



3 artists in SROs, where they live among their creations

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work, or even sold a single piece, but she has given a few things away.

Her piece de resistance — it took a year to paint — is the plumed serpent Mayan god. The stippled orange and green oil painting is 20-by-30 inches. "I have a thing for cultures other than my own," Miller says. "I feel like I'm a child of the universe anywhere I go."

Miller periodically flees the Tenderloin, or she couldn't stand living here. "You see people throwing up in the street, shooting up, jacking off, it's a rough place." She was mugged a year ago. But the grim Tenderloin is ultimately affordable. And because of her Spartan life she's able to save her nickels and dimes to travel every year or two.

"I get an idea of where I want to go and get books on it and do research," she says.

Miller wasn't always a full-time artist. A barber for 28 years, she had had two shops in Carmel Valley, the Clip Joint and the Mid-Valley Barbershop, where she scratched her artistic itch by whittling or painting at a little desk in back. Then she sold the shops to bankroll her lifelong dream — a dive into higher education. And at Notre Dame de Namur University in Belmont, she did quite well, graduating magna cum laude with a BFA degree. Then she got a master's degree.

She lived in San Carlos. As her savings dwindled, her rent jumped \$200, leaving her \$6 a month to live on. She got "very depressed." She ended up in San Francisco homeless as she had been for four years in her early 20s in Monterey. But she pulled out of it in a recovery and treatment program in 2006. Two years later, through Section 8 housing, she became an Alexander resident with a heightened sense of well-being.

Living in an SRO has been a godsend because it is affordable housing. But otherwise it hasn't affected her art.

"I always wanted cheap housing, but even in a homeless shelter I did art. It's something I have to do. It brings me peace."

An ad recently caught her attention that sent her into her research mode.

"I wanted to go to Key West, Fla., but I saw this \$367 cruise to the Bahamas," she says, unable to hide her enthusiasm. "How do you say no to that, dude?"

A little detail was the cruise left from Miami. No problem. Miller planned to grab her German-made art pencils, pack her sketch-

book along with a stack of peanut butter sandwiches, take the Greyhound across the country, stopping at youth hostels along the way.

The cruise, the cheapest way to travel she says, stopped at Ft. Lauderdale where she went into a funky art store and found a battered, 6-foot totem pole. She bought it and had it sent to her at the Alexander. She has been whittling away ever since to smooth the surface. She'll cover it with five pounds of beads, she estimates, which will take "months and months."

"I like to go see how other people live," she says. "And I see everything through my art eyes — shapes and color. Then I come back to the Tenderloin and I'm okay for a few months. Then I have to have another idea about some place. I'll start the research because I'll have to get away again."

She'll go to Guatemala this year, then tackle her favorite dream — Australia, thousands of nickels and dimes away.

"I love the aboriginal culture, their idea of origin, their religious beliefs," she says. "They can make art out of just a twig — painting it and putting dots on it. I've used dots, too. But that's a \$7,000 trip. Until then, I'll be eating lettuce sandwiches and peanut butter."

PICTURE PERFECT: POSTCARD OBSESSION

Todd Hebbbron got antsy when his friend, Buck, didn't return to the bar from the lobby bathroom in Yosemite's Ahwanee Hotel. So he strolled over to the gift shop, bought five postcards, returned to the bar and wrote each one to a friend.

"Maybe if he'd have come back sooner, I wouldn't have been doing this," said Hebbbron, 62, grinning and looking pleased at the postcards on his busy walls in his neatly organized sixth-floor room in the Ambassador Hotel. He likes sports, too.

The walls are colorfully swathed, dominated by Giants orange and 49ers red. He has 24



Joseph Sierra loves having art around him in his San Cristina Hotel room, and he spreads it throughout the hotel and goes out of his way to encourage other residents to try their hand at creating.

Giants schedules, 6 49ers, 6 Warriors and 24 pennants. He also has framed pictures of athletes, Thanksgiving church gatherings, seven blowups of Route 66 decal-scenes (he belongs to the nostalgic Route 66 Association), a raft of pins, old maps, two watercolors his stepfather painted and, not the least of it, 17 framed postcards. However, it's an understatement to say the postcards are the tip of the iceberg.

Hebbbron has 12,605 postcards that he went on to write since that stimulating bathroom break, Sept. 23, 1974. From then on, Hebbbron, a postcard collector before that, wrote them five at a time, being especially prolific when traveling. He keeps a diary with the names. The recipients are his family in Los Altos and other relatives and friends in California, Illinois, Minnesota, Texas, Oregon and Washington.

"My former landlady in Minnesota not only answers, she writes me about twice as many as I send her," he says. "People are grateful for a postcard correspondence. I'm not a computer person, just sort of old-fashioned."

Hebbbron's postcard-writing record came in 1994, a year he traveled across country. He wrote 605. Last year he wrote 379 postcards, and he just keeps going.

The ones on his walls are select postcards commemorating milestones, like the 7,000th he sent, and the 9,000th. But Hebbbron has embellished the postcards to look like fancy certificates. He has numbered and color-copied the postcard and on paper above has written the date, the five addressees he sent the card to, the store he wrote in, plus the town's name along with its emblem. He puts the special ones in 8- by 10-inch frames. Other formatted postcards he stashes in 157 scrapbooks, most of which are in storage and at his parents'.

"I call them picture postcard personal plates."

Some he has given away, like the one near the pickle barrel on the balcony facade at Tommy's Joyn on Van Ness Avenue.

You could say Hebbbron's life has followed his bliss. In 1982, he wrote a compliment to a postcard manufacturer in Aurora, Ill. It led to an exchange of letters, and a job for him the next year.

Although Hebbbron has been at the

Ambassador nearly seven years, he doesn't like staying long anyplace and soon moved on to work for postcard companies in Phoenix, Portland, San Antonio, and Smith Novelty Co. here in San Francisco, one of the nation's oldest postcard companies, where he continues to work periodically, stocking store shelves, among other jobs.

"People come in and say this is like a little museum," Hebbbron says pleasantly, proud of the colorful detail he has amassed. Friends have suggested he use his copyrighted format and go into business. "But no," he says. "It's strictly a hobby. I'm in for the nostalgia of it."

COMPASSION IN HIS MEDIUM

Artist Joseph Sierra came downtown 15 years ago to check on studio space at the Warfield, passing on Market Street the San Cristina Hotel, an SRO he thought might make a good dwelling place. It was centrally located and near Central City Hospitality House and its arts program.

The studio didn't work out, too pricey for his shallow pockets. Homeless at times and living in his car, he applied for Section 8, and got the San Cristina — 18 months later.

The SRO changed his life. Nothing in his experience related to it, he says, and it was nothing he ever could have imagined.

Born in Mexico to a family of field hands, they came north to work in farming communities from Bakersfield to Modesto under the searing summer sun.

"We worked in the fields — grapes, onions, garlic — 100-degree weather," Sierra said. He was telling his story in his colorful San Cristina third-floor room behind his door covered with silver CDs. "The work day started at 6 a.m."

Sierra's about 5-feet-5 with alert dark eyes and a round serious face that seldom breaks a smile. His thoughtful answers are surprisingly quick. And he never complains. "It was an experience, a way to see life in another way."

He came to the city of his dreams in 1994 wanting to be an artist. He loved San Francisco and its energy. He applied at the Art Institute.

"I got the tour," he said. He was offered a scholarship — 85% of the \$25,000-a-semester tuition. But he couldn't afford the 15%, so he

headed to City College, and with no regrets.

"I didn't have the income but I wasn't discouraged. To me it was just getting the tools (for art) and I met some wonderful people at City College."

For Sierra, art is the radiant flower of life and the fount of energy that fuels his compassion. "It's the way I see things and communicate," he says.

At City College, he got another tool for his personality. The shy, introverted Sierra was afraid to be in crowds, even to go outside. In art class he made a clay angel hiding its face behind its left wing. But Sierra found two psychology courses that addressed his problem. Eventually, he overcame shyness. Angels he made after that weren't hiding. They are iconic for him. "I have always felt that I am protected," Sierra says.

To some innocent folks — like Sierra certainly was — San Cristina would have been a nightmare. To him it was an "experience." He says most of the 58 residents have mental issues and many have addictions and have been homeless.

"I saw the need for improvements," Sierra says. "So I went to most meetings and addressed the issues that can be used to integrate people. It opened my eyes to a new reality I never knew could exist. It has affected the way I see the world today and my art."

"We can do things to affect the lives of others."

He thought the place needed brightening up. "The energy was depressing," he says. "I thought it would be healing to have some color."

Sierra suggested in 2002 to Community Housing Partnership, which owns the place, that he paint a tropical mural on a community room wall. CHP approved and furnished the paint. As more of Sierra's ideas tumbled out, the project grew to include a decorative terrarium with flowers and a gurgling fountain under the mural.

"I wanted something relaxing," he says, "a

small paradise so people felt connected."

He went on to organize monthly art and crafts classes downstairs and to furnish supplies, snacks and beverages. Making art is therapeutic, he says. When he finds out what each person likes he suggests a suitable medium.

Once a month he organizes recycling, which is more like a garage sale. He makes a flyer and circulates it, then meets with residents a day in advance to preview their pieces, mostly cameras, DVDs and stereos. They do the pricing. At the beginning of the month, the objects go on tables he sets up outside and the sale is on. He includes recycle pamphlets.

"A lot of units are full of stuff but it's not organized properly. If they've been homeless and living out of a push cart, they bring all that with them. Some don't have money for food."

An inveterate recycler, Sierra scours neighborhoods on his bicycle for castoff treasures to bring back to the hotel. Sometimes he'll travel by Muni, so he can haul larger items like a TV and refrigerator, which he has given away to residents who needed them.

Sierra's art — paintings, photographs, collages — are also found throughout the lobby and ground-floor common rooms.

Now, he's starting to organize a consciousness-raising group to meet on the topic of breathing. He has asthma. There are many smokers in the San Cristina.

"I'm not better than anyone," he says. "I just want to do things right. I want to bring the best of me wherever I am. Thank God I don't have addictions. Thankfully, I have ideas."

It's a huge commitment the diminutive artist has taken on, sustained by his own art, much of which is stored yet in evidence in his room. One wall is dominated by three 4-by-4-foot abstract paintings in red, green and yellow, giving off a tropical air. Other walls have masks and other paintings. Below, on tiered surfaces, are small shrines and hundreds of statuary and icons. Some are the seven dwarfs, a small plastic Christmas tree with suspended silver horses and the four clay angels he created while at City College. The room's cramped, but tidy with a hard-to-see washbasin in the corner.

"I have to deal with drugs and mental illness," Sierra says. "For me it's important. I'm motivated. It's a reflection of being alive in the electric energy that's here in San Francisco. I like to project that as a citizen of the world." ■

One angel Sierra made (center) is hiding his face under his wing, reflecting Sierra's own shyness, which he has overcome.

Todd Hebbbron is surrounded in his Ambassador Hotel SRO by his postcard collection that is meticulously curated with complete context for each.



PHOTOS BY TOM CARTER