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ART

He Likes to Throws His Weight Around

It's hard not to notice 6-foot-7 Martin Kersels, whose in-your-face work is winning raves here and in New York.

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Getting noticed is the goal of any artist, and in a high-profile and always diverse group show like the Whitney Biennial, it isn't easy. Thinking big helps, and grabbing visitors early doesn't hurt either, so Martin Kersels' in-your-face sound piece right at the entrance to the museum should hit its mark.

For the Biennial that opened last week, Kersels, who lives in Sierra Madre, has wired the lobby of the Whitney so that any of the conventional actions of a visitor--buying a ticket, checking a coat--triggers a recorded sound that resonates throughout the vast lobby. Collaborating with composer Mark Wheaton, Kersels has used these errant sounds to create a musical composition that varies with every chance move.

"The sounds range from a harp glissando, which trills as the front door of the museum is opened, to a drumming sound at the badge box. It's a cacophony, but it overlaps with a harmonious soundtrack," Kersels says. The noise will be hard to miss.

Thinking big comes naturally to Kersels, who himself is hard to miss. He stands 6 foot 7 and weighs about 360 pounds. If, as the saying goes, character defines destiny, what about the body? What is the role of physical size in life? For a gentle giant of a man like Kersels, logical career choices were linebacker or performance artist. He chose the latter. Between 1984 and 1993, as a member of the performance collaborative the Shrimps, known for their zany, spontaneous and often nude theatrics, Kersels used his height and girth to hilarious effect. He has carried those lessons into his visual art.

His tactics will be apparent as well in a group exhibition, "COLA: 1996-97 Individual Artists Grants," running April 30 to June 22 at the Los Angeles Municipal Art Gallery at Barnsdall Art Park, where Kersels' work will be seen alongside that of 11 other recipients of grants from the city's Cultural Affairs Department. The 37-year-old artist was inspired by his 2 1/2-year-old son, Kirby, to re-create the pictures of children at play that adorn the brightly colored boxes of Playmobiles and Legos. Instead of the trademark toddler, however, Kersels shows his own oversized image with the hapless toys, in photographs taken by his wife of 12 years, artist Mary Collins.

"I'm not sure what it means yet, but I like the idea of the scale, my being large and playing with little things," Kersels says.

Kersels slumps his considerable frame onto a picnic bench outside Yong's Cafe, next door to the Santa Monica gallery of his dealer, Dan Bernier. Sporting wraparound sunglasses and a woolly beard, the artist winces when asked about the role that size plays in his work.

"In grade school, as a big guy, I'd be a target," he says. "I never got into fights, but people would do that trick where someone kneels behind you and another

guy pushes so you fall over. It was embarrassing. The work is about helplessness and embarrassment."

The L.A. native initially wanted to make movies. At UCLA, though he wasn't accepted to the film program, he worked on other students' films, and the collaborative aspect fueled his interest in performance art.

"I really fell in love with performance," he recalls. "As a student, I collaborated on a piece called 'Swayback' organized by Lyn Hixon. It involved movement and was like doing theater without the theater. I was typecast because I was big, so I got to carry people."

Kersels studied video and performance art, and after graduating with a bachelor's degree in fine art in 1984, he joined the Shrimps. In 1989, he returned to UCLA to take a staff position supplying technical support for the fine art faculty, including Paul McCarthy and Chris Burden, both of whom are known for blurring boundaries between performance and sculpture.

After a decade of moderate success, the Shrimps disbanded and Kersels' wife suggested he pursue a graduate degree in UCLA's New Genres program. Since he continued to work at the school while taking courses, it was hard to schedule time for his own performance art. He came up with a Frankensteinian solution. "I started making objects that could do the performances for me, as surrogates," he explains.

Critical acclaim for these unpredictable contraptions, which have been compared to the conceptual art of Bruce Nauman and Vito Acconci, has been equally hard to miss.

"Kersels generally kicks ass--his own, his art's, his dealer's, and maybe ours--to see what kind of therapeutic dust he can raise, all the while garnering both our adoration and our sympathy for his cuddly puckishness," critic David A. Greene wrote in *Art Issues*. The *New York Times*' Roberta Smith admired Kersels' work in a show at SoHo's Jay Gorney Gallery, noting an "easygoing variety, a roving sense of self and subject that has its own weird kind of promise."

Kersels uses rudimentary techniques in the creation of his objects to generate a sense of identification.

"People feel a certain fondness for the Machine Age, because during the Information Age, you can't figure out how anything works," Kersels says. "People relate to the mechanical pieces because they can see they were made with simple materials.

"But mechanical objects have a repetitive quality to them. I wanted elements that would be fast or slow or silly, so they would be more performative than a machine. I like it that there is a margin for error. It's like the machine as human. The pieces began as stand-ins for me, but they took on lives of their own."

In a piece called "Piano Drag," seen in 1995 at Dan Bernier Gallery, a baby grand piano hauled itself via mechanized winch across a gallery floor and back, bashing into walls and unplugging itself. In fact, the instrument was a personification of the artist, he says.

"I don't always know how they are going to function," Kersels says. "There is the excitement, mystery and surprise for me. Four times during the run of the show at Bernier's, since the floor is rough, the piano flipped over. One time, Dan tried to stop it and realized he was going to be crushed. The third time it happened, I was there and I was so happy to see it happen."

Kersels stands up to demonstrate the effect, perching on tiptoe, arms outstretched, slowly teetering back and forth, then, blam, he slams his hands and body weight on a picnic table. "It was great !" he yells. "Though it's hell on the equipment."

Kersels' parents and grandparents moved to L.A. from Latvia after World War II. He grew up in the Pico-Union area and later in Playa del Rey. His father was a manager at Classic Industries and Orb Electronics, modest businesses that produced such hobby-oriented products as slot cars and jewel-casting kits. Kersels cites this as a definite influence on the homemade quality of his art.

"We'd test these things at home," he recalls. "Plus, I think the variety of my dad's businesses helped form the sense that I could do photos, videos and objects. I think I feel freer about it. Of course, it's also the influence of art history."

Kersels' mother was an amateur artist who regularly took her son to theater. He still remembers a production of Tom Stoppard's "Travesties" that he saw as a teenager. "That was really cool. Even then I loved it."

When Kersels was 17, his mother organized the family's "castle, museum and church" tour of Europe. "She was the one who would insist we see Rembrandt's 'Night Watch' or the rose window at Chartres." His mother died of cancer two years later.

"The trip was important for her and for me," he says. "I didn't feel uncultured before that, but it was eye-opening to see that history beyond the 1920s and Olvera Street."

Linking all of Kersels' work is an old-fashioned slapstick humor, perhaps most notably in his staged photographs of himself tripping and falling down or tossing smaller people.

"I think humor is a relaxing thing," he says. "The Shrimps always approached what they did with a seriousness that allowed it to be humorous; that's how I use humor in my work, as a double-sided tape so the piece will stick to you."

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* "COLA: 1996-97 Individual Artists Grants," Los Angeles Municipal Art Gallery, Barnsdall Art Park, 4800 Hollywood Blvd. April 30 to June 22. (213) 485-4581.