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# A different look at the world of art

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Michael Cheney is a Petaluma artist whose work is has been featured at the Art Without Labels gallery, which hosts a collective of artists with developmental disabilities located at 111 Kentucky St. The interview was conducted by Jan Elfman.

Michael, what was it like to put a successful show together?

MC: It was like pushing a boulder up a mountain getting ready for the show. The problem was once I got one boulder up the mountain somebody would say, "Now push this one up!" I kept pushing the boulders up, and then I had this pile of them. They were beautiful boulders not horrible, terrible boulders. I wanted to push them up the mountain.

What made you the most anxious about your show and your work being on display?

MC: It was like standing naked in the middle of the room. What if somebody were to say, "You're naked, you're ugly." I worried they wouldn't get or like my work at all.

What did you hope your images would make people feel?

MC: Happiness. Smiles. Laughter. Light. That's it! There's nothing more. If it brought a smile to someone's day or life, I'd be happy. Even if somebody felt they didn't want to buy my art, that didn't matter. But if it brought a smile to their day that was more important than any money they could give me — that smile lives forever.

Who are your artistic influences?

MC: I love cartoons, Tex Avery, Walt Disney and the Nine Old Men (they were Walt Disney's team). The Nine Old Men were very important to Walt. Charles Schulz, Picasso, all of them are my influences. All the great animators inspire and influence me. It's like taking a little of column A, a little of column B and a little of column C and forming something new, something that is yours. It's fusion food. It's taking two or more different styles and combining them to make your own style. That's what art is.

Why do you paint skeletons?

MC: A skeleton has no race, no gender, no religion, no culture. That's what's important. I wanted to take something simple and thought "I'll draw a skeleton." But it was bland so I gave it something funny. I gave it an afro or made it Uncle Sam or a band of skeleton musicians. It's taking something dark and brooding but making it fun. I have to mix humor with everything because if you don't laugh...you're pretty much a miserable person.

Is life ever scary?

MC: I came from a very interesting situation. I came from a school where they could have thrown you on the ground and put your hands behind your back. There are two paths you can take with that. You could be bitter and become a very dark person or you could go light and find the comedy and humor in it. I'm not saying I'm light all the time. Show me somebody who says they're always light and happy, and I'll show you a liar. Everyone's dark at times but a sense of humor has gotten me through a lot of stuff that I never would have gotten through. And I have great folks. My parents are always laughing. You have to be a quick wit in my family. If you're not, you're going down, you're going down fast!

If you could say anything to the world, what would it be?

MC: I wouldn't give a theologian speech. I don't need to say much. It's more important to listen than it is to talk. If you listen you will get so much more out of a person. Not enough people listen to one another. A great conversation is like a good tennis match. It's not a game of solitaire.

What is the most important lesson you have learned in life so far?

MC: We're all the same. Our differences are the tiniest of details. It's like looking at the pebbles and not the rock. The greatest lesson is just that. Our organs work the same way; we live; we breathe; we poop. We're all the same.

(Jan Elfman is with Art Without Labels gallery located at 111 Kentucky St.)



