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# Artist's Self-Portraits Rendered In Rainbow of Own Skin Tones

Heidi Benson, Chronicle Staff Writer Published 4:00 am, Wednesday, January 3, 2001

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San Francisco, CA. "Leo Bersamina" and his painting, 'Fool's Bamboo II'. Gallery Paule Anglim 14 Geary St. will be showing his work from 03 Jan. thru 27 Jan. 2001. Photo/John O'Hara

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If painters practice the art of illusion, then painter **Leo Bersamina**'s remark might seem out of character: "The camera can't lie."

The San Francisco-born artist is alluding to the evolution of his technique.

Working in his Potrero Hill studio after completing graduate work in fine art at Yale, Bersamina, 37, uses the tools of both a photographer and a painter to create unusual self-portraits.

"I was dealing with issues of ethnicity," he says. But rather than wrestling with fashionable identity politics, Bersamina says he was interested in "the things that make up the person that I am. And because I'm a person of color, ethnicity comes into play."

Bersamina's latest show -- a body of artwork that includes painting and sculpture called "Blue Room" -- is on display at San Francisco's **Gallery Paule Anglim** tomorrow night, the first Thursday of the month, when downtown galleries stay open late.

Growing up in Sonoma and Pacifica, Bersamina was intrigued by his Filipino, Mexican, Italian and Anglo heritage. Today, one of the most powerful works on the walls of his Potrero Hill home is his self-portrait "Skin Dial." A color wheel holds the center, while lines radiate out from it on a reflective sky-blue ground. How could such a seemingly geometric painting be a self-portrait? Well, that color wheel is made up of photographs of Bersamina's own skin, shot in various environments under different light conditions, from natural to artificial. Every skin tone, from white to black, is represented.

He began his ethnic investigations first by simply painting skin tones. "I thought, 'No, that's not right. Someone's done that.' . . . I didn't want to take my work through such a subjective filter, via painting. That's how I got interested in the camera, because of its objective quality."

By the time he left for Yale, he was packing some unusual materials. "I had a friend who works in a genetics lab sequence my genes, and started to play with that." (A gene sequence is an X-ray-like image in which a person's genetic "fingerprint" is revealed.)

"But again, whenever I tried to draw or paint from that, it flattened out the whole idea. I got interested in the actual film -- and it's beautiful. Absolutely sublime. I thought, why not just use photographs? It really worked conceptually, and from there, I went into weaving them -- along with the skin-tone photos. I actually cut them up and manually weaved them together."

Photographer **Cindy Sherman**, considered one of the most influential young American artists, has shown over the past 20 years that the self-portrait is always relevant. Bersamina adds: "Self-portraiture is interesting now that people are becoming aware that people aren't just white and they're not just black and they're not just brown -- they can be a number of those things and can access any of those cultures."

Bersamina also taps his passion for surfing, which has taken him all over the world. "Traces of place creep into my work," he says. "I think we all live our lives based on our memories."

One painting in his home is a particularly powerful meditation on memory. "Fool's Bamboo" (1999) began with a bamboo rug Bersamina once used on the floor, over which he superimposed an elaborate maplike pattern -- his remembrance of his paper route from his youth in Pacifica, painted in black over a super-reflective surface. (Inspired by years of making surfboards, Bersamina favors this shiny resin coat "because it always appears wet and adds another layer of mystery.") With hints of influences from early **Frank Stella** to **Gerhard Richter**, the resulting object invites and rewards inspection: It is at once self-portraiture, abstraction and a beautiful exercise in mixed media.

"What I want to do with this latest work is to take these techniques and go to the source of my inspiration -- the ocean, surfing, travel and all that encompasses," Bersamina says.

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## GALLERY SHOW

FIRST THURSDAY: About 20 downtown San Francisco galleries will stay open late tomorrow, until 7:30 p.m. Admission is free. For information, call the **San Francisco Art Dealers Association**, (415) 626-7498, or the **San Francisco Bay Area Gallery Guide**, (415) 921-1600. Leo Bersamina's show "Blue Room," which also includes work by **Laura Dufort** and Tomas Nakada, is on view through Jan. 27 at Gallery Paule Anglim, 14 Geary St., San Francisco, (415) 433-2710.