



Mandala maker handles life's shifting sands with art and kung fu

BY [AYALA OR-EL](#) | PUBLISHED JUN 14, 2017 | **CULTURE**

Not much had changed since Rafael "Rafi" Anteby was a little boy who played in the sand.

Sometimes his immaculate apartment looks like a big sandbox with dozens of bowls filled with colorful sands, which he collects from around the world: purple

from Big Sur and Idaho, black and green from Hawaii, red and yellow from Israel, golden brown from Myanmar.

Anteby, 52, who was born in Israel, is a Los Angeles artist who uses sand of different colors to make Hindu and Buddhist ritual symbols known as mandalas. It's an ancient art form that represents the universe. Some of Anteby's involve symmetrical designs, while others have featured figures such as a tiger or peacocks. Monks in Tibet work on their mandalas for months at a time, only to discard each one once it's finished, spilling it into the water.

"It's their way of letting it go back to nature. Part of the meditation is the practice of letting go," Anteby said.

His first exhibition of mandalas in Los Angeles is on display Thursdays through Saturdays through July 30th at 929 E. Second St. in the Arts District.

Anteby's process is different, creating his mandalas using dozens of sand colors, minerals, gold, diamonds and semiprecious stones from the Himalayas and gluing the sand into a canvas so it remains in place. Like the monks, he uses authentic artisanal tools over hundreds of hours to perfect the tedious process of funneling the sand through a metal flute.

His discipline to the practice drew the attention of the Tibetan Lama Adzom Rinpoche, an avid mandala-maker himself. The lama came all the way from Tibet for the exhibition reception on June 4. A portion of sale proceeds are being donated to the lama's Buddhist institute that educates hundreds of children from remote villages of the Himalayas.

Anteby was drawn to the Far East at first through his fascination with kung fu. He was introduced to martial arts at 14 in Haifa.

"I was a small kid and was often bullied by the boys; even the girls beat me up," he said. "As a result, I got involved with the bad crowd in town, a group of kids who were troublemakers and everyone feared them. It wasn't that I was a bad kid, but I felt safer with them. One day, a kung fu teacher came to our school and talked to us about it, and I knew that this is what I want to do."

Days after he finished his military duty in the Israeli army, he flew to Hong Kong to study with his kung fu master for two years. "I studied in a monastery-style school, 10 hours a day. I also led a life of a monk during that time — no women, no alcohol. I hardly left the place."

After his two years in Hong Kong, he moved to South Africa and joined a friend, Lance Von Erich, a former American professional wrestler, who had opened a gym. He asked Anteby to help him.

"I was a martial arts instructor at his facility and ended up staying there for eight years," Anteby said. "During that time, I won the South African championship in kung fu as well as the Shaolin world tournament for kung fu in China."

Back in the United States, Anteby was diagnosed in 2000 with macular degeneration. He was told that he had one year before he would become legally blind. Anteby refused to accept the verdict. "I told my doctor, 'No way, not in my book; it's never going to happen,' and he answered, 'I appreciate your positive attitude, but I still encourage you to start thinking about what it's like being blind, because it is going to happen.' "

Anteby found the name of an expert in Chinese medicine in Arkansas, flew to see him and stayed for two weeks, undergoing intensive acupuncture treatment. "After that, I went to see my teacher in Peking, who sent me to a 104-year-old teacher of qigong meditation, which I practiced for six months at the Wudang monastery," Anteby said. "Only then I went back to see the doctor who diagnosed me. He examined me and was shocked to find out that the disease had disappeared."

Anteby learned the art of mandala during his frequent visits to Nepal and Tibet, where he noticed monks working on them. "I approached one and asked, 'Can you teach me?' The monk replied, 'Can you learn?' "

At that time, Anteby already was an artist with a clothing and jewelry line called Bullets 4 Peace, which he started after a close friend was shot fatally in South Africa.

"I wanted to raise awareness about the perils of gun violence," he said. "I took empty bullet shells and transformed the bullet from a symbol of fear to one of love and compassion. This is my way of spreading consciousness of peace."

Anteby uses bullet casings taken from reload centers, streets and war zones, turning them into necklaces with symbols of peace and love. Among his customers are Jamie Foxx, Rihanna, Beyoncé, Chris Noth and Justin Bieber. Some of them, he said, participate at his annual charity event, which he established in 2008.

Not everyone appreciates the design of the necklaces, however. Airport security personnel have confiscated the items from Gloria Estefan, Snoop Dogg and members of the Pussycat Dolls as they were checking in for flights. (Anteby sent them new ones.)

In July, Anteby is planning another trip to the Far East, to study charcoal powder painting in Thailand, to work with monks in Nepal on a permanent mandala, and to do some sand carving in Myanmar. He also intends to distribute school supplies to orphanages and instruct children in tai chi, kung fu and meditation.

"I know how much [kung fu] had helped me as a kid, how much self-confidence I received thanks to it," he said. "It transformed my life for the better, and I know how much it can do for them, as well."