



Sharyn R. Udall, Ph.D

PLACE, TIME AND IDENTITY

The artists of the Santa Fe area work within an ancient crucible of creativity that has generated potent icons and ideas still resonant in the work of our contemporaries. From surviving objects we know that art has been made in the area for thousands of years, but the idea of showing it in a community gallery is of much more recent lineage. The casual, almost off-hand origins of Santa Fe's public exhibitions might be traced to 1910, when visiting painter Warren Rollins approached former Territorial Governor Bradford Prince for advice about showing his work locally. Looking around at the dusty territorial capital, Prince thought for a bit before replying, "I can't see what good an art exhibit will do; on the other hand, I can't see that it could possibly do any harm." From the surprising public response to Rollins's inauspicious presentation in the Palace of the Governors grew an appetite for visual art that has propelled Santa Fe to its present status as one of the leading cultural centers in the country, a place where tradition and innovation intersect and sometimes do battle.

Santa Fe's artistic legacy lingers as both blessing and curse for those painters, sculptors, photographers and mixed media artists who, each in his or her own way, must confront the inescapable burden of art history, present here as everywhere. They know that the capacity to innovate from tradition has been a perennial byword of American creativity. But they also know that preservation and stasis are not the same thing, nor are innovation and change. The discredited notion of "progress" in the arts has given way to the more interesting and more relevant challenge of understanding the experiential distance that separates us from the lives of our ancestors. Across that divide, what new energies are actively reinfusing the icons and ideas of the past? More to the point, has the modernization of society's sensibility kept pace with the artist's means of production, or is there an inevitable cultural lag between what is available, say, in a space such as the Santa Fe Community Gallery, and the art actually acquired by local collectors?

Within this exhibition there is no single visual narrative, no common philosophical approach. That statement is as true in contemporary New Mexico art as in the larger experience of American art, and it attests to the richness of this region's expanding multicultural traditions, by which I mean that the state's venerable and long-recognized tri-cultural heritage (Hispanic, Native American, Euro-

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American) is today augmented with every imaginable ethnicity, whose voices speak in multiple visual vocabularies. All are welcome; all help us to refute the modernist dogma of art's hermetic autonomy. If there are any constants in this show, they reside in the artists' abilities to render new tellings of stories we thought we knew, stories of art's relationship to enduring aspects of human consciousness. The absolute is change.

THE FINE FOLK OF NEW MEXICO—WHO, WHERE, WHY?

Knowingly chosen, the term folk in this exhibition's title helps to link certain impulses we see represented within it. Worth remembering is that the folkloric impulse arises out of a loosely-defined group identity, and folklore is a kind of artistic communication embedded in stories, myths, and songs that can provide rich sources for visual imagery. Particularly in communities of relative homogeneity and geographic proximity, folk tradition conveys the heartbeat, through symbols and characters, of a shared body of meaning, reflecting a culture's creativity and, at times, reinforcing social control. The folkloric impulse has always been part of a substantial and profoundly American manner, as seen, for example in the American Scene movement of the 1930s, which itself followed closely on the heels of the 1920s rediscovery of the nation's early folk traditions on the East Coast. In the American Southwest the elements of premodern folklore have been a more constant presence, often transmitted in religious imagery. In this exhibition some artists work respectfully within a matrix of traditional forms and norms, consciously recognizing meaning manifested in symbol. Among them are a handful of New Mexico's contemporary Santero artists, who deliver emotion-packed devotional subjects to modern audiences. For others, religious and folkloric symbols can be slippery, sliding across genres and escaping cultural frames to merge with pop culture and with its critique.

If folk art speaks to a perennial longing for a real or imagined past of greater simplicity, the artists who play it forward to today's viewers are anything but simple. Literate, media savvy, as likely to research their themes on the internet as in legend, they know what Hollywood and Madison Avenue have done to American folklore of all kinds, and they reject nostalgia for its own sake. Instead, they work selectively to extract meaning where it still resides, to expose its ironies, and to puncture its discredited verities. And for those who stand outside any folkloric tradition, the possibilities for form and content are wide open—as wide open as the spaces we inhabit here. The painters, sculptors, photographers and mixed media artists in this exhibition are as likely to abstract from nature, from memory or dream as they are to represent optically-correct objects or scenes.

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One way to consider how art focuses and intensifies life in the present is to look at changes in materials and techniques employed by these artists. References to older forms invite us to compare how such objects were made in the past and their means of production now. Can we tell by looking which sculptors in this show are still working mainly by hand—carving, sanding, polishing, fabricating with hand tools? Which have adopted cutting-edge technologies in their studios?

How has the advent of the digital age affected the photographers in this exhibition? Critics have argued that working digitally has changed not only the way photographers work, but the way they see. Can that be true? And what about the newer forms of performance-based and video art—don't those forms demand new modes of perception and reception?

An ancient material that constantly stretches traditional expectations is clay. Native ceramic artists in this show respond variously to a living tradition. Some, who see in it an extension of their own heritage and identity, follow the time-honored tradition of hand-coiled Pueblo ceramics. Others, for whom the clay's plasticity encourages nontraditional handbuilding techniques, produce figural work in which clay reminds us of the many creation stories involving humanity's origins in the earth itself. As the clay acquires life in the hands of the artist, we viewers participate in a somewhat mysterious way through the power of virtual touch. We are reminded here of the advice on touch left us by novelist D. H. Lawrence, a sometime New Mexico resident and a fervent advocate of direct sensory experience. Lawrence contrasted two ways of being American: one was a kind of "recoil into smallness"—what he called "the Puritan way." The other, more expansive and authentic way of being American, he insisted, was "by touch; touch America as she is; dare to touch her!" Lawrence was not thinking specifically of Native ceramics, but his words remind us of the expressive power of surfaces, whether textured or polished, carved or painted or woven. In recent Pueblo ceramics, as well as in the work of some contemporary weavers, the artists make use of a vast repertoire of old and new design elements. Fragmentation, incompleteness and pastiche are hallmarks of much contemporary art, and are readily seen in the deliberate, sometimes jarring juxtapositions of nearly-forgotten abstract polychrome designs with animal motifs and other nature symbols, a modern remix of history. Some artists have chosen to blend traditional Pueblo pottery forms with a politically-aware sensibility that exposes the flux and contradictions present in contemporary Indian culture. They present daring new takes on traditional subject matter, often infusing issues of human rights, the environment, and politics with a sure sense of irony and humor, thereby raising both their visual and political impact. These artists prompt us to join them in asking probing questions about the environment, past, present and future: how have humans transformed this area? Have we "improved" it to any extent? What have we damaged? Can we learn from past desecrations?

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All of which brings us to a final reconsideration of the idea of place in the art of our region. With the globalization of much of our culture, is it important, even appropriate, to address specific places? If art made in New Mexico used to be readily identifiable, is that true in any sense now? Does it matter in the twenty-first century where art is made? Here is my response: however much or little attention artists give to their specific surroundings, they take in the natural and cultural atmosphere they inhabit. Gertrude Stein, who knew many places, said it best: "Anybody is as their land and air is. Anybody is as the sky is low or high. Anybody is as there is wind or no wind there. . . . Everyone is as their . . . climate is." That climate once made Santa Fe a mecca for health-seekers, especially those with respiratory ailments; today alternative healing practices of all kinds are a more likely magnet. Remaining are the region's clear air, crystalline light and varied topography, which attract artists now as much as a century ago. In the early twenty-first century, many visual artists working in the Santa Fe area continue to wrestle—fortunately, in my view—with the artistic angels of regionalism. So yes, place remains as one of the vital ingredients in the crucible of creativity, floating alongside formal invention, legacies from the past, complex identity questions and dizzying new technologies.

Artists function at the leading edge of our cultural sensibilities, mediating between what society actually endorses or consumes and the outer limits of the artist's imagination. Even as they question the past, interpreting New Mexico's artistic riches in unprecedented ways, visual artists open portals, right in our midst, to the extraordinary. In every way that matters, Santa Fe's artistic community is the sum of its folk.

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