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Clothes make the art at new exhibit

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By Luke Quinton

Picture a favorite shirt. What makes you like it? What tendon of memory links you and that fabric? Maybe it brought you luck. Maybe it's your dad's. Or maybe it just makes you look good.

"Clothing has so many connotations to it," says Michael Anthony Garcia. "People can define you by what you're wearing."

Garcia looks very at ease, wearing suspenders and standing inside Austin's City Hall atrium. He's halfway up the main stairs, where his new sculpture, "Portico" hovers above an empty space between the rails.

Portico is Spanish for "portal," Garcia explains, the word dancing off the El Paso native's tongue.

As you take the stairs and turn the corner, you see a formation of crisp white business shirts clinging together with 14 red ribbons. The shirt collars bunch at the center, circling around the center of the "portal."

The work suggests any number of things.

"An escape to somewhere else," Garcia hints.

The choice of the standard, starched white shirt says a lot about the kind of escape he has in mind. Maybe it's to a world without email, Blackberries and TPS reports.

Garcia wants the people who pass by his work to make a connection with it; to see the shirts and think, "Yeah, that could be me."

But that's almost digging a little too deep. "Portico" is also just beautiful.

"People see it from all different angles," Garcia says.

His favorite view might be the one from below, where the shirt bottoms ruffle together around the center.

If clothes make the man, in this case they suggest the body, too. The red ribbon in "Portico" might be sinew or blood.

Garcia's work is part of this year's crop of more than 100 new artworks that make up the annual "The People's Gallery" exhibit, curated by Austin artists Jeff Williams and Werllayne Nunes, and Women & Their Work's Rachel Koper. There is art on nearly every surface of the building's limestone walls: sculptures, paintings and photographs by some of Austin's up-and-coming talent.

That includes the gleaming irony of displaying Jason Webb's immaculate paintings of derelict Austin buildings as the city continues to balance multimillion-dollar development and affordable housing.

Garcia has a second sculpture on the atrium's ground floor. It looks like a toppled stack of boxes, nearly bursting with clothes. He overheard one lady pass by and ask, "Is this a laundry chute?" Garcia speaks humbly and patiently. "I'm fine with that," he says.

"Exo XO" is a wooden exoskeleton that's trying to protect the clothing, "but not doing a very good job," Garcia says. He points at one spot.

"That purple shirt belongs to my brother," he says. "The ties are mine."

When he looks at the sculpture it conjures up real people, which is why Garcia's thrilled when people come by and say "I have that shirt!"

It's no surprise to hear Garcia say he has "tubs and tubs of clothing." They are his medium, after all.

But the business shirts were a little harder to come by. His day job as a Pre-K teacher doesn't lend itself to a suit and tie, and in this case the usual donations of clothes from friends and family didn't come through.

"I guess I'm kind of removed from the button-down world," he says.

"People's Gallery 2013"

Opening: 6 to 9 p.m. Feb. 22