



Palo Alto

Weekly

Weekend Edition

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Left: Mencher has plenty of company in his home studio: a painting in progress, his collection of hats, and his sweet dog, Zoey. Below: Zoey gets to be in “It Is What It Is” — three times. This is one of several Mencher paintings of people contemplating a glass of water.

Something **to talk** about

Kenney Mencher's provocative paintings challenge viewers to tell their stories

by Rebecca Wallace

A Kenney Mencher painting is like a man crying on a bus. You aren't supposed to watch, but something nags at you to look closer. Maybe you'll find out the full story.

But you never quite do. Instead, the Palo Alto artist's works inspire head-tilts and titters, stares, squeals and speculation. These slices of life — not *your* life, surely — are painted from photographs in a Realist style, but depict such cryptic scenes that viewers must dream up their own interpretations.

What's that guy whispering in that girl's ear? Who are the three identical women with three identical dogs? And why, oh why, is that lingerie-clad woman cavorting with someone in a Scooby-Doo costume?

“I think it begins with wanting to tell a story,” Mencher says of his artwork, flopping onto a couch. “I'd like to make paintings that tell stories like (illustrator) N.C. Wyeth and Stephen King.”

But he knows it's more than that. He knows his paintings are Rorschach oils on canvas. He has a point, but you have one, too.

Several viewers have made points about Mencher's paintings by writing stories and poems based on them. Eager to show off the ones he's posted on his Web site, Mencher scoots his

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The artist himself sometimes makes an appearance — or two — in his own works, including “Closet.” Here, Mencher’s wife took several photographs of him, which he then combined in the painting.

Kenney Mencher

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laptop across the coffee table in the downtown flat he shares with his wife, Valerie. Their white dog, Zoey, watches intently from across the living room.

“Scooby Snack,” for instance, inspired a poem including these lines:

“How thankful I am that I took

this chance

to be my own true self in our romance

and in case you feel a certain urge yourself

I’ve a Lassie suit up here upon the shelf.”

Another painting, “Reference Desk,” has sparked many a thought. In it, a foxy librarian displays shapely legs while a man looks on, clutching his hat in his hands. Mencher says that, to him, the painting shows “how stupid men are.” This guy becomes “a dithering idiot” before a beautiful woman.

In one of the poems, though, the man is an orthopedic surgeon, dismayed at the unhealthy contortion of the woman’s legs.

Mencher hoots delightedly, thinking of all the possible takes on his work.

“When someone writes a story, that means I’ve really nailed it. In a museum, you can tell if something is good if people are talking about it,” he says.

Mencher surely has given people something to talk about. In 2004, four paintings were removed from his exhibit at the California State Teachers’ Retirement System office in Sacramento, after some female employees said the works made them uncomfortable. The four offending paintings included “Reference Desk” and “Another Roadside Attraction,” in which a woman in a black dress hovers next to a car. Some people thought she was a prostitute.

Others have decided she was preparing to steal the car, or just looking for her keys.

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ORFEO

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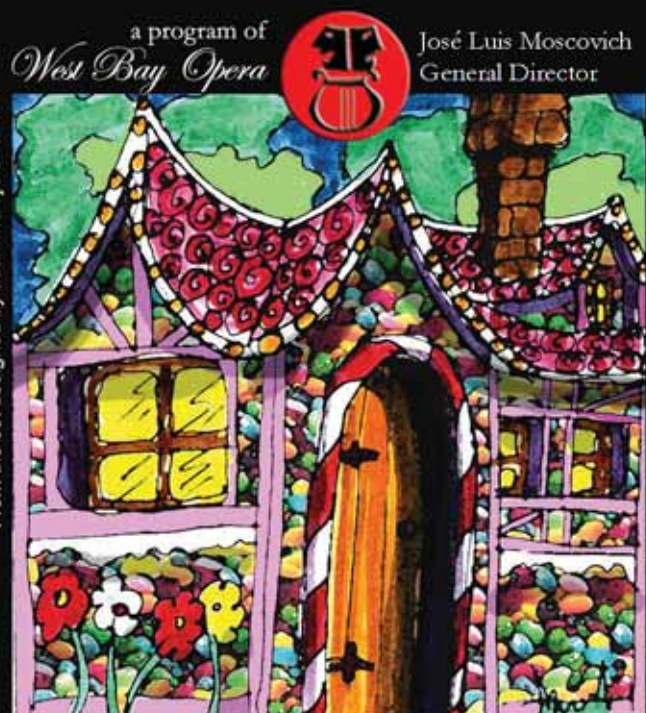
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'Pack of Lies'

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by scenic designer Kuo-Hao Lo. The Jackson home has ripply, cut-away edges that make the audience feel like voyeurs, as though you've peeled away a wall to spy inside.

The play rises and falls on the upheaval of Barbara Jackson, how her growing suspicions battle with her loyalty to her friend Helen. Maurice is simply remarkable in this role. Every facet of her dilemma shows on her face, and when this reserved Englishwoman lashes out in rage and fear, it's heartbreaking.

Maurice is ably matched by Dymor as her husband. He has the ruddy, chin-up Englishman persona down to a T, and his character's greater willingness to trust in the police contrasts with his wife's turmoil.

In a moving scene, the two recall seeing a man arrested some time

ago. For Bob Jackson, if the police say a man is bad, he's bad. But his wife is greatly disturbed at the recollection. "People don't stop being people because they've done something wrong," she says.

As for the Krogers, they can seem more like mere objects of suspicion than actual people. O'Keefe is sometimes too boisterous and one-note as Helen, and DeMico doesn't reveal a lot as Peter. But perhaps their characters are purposely underwritten to add to the mystery.

Nearly all of the characters do get a chance to reveal their inner workings during monologues that start many of the scenes.

This is a beautiful, literary touch by the playwright that adds to the complexity of the "Pack of Lies" world. When you learn about someone's feelings and life story, it can be that much harder to sum him up as a villain. ■

What: "Pack of Lies," a Hugh Whitmore play presented by Palo Alto Players

Where: Lucie Stern Theatre, 1305 Middlefield Road, Palo Alto

When: Through Feb. 4, with shows at 8 p.m. Wednesday through Saturday and at 2:30 p.m. Sundays

Cost: \$28 on Saturday nights; \$24 for other performances

Info: Call 650-329-0891 or go to www.palplayers.org.

What could Palo Alto borrow from Chicago's arts scene? (Hint: It's mobile.) Read more at arts editor Rebecca Wallace's blog. Go to www.PaloAltoOnline.com and scroll down to **Ad Libs**.

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Kenney Mencher

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The previous year, Hang Gallery in San Francisco had stopped carrying Mencher's work, with the gallery director calling it "perverted," Mencher said.

The artist seems partly sympathetic and partly amused by the rumpus. He says there's a difference between art that is provocative and art that is designed to offend.

"People in California are really careful of people's feelings," he says, adding that he completely understood the Sacramento decision to take down his work. "You can't blame them. You never know what someone will take exception to."

Still, Mencher confesses to being a tad miffed when the Hang Gallery pulled his work. Afterwards, he says mischievously, he started painting an entire series of male nudes.

In later solo exhibits at the Pacific Art League in Palo Alto and the Mountain View Center for the Performing Arts, Mencher says he "self-censored," showing only work that might be deemed tamer.

"I don't want to be a censored artist; I want to be a good artist," he says.

Deb Killeen, director of galleries and promotions at the Pacific Art League, agreed with that decision, but says she's a champion of his work, brouhaha or no.

"It's art that does what it's supposed to do. It makes you look again and again," she said.

Mencher has lectured on art and art history at the league, and Killeen said she hopes he'll return to speak again.

As with "Reference Desk," many of Mencher's paintings explore the interplay between men and women. In "After the Game," a man wearing only socks and shoes, seen from the back, leaps around waving pompons. A female cheerleader looks on with disdain.

Mencher says he was going for a subtext about the power dynamic between men and women.

The cheerleader is stereotypically objectified by her body and short skirt, but here the man is the one stripped down, made ridiculous by trying to get her attention.

"Sometimes there's more power in being the object of desire," he says.

Of course, one could also view the painting a million other ways. Perhaps the man is simply shouting: "Help! My clothes have been stolen!"

Now Mencher has his work in galleries that don't seem to offend easily, such as the Elliott Fouts Gallery in Sacramento and the Klaudia Marr Gallery in Santa Fe.

"Sometimes the work is controversial, but it just portrays human behavior," Marr said. "It's no more controversial than we actually are."

Marr has shown Mencher's work since October 2005, and his solo exhibition last November was very popular, she said.

"We immediately liked his work because it was fresh: sometimes humorous, sometimes twisted," she said.

These days, Mencher is on sabbatical from Ohlone College in Fremont, where he's associate professor of art and art history. He's a Bronx native who previously taught at Texas A&M University.

Life on sabbatical suits the artist. He gets up at 7, starts work at 8 in his home studio, and works till 5, with dog Zoey padding around the house in his footsteps.

Each painting, Mencher says, is a major production that can take 80 to 90 hours and cost him \$300 (canvases are costly at 48 by 60 inches).

Most paintings start out as photos. Mencher gets an idea for a theme for a painting — folders on his laptop are labeled "burlesque," "dealer," "day in SF" — and then turns the theme into a photo shoot. People including his wife, friends and students dress up and play characters while he snaps photos. Mencher was originally inspired by film stills, and many of the scenes feel like old Hollywood, with help from Mencher's collection of dapper hats.

(For the record, the photos of the slinky librarian and the naked guy with the pompons came from the Internet.)

With a photo shoot, models don't have to sit still for back-aching lengths of time while being painted. Mencher can also shoot the scene with differing amounts of light, giving him more options for the painting.

Then, Mencher goes into the studio, and with one eye on the photos on his laptop, he draws a scene with a charcoal pencil, standing up with the canvas mounted on the wall. He uses acrylic gesso as an underpainting, then adds the finishing layers in oil paint.

His earlier works were blurrier, almost Impressionistic, replete with earth tones. Now he uses bold colors, and likes his layers of charcoal and acrylic and oil.

"The light bounces through the oil paint and shows the color behind it. It adds richness," he says.

Deb Killeen likens his layered approach to "putting a puzzle together."

While Mencher says he loves teaching, he also hopes to someday pursue his art full-time. It's clear he's happy here in this small studio.

Fedoras hang on the wall, and Zoey snores softly from her dog bed. There are two tables, one for acrylic painting and one for oil. A line of pickle jars stands ready to receive used paint thinner at the end of the day.

And there's one more thing Mencher never paints without: a book on CD. Stories unspool into the air as he works, creating a room full of tales with provocative possibilities. ■

Info: To see more of Mencher's artwork, go to www.kenney-mencher.com. He is now exhibiting at the Bluespace gallery in San Francisco; go to www.sfb Bluespace.com.

About the cover:

Kenney Mencher's Palo Alto garage is packed with his paintings, including "Art Amnesia." Photograph by Veronica Weber.



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