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For his current art exhibition, Felix Morelo started small, creating intricate painted boxes that can fit in one's hands. One wall of the Peanut Gallery is covered with them. But as intriguing as these works are, Morelo was unhappy with them. "People weren't paying attention," he said. The boxes are "just so intimate and small." So he moved to bigger things, paintings with an "immediate effect."

Both are on display in Morelo's show at the Peanut Gallery, 300 21st Street in Rock Island. It is his first solo exhibition and includes 52 pieces – with prices ranging from $10 to $650 (most are in the $40 to $75 range) – from 2002 and beyond. The exhibit shows an impressive range, and respect for the work grows when one realizes that the largest pieces were done in a matter of weeks.

The oldest works are the boxes, small pieces that blur the lines between traditional painting and sculpture. They're hung on the wall, but they're not just two-dimensional surfaces; they're painted on all six sides. Some have figures in the back. And you really can't appreciate them at a distance.

When you look at the wall, it's overwhelming, and the pieces blend together. You miss the details, such as the small photographs under a thick coat of lacquer in *Scott's Loan*. Or a toy soldier covered in paint. Or pages from the biblical book of Revelation.

And when Morelo talks about these works, he talks about holding them in one's hands. He means the boxes to be tactile – to be handled, not stuck on a wall. He wants their owners to explore the textures – including sand, rice, and glass – and the details.

In his artist statement, Morelo calls the boxes "small and tedious," yet he clearly has an affection for them. One gets the feeling from talking with him that he was simply ready to move on from the boxes.

His recent work has been more straightforward and easier to classify as "painting" or

“sculpture.” “I missed painting,” Morelo said, “just seeing color on a big surface.” The richest of the larger-form works is *Ana*, and Morelo said it’s his favorite. He compared completing it to solving a math problem – “The first one’s the hardest” – and said that finishing it unleashed a creative torrent. On the wall facing the boxes are five large pieces that the artist said he did in three weeks.

Morelo described his recent work as “expansive, large, and fun” in his artist statement, and these paintings seem a deliberate contrast to the small, detailed boxes. *Pensive Yet Refined* and
Old Wise Lady
are as placid, elegant, and simple as the earlier pieces are busy and complex.

But the artist hasn’t abandoned his earlier ways. Several of the paintings have photographs on the back that served as an inspiration or a starting point. Morelo explains this in a literal way: “If you really know somebody, you know there’s something behind.”

Morelo’s Columbian mother came to New York City and gave birth to him, so he’s an American citizen, but he grew up in Columbia. He returned to the Big Apple when he was 11, and was educated at the Art Students League and Parsons School of Design. He also worked as a bike messenger in New York.

Morelo came to the Quad Cities four years ago, when he was 28, for an apprenticeship at IBP, and he now works in construction.

But he’s still a New Yorker in some ways. After the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks, he made an unscheduled visit to the Big Apple. Some photographs from the trip are on the back of a painting, while a pile of photos lies on the bottom edge of another.

Morelo said he plans to take a break from his artwork for a while before planning his next show. “This has been very emotional,” he said. “I need some space.”

But don’t expect him to disappear; Morelo *will* be back. “I don’t want to be overlooked,” he said. “I want to be seen. I want the work to be seen.”

The Peanut Gallery is open from 1 to 3 p.m. Saturdays.