

When: Opening Feb. 8, 6-9 p.m.
Running through March 29. Regular hours: Wed–Sat, 10:30–4:30 p.m. Sun, 1–4:30 p.m.

Where: Petaluma Arts Center, 230 Lakeville St.

Cost: \$5 (Seniors and students, \$4). The Feb. 8 opening is free.



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