Body of Work

Sam Hernandez has literally thrown himself into the art at his retrospective exhibit at Cabrillo Gallery

BY ANNE-MARIE HARRISON

Sam Hernandez has peed on his work. Apparently, it's not an uncommon practice in certain artistic circles, and for Hernandez, perfecting the patina—the varnish or surface wear on an object—of his sculptures is absolutely critical.

The Santa Cruz-based sculptor and painter, who served as the 2013 Silicon Valley Artist Laureate, explains that Picasso did the same, and that in fact, many artists put more than just their blood, sweat and tears into their work.

"You develop a certain kind of personal patina. I've laid my baby teeth in a sculpture, hair—I've done a painting with blood," he says.

Hernandez says it's the patinas that give a piece depth—not to mention that urine creates a unique lacquer when it reacts with certain materials.

In preparation for the Nov. 11 opening of his exhibit "Focus on the Object/Selections: Two Decades" at the Cabrillo Gallery, however, Hernandez says he focused more on finding what is within the material rather than what's on the surface.

"I'm trying to leave a lot of the decision making to the object itself," he says. "I'm doing a lot less contrivance—it's more stream of conscious."

This Cabrillo exhibit will feature work from two decades of his life, says Hernandez, who recently retired from a teaching position at Santa Clara University, where he worked for almost 40 years.

Rose Sellery, program director at the Cabrillo Gallery, says that the beauty in Hernandez's art comes from his inability to sit still—easily becoming bored has pushed him to create a litany of sculptures and paintings of which no two are alike. One large piece to be featured in the exhibit, for example, mimics the curves of classic Thonet café chairs, while other sculptures in the collection are huge and forceful in form, she says.

"They have this grace to them," says Sellery of the Thonet chair piece. "But he also has these other sculptures that are strong, angular forms from old tree trunks or logs that are massive and dramatic, and have more of a sense of a sentry standing on guard. They have a power and a strength to them."

Hernandez draws from ancient Native America, Asian and African artistry—with his own twists, of course.

"I think there's always a slight sense of subtle humor, even though he's drawing on these kind of iconic images," says Sellery.

As a teenager, Hernandez tinkered with hot rods, taking them apart and putting them back together, and he attributes much of his early work's symmetrical nature to his experience refurbishing cars.

Nowadays, he responds more to the natural and organic feeling of wood, however. Moving away from the perfectly proportional to monolithic sculptures of metal, wood and bronze has taken years of building on technical learning, he says.

"A classical musician develops his skills, works on them and works on them, and he'll stay a mediocre classical musician unless he can go beyond that practice. You've got to get the feeling in there," he says. "Now I've gone more from the classical pianist to a jazz pianist, where I have the techniques, but I let the other stuff follow, the composition develops from the act itself."

Hernandez says that splitting his time between Spain and the Santa Cruz area has made it apparent how people in other countries view artistic professions as compared to the U.S.

"It's not an overwhelming embrace from a lot of communities to talk about artists. In Silicon Valley, there are some institutions, and here, but there are lot of places that don't honor artists—you know it's necessary, but because we're so desperate to do what we're doing, we're happy to take crumbs," he says. "If you have a passion, then it's not a hobby, it's not something you do to kill time. It's something that you have to do."

"Focus on the Object/Selections: Two Decades" runs Nov. 11-Dec. 17 at the Cabrillo Gallery, 6500 Soquel Dr., Aptos. There will be a reception 5:30-7 p.m. on Thursday, Nov. 13, free.