

Always an artist

As a child during the Depression, Mary Pacios experienced poverty. As a young, single mother, she persevered through college. As an adult, she wrote and published books about notable friends. All the while, she was an artist — and still is.

BY SUE ZALOKAR
STAFF WRITER

Mary Pacios, a printmaker living in Portland, has a lot to say about society and life at large. Her work is as striking as it is personal. I'm no art critic, but I can tell you there is something special about the images that Pacios produces. They are beautiful and tragic — semi-abstract representations of real life and human emotion.

Pacios has been an artist all her life. She will chuckle as she tells you the story about drawing on the huge canvas of the earth with a stick as a small child in the late '30s. Raised in the poverty that accompanied many families' experience during the Great Depression, Pacios didn't have access to crayons or even paper and pencil.

True artistic drive cannot be repressed, though, even in an era when women were told where their place was. Pacios would politely albeit firmly ignore the naysayers and prove them all wrong.

She would also befriend some society fringe players: Elizabeth Short (known as "The Black Dahlia") and, during her time in New York City, the Kuchar brothers (indie-cult filmmakers).

"Bette" Short was a neighbor to Pacios, and in their youth — starting when Pacios was 8; Short was a teenager — the two would go for ice cream and to watch movies. Years after Short's unsolved murder, Pacios' desire to correct public opinion of her friend largely drove her to write a book about her. It is the age-old tale that women still have to navigate: you are either a madonna or a whore. Short was neither but has been depicted as the latter. In reality, she was a woman brutally murdered, quite possibly because of no other reason than someone thought they could get away with it. So far, Pacios is one of the only people to restore some dignity to the memory of Short.

Pacios also befriended twin brothers Mike and George Kuchar. She was cast in, or funded, Kuchar film projects. One such role was the lead in the 1995 short film "Society Slut."

Although she spends much of her time creating art, Pacios has found time to volunteer in the community, as well. She was active in both Obama presidential campaigns, and she was an integral volunteer with Street Roots for many years.

Through September, the public can watch Pacios and other artists work at the Geezer Gallery's new working-artists studio in Portland's South Waterfront neighborhood.

In the fall, Pacios will be at Portland State University, auditing and printing on the large press. In October, her work will be exhibited with master printmakers Eleanor H. Erskine, Josh Hulst, Michael McGovern and Jorge L. Porrata in "The Cutting Edge: Portland State



Printmaker Mary Pacios will participate in Art In Action, the Geezer Gallery's new working artists studio in the South Waterfront neighborhood. At right, Pacios' work, "The Salish Canoe." Below: A few of Pacios' large, hand-pressed prints.

of Mind" at Portland's ArtReach Gallery, 1126 SW Park Ave., across from the Portland Art Museum.

Sue Zalokar: For those who might not be familiar with your work, how would you explain it?

Mary Pacios: I draw from life, but I don't draw realistically; I draw emotionally — and I see emotionally. A lot of artists work from a photograph to make a drawing, but photos are very static. If you have a person sitting for you, they have to sit 20 minutes and then take a break. The whole time, they are thinking in their head, and that comes through. I don't do portraits because I'm afraid people aren't going to like what I see, how I see them.

S.Z.: What brings you to this medium?

M.P.: It's like my whole life — it was a fluke. (We both laugh).

S.Z.: I can relate to this.

M.P.: I went to art school as a painter. Most of my shows in San Francisco were my paintings. I was living in Modesto, Calif., and I thought, if I went for a master's degree, I'd be able to teach and earn some money. In the Cal State University system, the only advanced art classes they had were in printmaking.

I worked out an individual major in art and social change. I had it worked out for taking anthropology and sociology courses for academics, and I was going to take all the different kinds of printmaking classes.

The first topic in the printmaking class was relief, and the first medium was linoleum. I'll tell you from the first time I cut into that linoleum ... where had it been all my life? (laughter).

I've always worked big. When I was 5, I was asked what I would want to be when I grew up. I said, "An artist." I don't know where it came from. We were very, very poor. I was born in the Depression, and we were poor. We didn't have crayons and pencils and paper, and I love to draw. So I would go out in the dirt, and I would get a big stick, and I would draw in the dirt. I would have all this space to draw in.

When I started school, we didn't have crayons, but we had little colored pegs. It was in the first years of school that set the pattern for my whole life. In second grade, if you finish the work, you could take out your little box of pegs and you can play with them on your desk. I would always finish my work, get it right — fast. Then while all the kids were working, I would be covering my desk making drawings with these pegs. ... The idea was to keep the kids who finished first quiet. In my whole life, it was: take care of your responsibilities first, and then do what you want.

S.Z.: Can we talk for a minute about the responsibilities that you had as you were creating all of this art?

M.P.: This is an important era for me because the Republicans who are against birth control and abortion and want to go back to the '50s — they scare me.

I watched the first episode of "Mad Men," and I couldn't watch it again because it was like PTSD. It threw me right back into the '50s.

I loved school. It was my haven from a dysfunctional home. And at 17, I had to leave (school). I was pregnant. I didn't want to get married, but I had no choice.

At the time, I would bring shame to my family, and of course birth control was illegal



in Massachusetts. So at 18, three days short of a year, I had my second child. A nurse said to me, I don't want to see you in here next year. This was a Seventh-day Adventist hospital. The nurse told me about diaphragms.

I had never heard the word birth control. These are the instructions she gave me: She wrote down the doctor's name and phone number and said, "Call them; tell them I sent you and that you want an appointment for a checkup." So I went.

She also explained that in Massachusetts, if a doctor dispensed birth control, he would lose his license to practice medicine, so it was very serious. I went, and I told all my friends, and I gave them the doctor's name. They had never heard of birth control. Yeah (deep sigh). So that's what it was like. It was an underground network of women helping other women.

I left my husband, but I couldn't make it on my own at 18 with two children. Nobody would rent to me. I went back to my husband. I had no alternative. I had another baby at 20. After the baby was born, he said he wanted to

leave me. Oh, God! I was so happy! I figured, I can't let him know how happy I am, so he's at the door with his suitcase. It was like a movie. I'm standing there and he says, "You look so sad. I can't leave you like this," and he comes back in!

S.Z.: Oops! You might have looked a little less sad.

M.P.: He left a week later. His girlfriend was pregnant. But I had an apartment. I had babysitters. I just didn't have to support my husband anymore.

I was making more money as a waitress than he was making. Then I got my GED, and I got a job at a jazz club called Storyville. It was run by George Wein, who put on the Newport Jazz Festival. He and the manager hired me because I knew nothing about jazz. He said our next band is Woody Herman, and I said, "Woody who?"

The thing is they didn't want jazz groupies there. They wanted people who were going to hustle the drinks. For the next few years, I listened to Dizzy Gillespie, Sarah Vaughan,

Art In Action

What: Observe Mary Pacios and other artists in action during open-studio hours.

Where: Emery Apartments, 3139 and 3147 SW Moody Ave., on the waterfront.

When: 11 a.m.-7 p.m. Wednesday-Sunday, through September.

More information: Geezer Gallery, www.geezergallery.com.

Duke Ellington ... Count Basie ...

Most of the wait staff were college kids, and some of them went to Mass Art (Massachusetts College of Art and Design). One of the waitresses said she'd like to see my drawings. I had been drawing sketches of my children. I had to draw fast because they move so fast. I brought in a whole bunch of quick sketches of my kids, and she said, "You should go to art school."

I said, "Oh! I can't. I've got three kids to support ..." (but ultimately) I got accepted.

S.Z.: What was it like to be working and going to school as a single parent?

M.P.: My first year in college was something to get used to because I had to get my kids ready and I didn't want them to feel rushed in the morning. (I'd have to) get them off to school before catching my bus that was 45 minutes over to Mass Art then switch gears and be an art student.

Towards the end of my first semester, I was doing (really well) in the studio classes. The ones where I had homework? Not so good. But I was one of the top students in the drawing department.

The dean called me in, and I was all excited; I figured he's going to offer me a scholarship. After a little bit he said, "I want to cut to the chase. You should withdraw. You have three kids, and there's no way you can finish a four-

year program. You should go home and take care of your kids properly." I said no.

He told me I never should have been entered here. The school is crowded, and we can only accept the top third of those who qualify — meaning I was in the top third. He told me I was taking up valuable space.

S.Z.: What the ... ?

M.P.: Yeah. Of course I said no. I was the first woman with children who was the sole supporter of her kids to be admitted to that school. He thought I didn't belong there.

To counterbalance this, I had been living in a housing project, and the women in the housing project, we made friends and helped each other.

I had so many people (in my life) — how the society was at large — there was a subculture that helped people (like me) get by.

'Exerting the female dominance'

S.Z.: The female form is significantly represented in your body of work. What is the significance of this to you?

M.P.: The female body is beautiful. It's exerting who I am and who I identify with. I think to me, it's exerting the female dominance.

S.Z.: Indeed!

M.P.: I was surrounded by this. I had to overcome — women my age had to overcome — this thinking. If you were smarter, you had to pretend to be dumber. I didn't want to play that game anymore.

I'm an ex-Catholic, and there's a lot of things I don't like about (Catholicism), but the one thing that it did do for me as a kid, I'd go to church and I would see the Virgin Mary, I would see all these female saints, and of course I'm Mary. The highest thing you could attain was sainthood. The saint was above the pope. That meant that all these female saints were above the pope. It gave me the

counterbalance to "Men are superior, and you should defer to them."

S.Z.: You talk a bit about the sexism you've experienced. Do you experience ageism in your artistic or day-to-day life?

M.P.: In my day-to-day life, it's the condescending attitudes that sometimes get to me, whether it's being told I'm "feisty" or referred to as "lady" or just plain talking down to me. I live in subsidized housing, and under the new owners, I received a pre-inspection cleaning checklist suitable for a 12-year-old or a recalcitrant teen. Wash dishes and put away, etc. I saw red!

I experience good ageism in that I always get a seat. (Laughter)

S.Z.: Take advantage of that!

M.P.: When I was in New York City ... what's the name of the Dorothy Day group?

S.Z.: The Catholic Worker Movement.

M.P.: Yes! I met this young guy; he was Puerto Rican. He did the (El) Museo del Barrio (a New York City museum devoted to Latino culture in the Americas). I gave him the prints of Adam and Eve (a piece Pacios created in 1984) for the museum. He introduced me to this man who looked so old to me; he was maybe 70. He had an etching plate in his hand he had just done, and he was showing me the plate, and I was thinking, "Wow! When I'm 70 I want to be like him — still working."

This is why Geezer Gallery is so good because they have these programs and classes to stimulate the creativity in older people — the ones who have been separated from it.

The fact is that they show the work of older artists like these. (Pacios gestures toward the room around us and the artwork displayed throughout.) You can tell these are all experienced, developed artists. That's what they show. Whereas other galleries would pass

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