

MANUEL SANTANA
1927-2008

County Artist of the Year dies at 81

Manuel Santana left an indelible mark on Central Coast arts and politics

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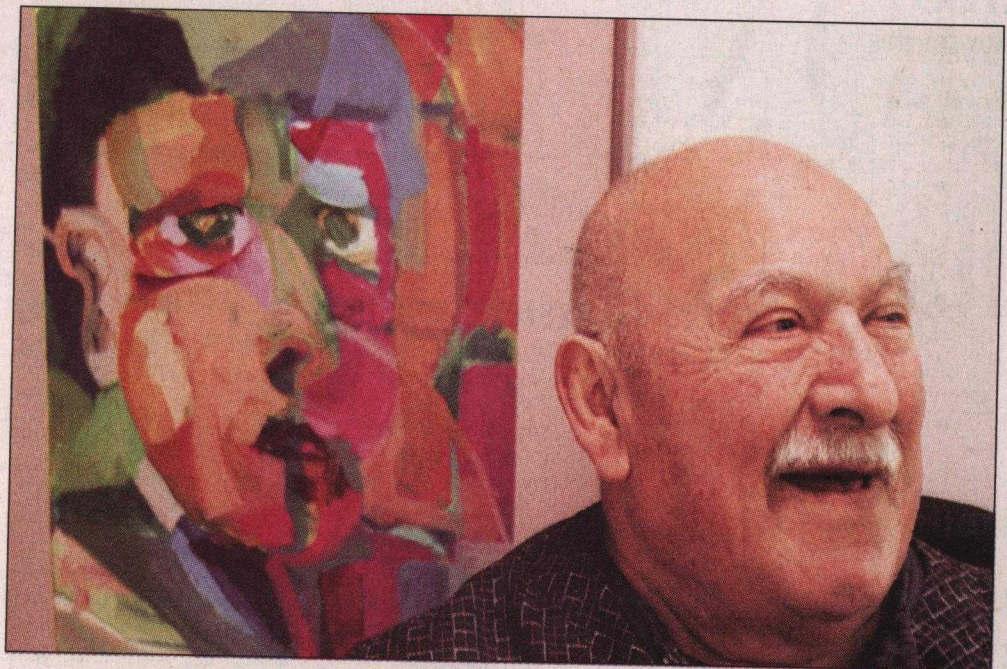
Manuel Santana, Santa Cruz County's Artist of the Year, restaurateur, painter, community activist, and a transforming force in the political and cultural art of the Central Coast, died Tuesday of complications from a brief illness.

He was 81.

"In his art and everything he touched, he could see the big picture. He could envision something bigger," said Earleen Overend, a friend and colleague who worked with Santana when he was president of the Cabrillo Music Festival in the 1970s and '80s. "That was a big part of what he would do for people and organizations. He could conceptualize things in ways that other people couldn't."

Born March 31, 1927, the son of a Mexican immigrant and a first-generation Mexican-American, Santana grew up in Los Angeles shining shoes and collecting glass bottles to help his family make ends meet.

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Contributed photo

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Santana

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His birth father, Gregorio Ruiz Velasco, returned to his hometown of Aguascalientes, Mexico, soon after Santana was born. He was later adopted by his stepfather.

At an early age, he demonstrated his love of art by collecting comic books and drawing bugs when he was placed in detention in school.

Still, Santana entered the art world almost by accident. With six months left to complete his studies to become a teacher at Los Angeles State College, he decided to quit, upset with the sorry state of education. One of his psychology teachers suggested he enroll in art classes: so impressed she was with his artistic abilities, she helped him get a spot at the Otis Art Institute of Los Angeles County. He was in his early 30s and had never taken a drawing class in his life. It was in the middle of the semester, there were no beginner's classes at the institute, and he was thrown into courses that pushed his abilities. He studied for two years at the institute, and later took private lessons.

By then, he had already been married to his high school sweetheart Alice Morales for more than a decade, and had two young boys. With a family to raise, he couldn't pursue art full time, and economics forced him to put down his brushes.

In 1961 he moved to Santa Cruz, where he first worked in construction, later establishing Manuel's in Aptos and Jardines de San Juan in San Juan Bautista. Known for his strong attachment to family, Santana would close his restaurant on Monday nights to watch movies at home with his children.

"I love my dad," said his son Leonardo. "To me he wasn't 'the great Manny.' He was my dad."

He had been a restaurateur for a few years when some of the most dramatic events in the history of the Chicano civil rights movement took place: labor leader César Chávez began a strike against the grape growers in California's Central Valley town of Delano. The farmworkers' cause was one of many Santanas would take on, along with improving rural development in the Central Coast, challenging segregation, and a myriad of other social endeavors.

He also had a passion for architecture and design. In 1963, he designed and built his own three-story glass house on Santana Lane in the Day Valley area of Aptos. He lived there for 27 years.

His father, who owned a foundry, cast a bell for Santana after the restaurateur opened Jardines de San Juan in 1975. When the Mission in San Juan Bautista was later being restored, the original mission bell was sent to Spain. The "Manuel Santana Bell" for a time became the mission's bell and is now displayed in the mission's gardens.

Santana's love of life was as boundless as his energy: in addition to his two restaurants, he served the University of Califor-

nia, Santa Cruz as the Founder of the Martin Luther King Committee; participated on the U.C. Water Resources Advisory Board; was a UCSC Fellow for Merrill College and was on the Board of Directors for the Bear Republic Theatre Company.

Santana also worked in Monterey and Santa Cruz counties on the National Advisory Council for Rural Economic Development as president of the Central Coast Counties Development Corporation, which in the mid-1970s started the Salinas-based nonprofit farming center now called ALBA and organized a farmworkers' cooperative at the San Jerardo labor camp in Monterey County.

He also helped organize the first Housing Authority in Santa Cruz County.

In 1989, after about three decades as a businessman, he decided to pass on the administration of his restaurants to his family so he could dedicate his life to art. He was 63 years old, and had not painted for nearly 30 years.

In almost two decades of frenzied activity, Santana produced hundreds of acrylics, prints, sculptures, and political cartoons. His canvases are known for bold strokes, explosive colors, and criticism of this country's political life. Manuel often cited the influence of his Mexican family — a prominent business and political clan in Aguascalientes — in shaping his knowledge and appreciation of his Mexican culture.

He also donated space there for the initial home of El Teatro Campesino. He was instrumental in the establishment of the world-renowned Cabrillo Music Festival where he served six terms as president.

In 1992, Manuel was inducted into the music festival's Hall of Fame and became a lifetime board member.

Overend, past president and current board member of the festival, said Santana took the festival to new audiences and had an especially close rapport with musicians, who would often spend after-concert hours in his Aptos restaurant.

"Because of who he was, there was just such a warmth and heart in it all," Overend said. "I'm sure many musicians during that time probably thought as much about Manny and his restaurant as they did about the festival."

As the Santa Cruz County Artist of the Year, he has six shows now underway: five at each of the Santa Cruz County Bank offices, and one at the Museum of Art and History at the McPherson Center. Santana was scheduled to give a slide show and lecture about his work on July 18 at the Museum of Art and History.

The award goes to an artist who lives in Santa Cruz County, has a national or international reputation, and has contributed to the cultural enrichment of the local community.

Prior winners include actor Paul Whitworth, photographer Frans Lanting and poet Adrienne Rich.

Friends said Santana, known to many as "Manny," loved to live large: he had a voracious appetite for good food, spirits and animated conversations. He loved box-

ing, singer-songwriter Tom Waits and gardening — his cactus collection in Jardines is one of the best-known in the Central Coast. He is survived by his children Angelina and Leonardo, daughter-in-law Patricia, grandchildren Oliver, Joaquin, and Valentín, as well as numerous siblings, nieces and nephews in Mexico.

A celebration of Manuel's life will be held at a later date. His family said contributions in lieu of flowers may be made to the Santa Cruz County Community Foundation, Santana Memorial Fund.