



B. Joseph Valenzuela is an emerging Sacramento artist whose paintings use layers and layers of words as texture.

WORDS SHADE HIS WORK

Musician-turned-artist Uses letters as the DNA of his paintings

By Edgar Sanchez
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B. Joseph Valenzuela was headed toward a music career when he veered on a different path.

It led to his becoming a Sacramento painter, one known for his striking distinctive style.

"I was kind of a late bloomer to the visual arts," Valenzuela said last week in his midtown apartment. "Music was my original passion."

Today, at age 30, Valenzuela is regarded as a maestro-of the canvas, one of the city's top emerging artists.

His paintings convey powerful messages, not only through images, but through the words embedded in them in dark ink.

Most of the words are so tiny, they're not visible from a distance. They emerge to discerning viewers taking close-up looks.

"Sometimes the words are so minuscule, so little, they're reminiscent of atoms or molecules," said Valenzuela, suggesting that words are, in fact, the DNA of his paintings.

"Paragraphs, Sentences ... individual words all come together to shape any particular figure or object," he said. "I use layer upon layer of words as shading, the same way many artists use cross-hatching."

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Artist: Sound, color link sent him on his way

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But, Valenzuela added, he doesn't expect people to read every word.

One of his favorite works – "a seminal piece for me" – depicts an eight-legged horse traveling across the cosmos.

The 9-by-7-foot painting is entitled "The Night Mare." The steed at its center is covered by a galaxy of words, including the lyrics to a song Valenzuela wrote:

"Swallowed by the fog
Swallowed by the sea
Swallowed by the gale
The winds that carried me..."

No single word fully describes Valenzuela, said Tom Monteith, the art professor who steered him toward painting in 2001. In those days, everyone addressed Valenzuela by his first name, Bryan.

"Bryan is a passionate person, an independent spirit," said Monteith, an art instructor at California State University, Sacramento. "It's something you can't teach."

After graduating from Oak Ridge High School in El Dorado Hills, in 1996, Valenzuela enrolled at CSUS.

Soon after, the young man who lived for music courses took a break from campus.

When he re-enrolled in 2001, he took Monteith's course "Beginning Color."

"The musical scales are called chromatic scales, so I was trying to find the connection between color and sound," Valenzuela said.

He got the connection, along with Monteith's suggestion that he become an art major.

"It was clear the Bryan had (great) potential" to excel with paint and brush, Monteith said.

Valenzuela, who expressed "a huge debt of gratitude to Mr. Monteith," graduated from CSUS in 2003 with a bachelor's degree in studio art.

When he graduated, Valenzuela concentrated on playing with Call Me Ishmael, a rock band he had joined as a singer, guitarist and keyboard player.

In 2005, to promote a self-released full-length album, the band toured the nation's nightclub circuit for two months.

"After we returned, we sort of split up," said Valenzuela, who gave the band its literary name. "Our drummer, Robby Dean, moved to L.A."

"We never officially broke up, but we've been on hiatus for a couple of years."

After the music stopped, Valenzuela opened an art studio behind his apartment.

Since then, he has supported himself by selling his art, which has been exhibited at numerous local galleries.

"I've been lucky, very lucky, that people have been buying my stuff," Valenzuela said. "Every show I've had, people have bought something."

While it's difficult to part with his creations, he said, "It makes me happy at the same time that someone else enjoyed it enough to buy it."

Last year, one of his paintings won an Award of Merit at the State Fair.

Valenzuela is truly talented, said Jennifer Keller, owner of the CoolCat Gallery, where his work has been shown.

"I would love to have one of his works in my home," she said.

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