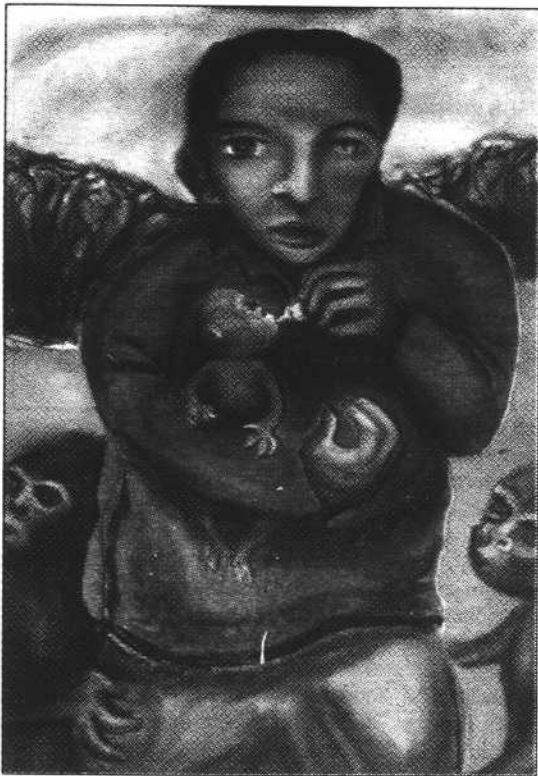


Artistic Differences

An ongoing look at ethnic contributions to Nebraska state culture.



ART COURTESY OF GERARDO MEZA
"BOTTLE FED," an oil painting by Meza, reaffirms one of his prevailing themes: the significance of family and the role of the father.



RICK TOWNLEY/DN
PAINTER GERARDO MEZA, 35, has been a contributor to the local art scene for more than a decade.

Art reflects heritage

Local artist uses culture as theme in paintings

BY CHRISTOPHER HEINE
Staff writer

Gerardo Meza's home is a tribute to his most sacred loves — family and art.

Pictures drawn by Meza's two young daughters and old black-and-white photographs of extended family are placed throughout the downstairs walls of his rented, brick duplex.

Meza's family and its history is of primary importance to him; one of his past gallery exhibits was titled "The Father Figure."

"A lot of it came from when my dad

died, and I realized that he was such a big influence on me," Meza said. The influence is confirmed in the northeast corner of the living room where two photos hang closely together. One is of Meza as a young boy posing in the saddle of a wooden horse in Mexico. The other photo is of his grown father sitting on the same structure. Nearby hangs a passport photo of Meza's father. It was taken just before he emigrated from Mexico.

A crucifix hangs above the home's entrance marking Meza's devout hold on his family's long-lived history of Catholic belief.

Deb Oden-Meza, his wife, said the couple attends Mass each weekend.

Meza may be a traditional family man, but he is a modern artist in every sense. And this, too, is well-represented on the walls of his home.

The downstairs is dominated by the 35-year-old's starkly colorful and surreal images and characters.

Meza puts his signature on paintings with slightly disfigured beings that seem to literally float off the canvas.

Furthermore, his works are tinted just enough with cubism to make most weekend art fans think of Picasso.

The influence of such great Hispanic artists on Meza is unquestionable, and his brilliant portrayals of modern themes have led to exhibited pieces

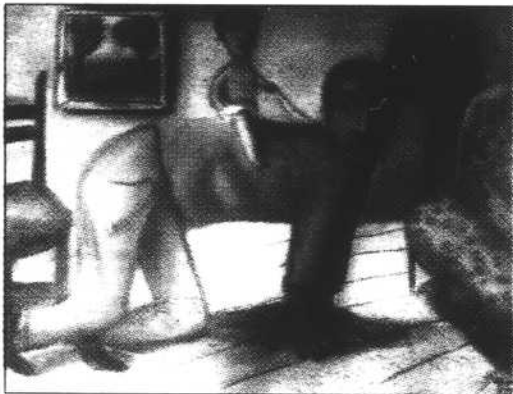
in Chicago and Omaha in addition to countless Lincoln showings.

The successful painter said he'd rather not sell his work. But if Meza didn't allow interested buyers to purchase his pieces, he'd soon run out of room to store them in his house.

"It's a traumatic experience when you first start at it," he said. "I just try to look at it like I'm giving something good of myself to society."

His wife thinks he's giving more and more all the time.

"Since I've known him, his work has really evolved from just something cool he does," Oden-Meza said.



ART COURTESY OF GERARDO MEZA
"HORSE" BY GERARDO MEZA is one of three paintings centered on the significance of family in his "The Father Figure" series. The compellingly abstract and slightly distorted lines of Meza's work have earned him national attention.

"Now I think Gerardo is known more in the community as a teacher."

Meza said he has spoken to groups of high school and grade school Hispanic students in Lincoln and Grand Island about being an artist.

"I hope to open up a different way of thinking for new immigrant kids from Mexico," he said. "Try to show them there are other ways of expressing themselves than through gangs and trouble."

Meza said his role as a mentor started at the Hispanic Community Center in Lincoln. The side-wall, outside mural at the center was painted by the artist with the help of more than 20 school-age children in the summer of 1995.

Elliot Revas, then assistant director of the center located at 23rd and O streets, said the project was an example

of Meza's commitment to helping kids.

"What he's done is wonderful," Revas said. "The mural makes me proud to be a Latino-American."

Cecilia Huerta, of the Mexican-American Commission, said the mural inspired her to learn more about Meza.

"It tells a story every Latino-American can relate to," Huerta said. "It's about family, community, religion and other things we all understand."

Huerta said she contacted Meza to create a cover for a book titled "Nuestros Tesoros: A celebration of Nebraska's Mexican-American Heritage."

"Nuestros Tesoros" translates to "Our Treasures" in English. The book documents the customs and folklore of Mexican-Americans: Meza was the perfect person for the job.

"It was a way I could connect with the rest of the Hispanic community in Nebraska," Meza said. "It was another chance to give a piece of myself to my heritage."

The Hispanic community certainly isn't alone in recognizing the work of Meza.

University of Nebraska-Lincoln Art Professor Martha Horvay said she has been "extremely impressed" with the artist's sense of style.

"His work is very expressive and psychologically complex," Horvay said. "Gerardo has an excellent sense of colors and uses them well to evoke an ambivalent, narrative mood."

She said Meza develops original images of humanity.

"I'm particularly impressed by his depiction of babies," Horvay said. "He doesn't paint them like other people have. He doesn't make them look cute. They usually look sad or serious and that makes you take them more seriously."

Meza said his paintings are surreal for a reason.

"I don't do anything from real life," he said. "I get it all from my head with the dreams and emotions I have going on at the time."

The painter said his art in "The Father Figure" series had much to do with his own fatherhood.

"Another thing I realized after Dad

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