

# For one artist, the pandemic has allowed for an expansion of expression

By Kathleen Alaks of the Daily Courier

For Valente Ornelas the man, the coronavirus pandemic has been a time of apprehension and change.

For Valente Ornelas the artist, the past six months have been a time of experimentation and growth.

"Uncertainty has tasked me to begin reimagining what to do with art, with painting. This is a time or an opportunity for me to stop doing what is comfortable," he said.

Ornelas pursues an abstract approach to painting in his newest series of acrylics, titled "What Now," on display through September at Gallery One in downtown Grants Pass. This is the first time the 67-year-old artist has been featured in a gallery show.

His "What Now" paintings are "free flowing, nonrepresentational and without preconception. Basic," he said. "It's a new way to express myself. I'm not sure what I'm doing and I don't know where this will lead me. Hopefully, it will lead to an answer for 'what now?'"

Born and raised in Bakersfield, California, Ornelas was interested in art and making art at an early age. He remembers thumbing through volumes of his father's Encyclopedia Britannica, always lingering over images of artistic masterpieces.

He studied art in college, Bakersfield Community College, San Jose State University and finally California State University at Bakersfield, earning a bachelor's degree in art.

"Then, in order to make a living, I earned two teaching credentials from CSUB," he said. He taught fifth grade and his wife Claudia taught first grade in Bakersfield city schools for many years.

They retired in 2009 and began exploring California, the Sierras, the valleys and the northern coast.

"We had always done a lot of camping trips to Mexico. But when we got the fifth wheel, we did it more intensely, sometimes spending almost an entire year on the road," Ornelas said. "We were kind of like freewheelers."

In 2011, they settled in Grants Pass.

Ornelas quickly got involved in the local art scene, painting with the Brushstrokes artist group and attending figure drawing sessions at the Grants Pass Museum of Art.

"We found that the art community was enthusiastically encouraging," he said. "Not only did I get to make art, I met and made friends with local artists."

In 2016, Ornelas teamed up with artist Judy Davidson to paint the colorful garden mural — vegetables, flowers, herbs and a vineyard scene — on the side of the Herb Shop at Fourth and G streets.

"I always feel a sense of pride when I see someone having their photo taken in front of that mural," Ornelas said. "That's our contribution to downtown."

When he first moved to Southern Oregon, Ornelas says he found artistic inspiration in the local landscape.

"The beauty of the scenery here, with the rivers and the forests and the farms and the vineyards... for an artist it's kind of irresistible," he said. "Landscapes is what got me going again with painting."

Those paintings were "somewhere between representational abstract expressionism and impressionism, with a strong dose of intuition and alchemy," he said.

But landscapes are not quite doing it for him anymore. He is on a new journey of self discovery.

"I gave myself permission to try something new," Ornelas said. "Now I'm just pouring paint on canvas, just to see where it goes."

"What Now" is on display at Gallery One, 229-B S.W. G St., through September. The gallery is open 11 a.m. to 3 p.m. Thursdays, Fridays and Saturdays.

Ornelas will be at the gallery Friday during regular hours to meet with visitors and talk about his work.

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