

Pucker up

Pop art and whimsy define style of 'Lip Guy'

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By Sue Mayfield Geiger



Photos by Kevin Cox

When you pull into the driveway of Bob Pahlka's lime green art studio/workshop/home in San Leon, you immediately notice the big, painted red lips that say "Kiss Me."

And when you enter his house, lips abound — in practically every room. Why? "It just came out of my head," Pahlka said. "A gallery in Houston was having a show some years back and the theme was 'Love and Kisses,' so I decided to do big lips — 36 by 42 inches on a wood panel — and it sold immediately. I began doing more of them — even bigger — and since then, I've sold every piece of lip art that I've painted. I don't know why; they just sell," said Pahlka, who is now known as "Lip Guy." Born in Oklahoma City, Pahlka arrived in the Clear Lake area about 20 years ago via New York City and Denver. With careers in retail and homebuilding, he eventually became his own general contractor and got interested in art along the way.



"I wanted to do something more creative, so I started making canvasses out of bendable plywood," he said. The one on his front porch has 29 different sides to it. Pahlka soon began taking art lessons at Art League of Houston to learn abstract technique. "I didn't want to do landscapes or portraits and abstract intrigued me," he said. After dabbling in painting and sculpting, he started making his own wood panels. "Most of my art is on panels now — mainly birch," he said. "I use a lot of texture, and the panels lend themselves better to that as opposed to canvas, which sags and cracks." Pahlka's contracting business boomed after Hurricane Ike and he was spending more and more time in San Leon and Galveston when he noticed many properties for sale. He started asking around and found a house that spoke to him. "It had been heavily damaged by water and was basically a shell," he said. "But the entire house was diagonal tongue and groove so it was pretty sturdy." It took Pahlka more than two years to make it livable. "After completing the house, I got serious about my art," he said.

He describes his style as a combination of pop art and whimsy — particularly those lips. Yet, recently he has been leaning toward sculptures with a lot of symbolism, much like Jackson Pollock and Roy Lichtenstein. Pahlka's pieces contain the essence of Mickey Mouse, Star Wars, tiny farm animals, miniature soldiers, vivid glass vegetables and just about anything you might find at a garage sale or the Dollar Store. He also paints Queen Palm pods in various shapes and sizes. "I accumulate things that I think will make good art," Pahlka said. "I see something and think, 'Oh yeah, I might do something with that.' I don't visualize ahead of time. I have the items at hand and then assemble the art."

Pahlka gives credit to Salli Babbitt, an art teacher with whom he has studied for about 10 years. He concedes that he does get ideas by looking at other artists' works. "I've learned a lot from art history," he said. "And a lot of my inspiration comes from Warhol, Rauschenberg, Magritte and Picasso."



"I want someone to say, 'Wow, that's weird,' when they look at my art," he said. His prizewinning sculpture "Self Portrait" was on display in the Bank of America lobby in downtown Houston a few years ago and now occupies a prominent place in his living room. "My art isn't gallery art," Pahlka said. "It's more festival art, because I'd rather sell my art and meet the people who buy it as opposed to having it on display."

Pahlka's downstairs workshop is full of lumber, carpentry tools, acrylic paints, palm pods and other oddball things that will no doubt become works of art. He has shown his work at many galleries and art festivals and is a member of several art organizations. His work in progress? Lips, of course.



Self Portrait