



Tradition and Transgression

In Santa Fe,
contemporary art
moves forward in
conversation with
the past.

BY ALINE BRANDAUER



In a place as saturated with diverse artistic traditions as New Mexico,

the creative process is bound to involve a complex dialogue with the past. Absorbing Native American, Spanish and Anglo-American influences, New Mexico's cultural producers cannot escape tradition; they can try to ignore it, emulate it or help it to evolve by responding to it while expanding its scope. And with Santa Fe now a global capital of contemporary art—much of it without any specific local inspiration—artists and galleries are right in the middle of the debates over how today's art relates to its roots. Against a summer backdrop of Art Santa Fe, Indian Market, Spanish Market, the International Folk Art Market, the SITE Santa Fe Biennial and SOFA West, artists contend with images they inherit as well as those that are inevitably projected onto them.

For Native American artists, the confrontation with the past is still very present. Darren Vigil Gray (Jicarilla Apache/ Kiowa Apache) grew up on the reservation near Dulce, N.M. Since graduating from Santa Fe's Institute of American Indian Art, Vigil Gray has become the golden boy of the generation of native painters, following the influential artist and teacher Fritz Scholder and Vigil Gray's own mentor, T.C. Cannon. Vigil Gray's paintings are expressionistic and emotional, with half-remembered figures emerging from heavily painted landscapes and dreamscapes.

Painting, for this artist, is an event without end; it con-





sists, he says, of "making a mess, turning it sideways and making some more mess, mark-making. I have to make a lot of chaos, and out of the chaos I start massaging the forms into play. It's almost predestined, but I have to go through this process of chaos and find resolution to it." In Vigil Gray's landscape, *Sky, Canyon Walls and Desert Dirt*, the land and sky interact with each other and the viewer as a liminal, miasmic, magical place where only by entering into the animistic space can meaning be formed. He is represented by Gerald Peters Gallery.

Diego Romero, raised in Berkeley, Calif., but a member of Cochiti Pueblo near Santa Fe, is a ceramic artist. His movement away from traditional decoration and iconography belies knowledge of very rigorous traditional processes and contemporary techniques. One recent work, *Fallen Warriors*, reveals Romero's clever pastiche of cultures, here a clear nod to Michelangelo's *Pietà* in a Mimbres-style bowl. Romero frequently uses references to the Iliad and to well-known works of American and European art, as well as to ancient Puebloan pottery. Robert Nichols, Romero's longtime dealer, shows his work along with antique pots. "Diego has made the tradition his own," says Nichols. Romero says, "Most Pueblo pottery, the historic stuff and even contemporary work, addresses a dialogue with fertility, rain, growth and animals associated with that, whereas my dialogue centers around post-industrialization,

the commodification of Indian land, water, alcoholism."

Voices From the Temple Mound opens at Blue Rain Gallery on July 7. Part-Tlingit glass artist Preston Singletary collaborates with Choctaw nation member and bead artist extraordinaire Marcus Amerman on an exhibition derived from Choctaw antiquities and glass. Temple Mound "gives voice to an under-documented history" by playing ancient ideas against contemporary objects."

Spanish-American artists revived many old artistic traditions during the early to mid-20th century. Ironically, much of the impetus behind that revival came from newly-arrived Anglos and, in the 1930s, the WPA. There are many schools of thought among contemporary Hispanic artists, and feelings can run high about innovation. Luis and Sergio Tapia are *santeros* (sculptors who carve wooden saints, or *santos*) who push the envelope. Luis has successfully brought the modern Chicano experience to the revered ranks of the saint-makers. His son, Sergio, has gone in yet another direction with his traditional skills—retaining the devotion that marks a *santo* while peeking out of the Catholic faith to everyday contemplative moments. Sergio's *Las Cosas que Pasan* ("fleeting things") depicts a man reading a newspaper by a window that looks out onto a lush world. Sergio has been studying with his father and other Northern New Mexican *santeros* since he was five years old. As for Luis, he has been both lauded and

Previous spread: Darren Vigil Gray, *Sky, Canyon Walls, Desert Dirt*, 2010.
This page, from top: Woody Gwyn, *Arroyo/Sky*, 2010; *Pacific/Highway*, 2010.



GERALD PETERS GALLERY, LEWALLEN GALLERIES



criticized for his creations. In *Northern New Mexico Clothesline—Two Weeks of Laundry*, we see many of the common symbols of Norteño life: Jesus, the Sacred Heart, a Budweiser bottle—all on t-shirts drying on a line. The Tapias' work can be seen at Owings Gallery as well as at Spanish Market.

The landscape tradition in Northern New Mexico starts with East Coast and European artists who came in search of the picturesque at the beginning of the 20th century. Upon seeing rural Hispanics and Native Americans, their primitivizing tendencies sought to place the genre scenes into a seductive setting. But landscape and light have become perennial sources of fascination for artists in New Mexico. Woody Gwyn's first show with LewAllen Galleries continues his exploration of topography and the physical world. Through painstaking rendering of vast landscape, often from a fleeting perspective, Gwyn evokes a physical reaction,

From left: Joan Watts, *Untitled #14*;
Woody Gwyn, *Lamy*, 2009.

startling the viewer with the vastness of the scale and creating a desire to enter into the view. Art historian Sharyn R. Udall has written of Gwyn's work, in her letter nominating the artist for the New Mexico Governor's Awards, "Like the earth's surface, each mind has its own topography; Woody Gwyn's is open, fluid, expansive, like his canvases. Disguised in the persuasive truth-telling of realism, his paintings invite us to explore realms where nature and culture test mysterious new affinities." The long history of landscape painting in the Southwest attests to the appeal of barren, vast vistas suffused with light. The artist's *Arroyo Sky*, in which one sees only sky and two high edges of canyon wall, positions the viewer at the center of a place whose expanse makes it impossible to feel com-



petent enough to see the whole scene. At 12 by 168 inches, the work demands that you be awed.

Joan Watts engages in dialogue with that light by peeling away form to reveal essence. Her new series, on view at Charlotte Jackson Fine Art downtown, was inspired by observing the moon and its phases during a retreat in California. The rigor and subtle gradations of color recall the late Agnes Martin, who called New Mexico home for most of her life. Jackson, who has a project space and is also the founder of the Art Santa Fe fair, is moving to a larger new space in the Railyard district. The inaugural show there, which opens July 9, is curated by contemporary art maven and collector Bobbie Foshay and is titled *Self and Family—A Recent Look*. A radical departure from Jackson's focus on queer abstract work, *Self and Family* brings together seven living artists who explore portraiture.

As art in Santa Fe broadens its scope, inevitably it defines itself in relation to broader art traditions. Jackson's group show demonstrates that the trend toward abstraction in portraiture that began with Manet continues in various forms. The

works range from the cool, flat images by Alex Katz of his wife, Ada, to Hendrik Kersten's meticulous Northern European paintings of his daughter, whose eyes look out but slide their gaze to a point beyond the viewer. Kiki Smith's *Mortal* explores the relationship of life and death by referring to her mother's head, hands and feet. Ellen Harvey effectively excises herself from her images by using the reflected flash of the camera. (Edgar Degas, in his photographs from the late 1890s, used similar techniques in which the camera and photographer were subordinated by means of mirrors. His stunning double portrait of Mallarmé and Renoir is perhaps the best known of these photographs.) At the beginning of the modernist era, the Italian Futurist Boccioni announced, "A portrait, to be a work of art, neither must nor may resemble the sitter... to depict a figure one must not paint that figure; one must paint its atmosphere." Perhaps in the future, the portrait will become increasingly evanescent.

At Skotia, another shift in focus is occurring. The gallery emphasizes contemporary realist painting but has just launched its first Biennial International Photography Invitational. Seventeen artists from 13 countries

have been handpicked based on the quality and originality of their body of work. Among the artists in this stunning exhibition is the Iranian Alireza Fani. His haunting *Entrance* portrays two adolescent girls with a bone and fish. With these objects from his childhood, spent partly in Tehran and partly at his grandfather's farm in the country, he creates a new iconography. "I call this collection *Remained Objects*," says the artist, "because we have been left with very little in our country, and from this deficiency I found another meaning in these objects." Bone symbolizes death, the sliced fish either the breath of life destroyed by violence or the violence itself. The girls portray the "fragile generation who has been forced to challenge this violence." Fani's surrealizing images take us to a deep place just below consciousness where the body knows before the mind. After the Invitational, Skotia returns to its core mission with *NAKED* (opening July 1), which gathers together a series of well-known realist painters, among them Graydon Parrish and Francesca Sundsen.

Re-presenting the Nude, curated by John O'Hern, former director of the Arnot Museum in Elmira, N.Y., opens at Evoke





“We want to have the objects still be what they are, but be seen in a new context.”

Installation of works by Paul Henry Ramirez
at David Richard Gallery.



Clockwise from top left: Luis Tapla, *Northern New Mexico Clothesline*; Roxanne Swentzell, *New Admiration*; Sergio Tapla, *Los Cosas que Pasán*; Meow Wolf's *GEODEcadent II* installation.



Gallery on July 2. "The body and its senses are our tools for experiencing the world and each other," claims O'Hern. "The ineffable energy that animates the body opens up worlds within and without." The nude is, of course, a major trope in Western art. The late Sir Kenneth Clark wrote of it, "The body is not one of those subjects which can be made into art by direct transcription—like a tiger or a snowy landscape.... We do not wish to imitate; we wish to perfect." Today, the nude no longer necessarily keeps to this idealization; rather, the body is often utilized to explore emotional states and physical trauma. In our post-Foucauldian world, it is almost perverse to deny that the nude body is trapped in webs of power and desire. This is certain to be a lively show, with bare-naked art from artists such as Geoffrey Laurence, Michel Bergt and Roxanne Swentzell.

At Zane Bennett Contemporary Art, there is much joy that François Morellet has completed his windows for the Lefuel Staircase in the Richelieu Passage of the Louvre. Traditionally, living artists exhibited in the Jeu du Paume, while being hung in the Louvre was reserved for the dead. The installation is titled, "L'esprit d'escalier," a play on words that refers not only to the staircase (*escalier*) itself but also to a French expression (attributed to Diderot) that means that frustrating feeling that comes when you finally think of a clever comeback for a conversation—well after the right moment has passed. Morellet redesigned the bay windows and oculi in a clever attempt to visually subvert and fragment the original windows by playing them against the new. The resulting space is delicately destabilized yet elegant.

At the venerable Linda Durham Contemporary Art, in its great new space, the twenty-somethings artists' collaborative Meow Wolf has erected an assemblage of domestic objects on a geodesic dome frame. "We want," says member Caity Kennedy, "to have the objects still be what they are, but be seen in a new context." Rewind to Kurt Schwitters' *Merz*, a holistic vision of



objects, acts and creations that combine and recombine the flotsam and jetsam of everyday life, or to Picasso's re-purposing of objects as art. The GEODEcadent II, as it is called, has a travel-and-return theme: bicycles, suitcases, Victorian chairs with the stuffing threatening to come out, reconstructed into a not-chair six feet off the ground. Being in the interior of the installation is like being in a childhood fort, daydreaming. The Buckminster Fuller geodesic dome carries, both literally and figuratively, the weight of the accumulation of things. Its structural clarity gives a frame to all that stuff. "This installation by Meow Wolf provides a great opportunity for dialogue between these young artists and older viewers," says Durham. "The extremely new and innovative use of traditional objects from the 1950s, '60s and '70s evokes nostalgia for our audience. While much new art provokes anxiety, GEODEcadent II, seems to comfort people."

The new kid on the gallery block is David Richard Gallery, which opened with



a bang this June. Two one-person shows, of Beverly Fishman and Paul Henry Ramirez, brighten the gallery space. Fishman's *Future Natural* addresses the ubiquitous presence of medical imaging in our lives and how it is coming to shape our self-perception. Elegant paintings on steel and glow-in-the-dark wall sculptures, Fishman's sometimes whimsical creations address a very serious subject. Ramirez, originally from El Paso, brings us vivid hard-edge paintings that spin and almost act like Frisbees—like 3-D paintings shaped like disks and painted in spiral forms that are a bit off-center. The energy of this show really comes from Ramirez' technical skill and knowledge of hard-edge painting combined with a willingness to play with conventions.

The ways in which an artist positions him- or herself in relation to tradition and traditions is a key factor in the polyglot conversations of post-post-modernism as it evolves in the 21st century. In Santa Fe, a particularly polyglot American art city, the dialogue promises to be rich and deep. ■