



August 27, 2004

Publication Date: Friday, August 27, 2004

In living color

Artist Sonya Paz's bold design will commemorate Palo Alto's Festival of the Arts

by Terry Tang

Drinking plays a major role in Sonya Paz's work. A bottle of fine wine or a martini frequently anchors one of her polychromatic, eye-catching acrylics.

When she begins to paint a new piece, the budding artist sometimes needs a beverage to help the creative process along. However, it's the corked container -- not the alcohol inside -- that gives her an emotional high.

"People have asked me, 'So, do you drink wine when you paint? Do you drink martinis?'" Paz said. "I'm pretty much fueled on water and lemon or Pepsi. I'm more intrigued by the shape of a martini glass or the way wine comes out of a bottle."

Paz's surreal symbols of Bay Area food and art culture won over the Palo Alto Chamber of Commerce, who, along with staff from MLA Productions (which organizes the festival vendors), commissioned her to craft the official poster for this year's Palo Alto Festival of the Arts. Entitled "Passion for Art and Wine," the design boasts colorful symbols -- a wine bottle, two glasses, a guitar, trees, city buildings -- emerging from a vessel.

"I think it's a beautiful piece," said Sandra Lonquist, Chamber president and CEO. "I like the liveliness of the colors. I had admired her work when she was at the festival in the past ... When I was asked 'Is this the one I want,' I was very happy to say yes."

Visitors wining-and-dining at this weekend's much anticipated Palo Alto Festival of the Arts will inevitably come face-to-face with Paz's work. In addition to peddling her own wares, Paz will make an appearance at the chamber's booth to sign posters.

Combining Cubist and modernist sensibilities with a Mardi Gras palette, Paz's paintings initially appear as visual confections. Yet, her pop art manages to inject a subtle "Sex and the City" vibe while remaining family-friendly.

"Most people who know my work -- cityscapes, wine, cubism -- they know a lot of it comes from me loving city life," Paz said. "I have a 'Sassy Girl in the City' series. I like to think I'm a sassy girl."

Originally, Paz had submitted slides of her work last February, intent on being one of the Palo Alto Festival of the Arts' 300 artisans. She was pleasantly surprised when MLA informed her that the festival's committee wanted to collaborate with her on a design for all the posters and T-shirts.

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Palo Alto is not the only community coveting Paz's artistic vision. She also completed T-shirt designs for the Sausalito Art Festival and posters for the Livermore Valley Harvest Wine Celebration. Both events kick off Labor Day weekend. Between prepping for these events and being a full-time mom, Paz has had no trouble keeping busy. Not bad for someone who became a full-time artist only two years ago.

"It's all good stuff. I'm not complaining. It's just a little overwhelming," said Paz, who also belongs to the Artists Guild of San Francisco. "It will be a real test with these three events, especially with all of them happening in such close proximity."

Born to Ecuadorian parents and raised in San Jose, Paz grew up embracing art. It's hard not to see Picasso's lasting influence on her work. In kindergarten, she accompanied her family to an art show that featured some of the renowned Cubist's paintings. She remembered being mesmerized at how he could portray a woman staring in three different directions simultaneously.

A love of Picasso, Andy Warhol and Roy Lichtenstein, however, didn't help Paz enjoy formal art classes. As far back as junior high, she didn't feel comfortable conforming to teachers' standards.

"I had taken all different facets of art and got stifled by the instructors back then," Paz said. "It always felt like a hand-slapping thing -- 'don't use these colors, the masters never did that.' If you're always being told you're doing something wrong, it just takes the fun out of it. So, I went for graphic design."

After taking some classes at De Anza College, Paz went into the work force. After a five-year period of moving in and out of California, she settled permanently in San Jose in 1991 with a job in Apple's administration department. In 1996, while starting a new position at Adobe, Paz began painting again.

By the end of the year, she had a 15-piece Warhol-esque tribute to Lucille Ball showing in San Jose's Gordon Biersch. Soon, Paz's works were decorating the spaces of several coffeehouses and eateries. Finally, in May of 2002, she left her Silicon Valley career to devote all her "blood, sweat and tears" to more artistic endeavors.

"I firmly believe in working for a product you believe in," Paz said. "There's something there. Some people think money is everything. My family, my career options and my dignity are much more important."

Familial support has helped Paz weather the pressures of her growing career. Indeed, Ryan, the younger of her two sons from a previous marriage, may be her biggest fan. She recalled how one of his neighborhood friends was over and asked who made the "pretty pictures" on the wall. Ryan, 14, affectionately described his mother as a famous artist.

"In his eyes, I do something that makes him proud of me," Paz said. "It really touched me. I just thought I'm this parent who works a lot. For him to say such a kind thing -- especially at the age of 14."

She also receives guidance from Mark Kovich, her business partner and "significant other" of eight years. A distribution sales manager at Motorola, he only began shepherding Paz's marketing and merchandising last February. Content to have someone else help make key decisions, Paz can make sure that painting doesn't get lost in the business shuffle.

"People say 'how wonderful, you can paint all day,'" Paz said. "I think 'I appreciate your compliments, but it's a lot of work.' It's a creative process. I can't just turn it on. In my mind, I'm going 'I don't paint all day. I didn't even paint all week.'"

As much as some artists may detest the idea, possessing keen business sense is essential to actually making a living, Paz said. Working artists have to stay organized, book events and know how to reach out to people. Paz credits all her experiences at Silicon Valley companies with preparing her for the business of art.

"I think we all hear stories about the Warhols who were street artists one day or doing art for fashion magazines and the next day, they were the new kid on the block," Paz said. "Their art would sell for thousands of dollars. Those are isolated incidents. Success is not overnight. People who think that -- it's not that way."

Besides creating art and talking with collectors worldwide, Paz has fashioned a line of watches. Designed for men and women, each wristwatch face sports one of her paintings. They are already available at local retailers such as JAX in Santana Row.

Whether it's her accessories or art prints, Paz still wrestles with self-promotion. She tries to remain humble and carefully plans when and where it's appropriate to discuss her work. Still, the feeling that comes with seeing her creations on someone else's walls never gets old.

"I still pinch myself sometimes," she said. "It's surreal to me that something I create out of my heart, people want to put it in their homes."

Who: Artist Sonya Paz, exhibiting her modern pop-art paintings. She will also be available to sign posters at the Palo Alto Chamber of Commerce booth from 2-3 p.m. both days.

Where: Palo Alto Festival of the Arts, University Avenue (between High and Webster streets), Booth Number 331

When: Saturday and Sunday 10 a.m. to 6 p.m.

Cost: Admission is free.

Info: Call (650) 324-3121 or visit www.mlaproductions.com/pa_home.html

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