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Steve Mendelson: Chasing beauty

For 20 years, Steve Mendelson has charmed Pittsburghers into buying art at his Shadyside gallery. But behind his smile lurks a frustration with the image he has so carefully cultivated

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By Caroline Abels, Post-Gazette Cultural Arts Writer

Care to be seduced?



"People have different fortes. Mine is seduction," says Steve Mendelson, who travels the world to collect art for his gallery. (Robin Rombach, Post-Gazette)

Let Steve Mendelson put his arm around you, look into your eyes with his hazel-colored own, whisper in your ear that you really will feel *fabulous* with that erotic sculpture, nude watercolor or African mask in your living room, then hear him recount how he got that erotic sculpture, nude watercolor or African mask into his Shadyside gallery from its place of origin.

You'll reach for a cheese cube near the other partygoers at Mendelson Gallery while Steve, sensing your tentativeness, will take his hand off your shoulder -- or your waist -- and return it to his wine glass. A Cheshire-cat grin will bisect his bronzed face and he'll cock his head to one side, buying time as you figure out how to respond to his pitch.

You'll hedge -- and the dénouement of Steve's seduction will begin with a "get back to me" or a "you think about it." He'll kiss you on the cheek or slap you on the back, and you'll blush or laugh or slink away to the wine table, where you'll watch him work his charms on another potential buyer.

You might leave his art opening \$800 poorer, one friend richer or simply perplexed that such a salesman exists in Pittsburgh.

Exists he does. Succeed? Enough. But not as much as he could elsewhere. Despite his 20-year reputation for throwing tipsy openings, hanging sexually charged art on his walls and dousing Pittsburgh with a

little *joie de vivre*, Steven R. Mendelson spends many afternoons waiting for the doorbell of his Shadyside gallery to ring. For every object in it, there is a daily passerby who peers through the window and keeps walking.

Such disinterest has bred in Mendelson a bubbling irritation -- with his line of work, with his hometown, with his lifestyle. It's an irritation that is much at odds with the charming and upbeat persona he displays at the numerous social functions he attends. In fact, he says he's losing interest in such events, which he attends to spread his gallery's name. The chatting he does over cocktails isn't helping quash Pittsburgh's reluctance to support avant-garde art. He's fed up with the people who attend his art openings only to "eat my food and drink my booze."

But Mendelson stays in Pittsburgh because he is peerless. To this city, he can bring back treasures from Bali, Cuba and Indonesia and say he's the only gallery owner here who does. And he gets attention when he invites people to show up in the buff to an erotic art opening, whereas in bigger cities, he'd be added to the list.

"I know I'm in the wrong place," Mendelson says. "But I'm still here because I've made this gallery my own. It's full of my art, my collection -- it's my own temple in a way. Sure, I think if I was someplace where thirtysomethings believed they had a future, I would succeed. But if I were in New York, I'd have to work like a slave to break even. It would be a totally different life."

So Steve Mendelson stays, somewhat unsuccessful, in the wrong place -- a place that has many opinions of Steve Mendelson.



"I keep having to defend Steve to other people," says Rob Rogers, a Post-Gazette editorial cartoonist and a close friend.

A host of other friends say the same. They agree he has a reputation for being shallow, an operator, a gigolo. One friend calls him "the Don Juan of Pittsburgh." He exudes sensuality, revels in innuendo and embraces women with impunity. He's been called the city's most eligible bachelor and its smoothest sell.



Mendelson chats with artist Ron Desmett at a recent opening at Mendelson Gallery. (Martha Rial, Post-Gazette)

"He's extremely sensual, and I think it makes a lot of people, even me,

get the heebie-jeebies," says longtime friend and former girlfriend Lynn Cullen, who hosts an afternoon talk show on WPTT-AM. "Every time he comes in the room you think, 'Oh no! He's not going to *kiss* me!'"

"People hate me for the same reasons they hate the French," he says.

He travels to out-of-the-way places to find art and is often on a plane going somewhere. He talks forthcomingly about his years in Paris as a street clown and his time in India as a would-be holy man. He knows wine, he eats at restaurants like Casbah and Soba, down the street from his gallery, and he's made the Post-Gazette's "Seen" page more than 40 times in the past five years.

But Mendelson, who is 48, also plays basketball with the guys at the Jewish Community Center in Squirrel Hill. He goes to Charlie's diner in Wilkinsburg for breakfast, plays golf and is a voracious movie-goer. And he says he would love to have children. He is godfather to Cullen's 7-year-old adopted son, taking the boy everywhere and calling him one of his favorite people.

So Steve Mendelson, a native of McKeesport, has his suburban side. But Pittsburgh prefers to place him in Paris, Buenos Aires or Athens.

"Sometimes I feel trapped in this persona that people won't let me out of," he says. "I know I've created it, but sometimes I feel like I've painted myself into a corner."

If he has, it's so he can sell art. The persona he says he's "trapped in" actually forms the basis of his sales strategy. It's a strategy of seduction, one in which he attempts to talk up a piece of artwork so intensely that a potential buyer cannot resist. Accordingly, he must make *himself* irresistible.

"People have different fortes. Mine is seduction," he says. "Sam Berkovitz [of Concept Art Gallery], he's a straightforward, honest businessman. I suppose I'm like this maverick, easy come, easy go."

He admits the seduction strategy doesn't work with everyone: "I think it puts some people off; they think I'm pressuring them."

And even he can get frustrated by his act. He recalls the woman who recently seemed to be feigning interest in a painting so she could get him into bed. He didn't want to lead the woman on, he says, but felt the need to keep up his flirtatious act so he could sell her something.

In the end, they parted platonically -- "and we felt good about it," he says. "And she bought a painting, which arouses me in itself."

But how much of Mendelson's image is real? Not much, he says. He insists he is shy and introverted and more interested in a quiet dinner with some of his half-dozen close friends than a splashy cocktail party, which he considers "work." Friends echo this by saying he can be as

sensitive as he is cocky, as vulnerable as he is confident, as eager to be liked as he likes others.

Still, he's an enigma to just about everyone. His mother, Devora Mendelson, said with a laugh: "I've known him 48 years, and I still can't figure him out."



Nina Pineda, a reporter for WTAE-TV, has been dating Mendelson for a year and often accompanies him on his worldwide travels. The two spoke outside Mendelson Gallery during a recent opening. (Martha Rial, Post-Gazette)

A graduate of Shady Side Academy, Mendelson dropped out of the University of Michigan at 20 to go on one of his most formidable journeys: an eight-month spiritual quest in India. Though the trip made him more confident and got him interested in world travel, an autobiography he is writing indicates that he wonders whether he gained anything more from the journey than a smattering of culinary, criminal and coital experiences.

He wandered through the Indian state of Orissa, he says, with only \$40 in his pocket and came upon numerous spiritual gurus in the forest. He was ripped off by a fellow wanderer who drugged him by putting opium in his tea but whom he later forgave by not pressing charges. He wooed a number of young women from Western countries who crossed his path, and he endured hepatitis and food poisoning along the way.

He fondly recalls the time when a group of villagers -- enticed by his foreignness -- flocked to him as if he were a holy man and asked him to heal a blind girl. Of course, he didn't, but: "I ended up being a guru of some sorts. Not that I had a temple built to me or people kneeling at my feet all the time, but I saw I could touch people."

His mother says the trip not only brought him out of what was then a quiet and withdrawn self, it got him interested in selling art, because he returned from India with numerous objects that he ended up selling. To this day, the backbone of his gallery is formed by rare artifacts he has found on his travels, which have included Syria, South Africa, Peru, Japan and Belize, to name a paltry few.

Mendelson eventually finished his art history degree at Michigan and then, in his early 20s, took off for India once more. But when the plane

stopped in Rome to be refueled, he got off, and during his brief stay in that city he met Not Vital, an unknown Swiss artist whom Mendelson later supported and who eventually became world-renowned.

But Mendelson never got back to India. He spent three years in Paris, where he supported himself as a street clown, mime and juggler, and later as an employee of a photo lab. Spurred by the loss of a woman -- whom he had met while "wandering through the Cimetière Montparnasse on a blustery, gray February afternoon, clad in my black woolen cape" and blowing out "mournful notes on my bamboo shagahatchi," according to his autobiography -- he left Paris for Martinique.

There he worked at Club Med as an "animator" -- "someone who makes things happen," he explains. But when he got word that his father was ill, he returned to Pittsburgh. If it wasn't for that, Devora Mendelson says, he never would have returned to his hometown. His father died soon after.

Then, in 1978, Mendelson decided to establish a gallery. He found space on Morewood Avenue in Oakland and began building his collection and his name by displaying some of his own artwork -- mostly photography and collages -- as well as offbeat and experimental work by others. He credits his 1980 "edible art" show with putting him on the map. It drew national media attention.

In 1988, he found his current space at 5874 Ellsworth Ave. -- an abandoned bordello that he acquired for \$32,000 in an IRS sale and fixed up mostly by himself. Since then, it has housed shows by nationally known artists Burton Morris, Thad Mosley and Emil Lukas, as well as shows by lesser-known locals. Artists say he is often nurturing, offering criticism and suggestions for success, while others complain that his commission can run high.

Then, there are the outrageous shows. Clothing was optional at a 1995 erotic art exhibit at his gallery. A year later Mendelson staged another erotic art show that centered around metal sculptures and featured a nude woman engaging in performance art.

"Really, his gallery is more than simply a place for showing art," says David Lewis, a local artist who has shown work there. "It's a place where people can meet and talk about values, talk about aesthetics, talk about society, talk about where we're going. That is Steve's mission, and always in his gallery you will find things that support his mission. Sure, there are decorative things there, because he has to sell those things to survive. But most everything he has has a provocative edge."

In that vein, Mendelson wants his gallery to host a "salon" that would draw interesting people -- and people interested in ideas -- to chat about art and society. After he mentions the dream, though, he wonders if anyone in Pittsburgh would come.

"I'm really frustrated with Pittsburgh now," he says. "I feel I'm wasting my time and my talents."

His primary frustration is that Pittsburghers are afraid of buying art, even when they like something and have the \$400, \$800, or \$1,000 needed to purchase it.

"I have people coming here who are amazed at what I have. I mean, they walk around and say, 'How do you know what to buy?' and 'You have such great style' and 'What an eye.' I want them to appreciate it but also feel comfortable enough to buy it."

He says others in Pittsburgh are only paying lip service to regional art: "Everybody thinks everyone else is supporting it, so they don't have to." Local collectors, he says, are more interested in a piece of work if its creator lives outside Pittsburgh. He cites Thad Mosley -- a nationally known black sculptor who lives on the North Side -- as an artist whose work does not sell adequately in Pittsburgh.

Mendelson insists he isn't about to give up his gallery. But recently he considered leasing a building on Walnut Street to give his gallery greater exposure. The plan fell through, but at the time he called it "my last-ditch effort to see if I can really sell art in Pittsburgh."



Mendelson may talk about a lack of interest in his gallery, but he is actually doing all right. He says he posts gross sales of about \$160,000 a year and makes between \$40,000 and \$50,000 in profits. Those figures have stayed steady in recent years, though he's had better years and worse ones.

He admits that he makes enough to live well. The second floor of his gallery, where he lives with his 21-year-old cat, Mookie, is awash in impressive art, including a Keith Haring wood panel and a giant Not Vital sculpture. The apartment also features a marble bathroom and stylish kitchen.

But he complains that everyone thinks he's rich when, in actuality, he traded a lot of art for furniture and other personal items, such as his motorcycle. He maintains that he's driven the same Audi station wagon for 10 years (license plate: MNDLSN), that he doesn't buy many new clothes, that he saves money abroad by staying at inexpensive hotels and always gets cheap airfares.

"People think I don't work at what I do," he says. "People think I inherited a lot of money but it's not true -- zero money. People think I'm a drug dealer -- not true. They think I must have money somewhere,

otherwise how can I buy all these things? How can I travel to all these places?

"It's because I'm artistic that I get invited to black-tie events," he continues. "And I live in some of the best places in Europe because I have great friends. But I lived in Paris for years on nothing."

Mendelson's frugality inspires him to find artistic treasures for next to nothing abroad, in turn allowing him to sell them for much more in the States. Among the objects in his gallery's permanent collection are shadow puppets from Bali and African masks and sculptures. He prides himself on his discoveries.

"I have people coming to show me art every week, and I might say that's very good and thank them," he says. "But I'll feel closer to something if I found it in Java or Bali myself."

Another advantage to traveling, he says, is that he can get on a plane and no longer be "Mendelson." He likes that foreigners, unlike Americans, don't immediately ask him what he does. And he talks about creating new identities for himself when he is abroad.

His identity at home, however, often precedes him.

"He told me on our first date that he has a checkered reputation and that I'd hear rumors," says Nina Pineda, a reporter at WTAE-TV and Mendelson's girlfriend.

Indeed, Pineda heard a lot before going out with him -- that he'd had a slew of beautiful girlfriends, that he was royally flirtatious, that he couldn't commit. What she learned was that he is sensitive and empathetic, enjoys being unique, and is eager to be liked.

But after a year of dating him, Pineda still gets warned about the 6-foot, 4-inch art dealer with the black curly hair.

"People feel like they have to drop hints to me about him," she says. "No one trusts someone who's 48 and never been married."

Pineda, 30, is well aware of Mendelson's flirtatious side but senses he's ready to give commitment a try. She hopes he will treat commitment as simply a deeper adventure. But at the same time, she is willing to accept a facet of his personality that seems entrenched.

"To accept him, I have to accept his flirtatious side -- it's what attracted me to him in the first place," she says. "He just loves looking at beautiful women, at beautiful people. And I can't be scared about it, because it's as innocent as if I were to give you a hug."

Rob Rogers says his friend is a lot more vulnerable than he lets on -- and has learned from it. He notes that Mendelson was briefly engaged in 1991.

"When it comes to relationships, he has a lot of insight, despite being someone who has a reputation for not being in a stable relationship," Rogers says.



Will Steve Mendelson stay in Pittsburgh? He is coy when asked. It depends, friends say, on his relationship with Pineda, on whether he can put up with local reluctance to buy art, on whether he will get infected by the travel bug again but not want to be cured.

"He's searching now," Cullen says. "Like, who isn't? But he's at midlife. It's not unusual to assess then, and he finds himself wanting in some respect. I think he does want a family. There's a part of him that's pulling him to a more tethered position -- more than ever."

His future also depends on whether he wants to keep up a sales strategy that can sometimes depress him.

"It's always me having to seduce people through the mystique of the gallery or the mystique of collecting," he says. "But I don't like to call people or invite them into my home -- it's like prostrating myself and saying 'Let's make a deal.' I'd rather people walked in, had a cup of coffee with me, looked around and said, 'Wow, I'd like to buy that.' "

He will lower his business expectations for now, he says, and travel to more places where he can escape his image. Pineda says he "no longer needs to be everything to everyone."

"I like my life, not my business," he says. "When I'm on a plane going to one of these places, I forget what I do for a living. I'm just a collector. An experimenter of life."



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