

“One morning, when Gregor Samsa woke from troubled dreams, he found himself transformed in his bed into a horrible vermin.”

— Franz Kafka, “The Metamorphosis”

CAPTURING INSPIRATION

■ After decades of chasing art thieves, Ventura’s Len Poteshman is following his own artistic muse

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Frank Kafka and Ogden Nash, in a profoundly absurd way, are kindred spirits.

Ventura artist Len Poteshman, who admires both surreal novelist Kafka and light-verse poet Nash, creates art that harbors a similar dark whimsy.

A corporate CEO in one of his sculptures, for example, is morphing into a lizard; in another, a man is a roach a la Gregor Samsa (“Kafka thinks like me,” Poteshman says). And even in the bright, colorful abstract epoxy paintings he’s created most recently, on display through Sept. 30 at the Vita Art Center in Ventura (including one titled “Ode to Ogden” scattered with the poet’s couplets), there’s a heaviness.

LIGHT AND DARKER

The contradictions spill over from his life experiences, which veer toward the darker side.

The 80-something Poteshman, a Chicago native, grew up next to a mortuary; his first memory is of dead people dancing around his bed. He planned a career as a concert violinist until he was drafted in World War II at age 17 — and broke both of his hands so badly in a plane accident that he could no longer play. He does not



Len Poteshman’s sculptures of men morphing into creatures, including “Roach Man” (second from left), are inspired by Franz Kafka. “I think Kafka thinks like me,” Poteshman says. “I can’t take life too seriously. There’s a lot of tongue-in-cheek, a hilarity in these sculptures. Kafka is as contemporary today as he was then: Everything’s a big joke and you can never get your problems resolved.”

talk about the traumatic details. After the military, Poteshman switched to visual arts and earned a master’s degree in Mexico, where he learned how to draw anatomy in part by visiting a morgue.

We’re just getting started.

Poteshman got married in Mexico, and to make a decent living to support his pregnant wife (who later died from illness), he returned to the U.S. to work “temporarily”

See POTESHMAN, 24



“God in his wisdom made the fly. And then forgot to tell us why”

— Ogden Nash, “The Fly”



for the Los Angeles County Sheriff's Department. That turned into a 25-year law enforcement career in which he drew composite drawings of suspects and victims — even getting involved in the Manson murder trials — and worked in the department's art crimes division.

He taught art in Los Angeles after retiring from the Sheriff's Department, and ended up in Ventura 11 years ago when a cruise he had planned for his birthday was canceled after the 9/11 attacks.

Many of his abstract paintings address the frustration he feels about innocent people involved in the horrors of war, from World War II to the current conflict in Afghanistan.

"The beauty of the art for me is that I have a way in which I can express my frustration without going out and killing someone," he said.

Do not cue the morbid music, however, because Potesman is not at all Mr. Depressed Artist Under a Black Cloud. He has a rich sense of humor, and constantly talks about how fortunate he is — to have survived the wartime accident when others did not, to live in Ventura (he and his partner, ceramic artist Linda Carson, moved here from the San Fernando Valley), to still adore classical music, and to create what he wants without financial pressure.

Potesman has never had to worry about making a living from his art, he said, because his other jobs have supported him.

Donna Granata, founder of Focus on the Masters, a nonprofit art group that researches and preserves the lives of noted local artists through oral histories and other documentation, met with Potesman extensively in 2011.

During a 2011 videotaped public Q-and-A with



CONTRIBUTED PHOTO

This detail shot shows a segment of one side of a 12-foot-tall monument Len Potesman created from pieces of handguns and rifles confiscated by the L.A. County Sheriff's Department. The idea came to him when he noticed the "serpentine quality" of the rifle parts.

ARRESTING ART

The Los Angeles County Sheriff's Department saw weaponry. Len Potesman saw artistry.

The Ventura artist, during his 25-year career with the Sheriff's Department, created a stately 12-foot-tall monument out of 7,000 confiscated handguns and rifles.

"Every year, the Sheriff's Department was required to destroy all confiscated guns," Potesman said. "At first they threw them in the Catalina Channel — not a great idea" (for safety or environmental reasons).

The agency then started sending the weapons to a factory that broke them into pieces. Potesman suggested making a memorial sculpture out of the broken-up metal parts.

"You could see some of the rifles had a sort of serpentine quality," he said.

Potesman took the parts to a foundry. "I had one hour to set these things in sand on four sides of four cubes, then they poured molten steel over the top, and sandblasted all the sand off," he said. The cubes were then welded together.

Potesman said he originally wanted the piece to go to the Sheriff's Department, but believes that the National Rifle Association, which wasn't happy about the monument's anti-gun statement, objected, so the sculpture stayed at the foundry for many years. But the Sheriff's Department, in a 1986 Los Angeles Times article, said moving the 8-ton monument was too costly.

Eventually, a Montebello police officer saw the artwork at the foundry. It now stands in front of a Montebello courthouse.

Karen Lindell

Granata at the Brooks Institute in Ventura, Potesman was bewildered when an audience member asked if one of his pieces, a striking ink and charcoal self-portrait (seen in a slide show to accompany the interview), was for sale.

"Why would anyone

want to have my portrait?" he asked.

"That quality of not realizing the value of the work — rare for artists — allows for such freedom of expression," Granata said. "When it's not for sale, the work is deeply personal. I call it 'truth



Some of Len Potesman's sculptures feature people in stages of metamorphosis, including "Owl Man" (foreground). In the background, a corporate executive (Potesman says it's Bernie Madoff) is turning into a reptile.

in the imagery.'"

CRIME SCENE

For Potesman, the transition from music to visual art after his accident wasn't a creative stretch. During high school, Potesman had won scholarships to the Chicago Art Institute and American Academy of Art.

After the war he attended the University of Guadalajara for five years on the G.I. Bill, earning bachelor's and master's degrees in fine arts.

Potesman started out as a portrait painter in Mexico, "but then I was tired of it because most of the people who wanted the portraits weren't terribly interesting," he said, "particularly when you had to

do kids, because you could never see kids in the same way as the parents."

Portraits become more intriguing when he returned to the U.S. seeking a job that would support his family. Potesman responded to an ad for a job as a deputy with the L.A. County Sheriff's Department.

"They were able to take advantage of my background," he said. "Everyone has to start off doing a year of penance (working) in the jail, so I was doing some art rehabilitation of the inmates for a while." He then was enlisted as a composite artist, creating portraits of suspects based on victims' descriptions.

He also re-created crime scenes using actors

and makeup; photos of the staged crimes were often shown to juries. Potesman's file of documents at Focus on the Masters includes several examples of his often gory re-creations.

Potesman was pulled into the Manson murder cases, in particular the murder of Gary Hinman, a music teacher who lived in Topanga Canyon and was attacked by Charles Manson, then killed by Manson follower Robert Beausoleil.

Manson slashed Hinman's face with a sword, cutting off his ear. Beausoleil stabbed Hinman to death in the chest.

Potesman had to create a 3-D sculpture of Hinman's torso with red marks indicating where the knife was thrust under his ribs and his ear cut off.

Hinman's body was so decomposed when it was found a week after the killing, Potesman said, that it was covered in flies, and all he had to work with was a small driver's license photo of the murder victim.

In other cases, he created sculptures that indicated where bullets went through the body.

Then, "the sheriff let me get into art crimes," Potesman said.

He helped create a database, sending a form to galleries and possible collectors that encouraged them to document their possessions, purchase insurance and take other precautionary measures.

In addition to theft, he said, art crimes include forgery, which is "very prevalent, particularly with contemporary work. People will buy this stuff and can be very gullible. It's a dirty business."

"And then of course you've got the laundering," he said, referring to drug dealers who buy and resell paintings as a way to launder narcotics money.

He often worked undercover with the FBI or

See POTESMAN, 25

POTESHMAN from 24

other agencies, acting as an expert or connoisseur interested in purchasing a piece of potentially fraudulent art.

'TOO ECLECTIC'

Now, Potesman devotes time to his own art. "I don't have preconceived ideas on anything I do," he said of his creative process.

Sometimes he simply throws some color on canvases, or sketches with a pen, to see what appears.

"Most of the stuff is totally spontaneous — and not all of it is good," he said. "A lot of it I've destroyed."

Most artists, he said, "when they're successful in a particular genre, they don't want to deviate from that, and that's probably where my fault lies, being so diverse." The owner of



KAREN QUINCY LOBERG/THE STAR

Painter-sculptor Len Potesman shares a studio at the Bell Arts Factory in Ventura with his partner, sculptor Linda Carson. Potesman retired many years ago as a sergeant with the L.A. County Sheriff's Department, where he worked as a composite artist and in the art crimes division. He's also done drawings for the Ventura County Sheriff's Office, he said.

a Los Angeles gallery once told him that he was "too eclectic, and that's not what galleries want. Fortunately I never had to exist on my paintings."

The final piece he points to in his studio is a quirky sculpture of a large crooked

pencil. Printed on the body of the pencil are various puns related to marijuana, including ... "Pot-eshman."

"That's my name," he said with a laugh. "But it (marijuana) doesn't work for me; I don't get any effect out of it."

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