Made in New Mexico

HOME MADE

AN INNOVATIVE ARTIST, A BESPOKE TILE COMPANY, AND A GLASSBLOWER HIGHLIGHT THE MANY MAKERS OF NEW MEXICO.

Clockwise: Syzygy Tile, Ira Lujan's glasswork, Thomas Vigil's studio.

Makers have always been the foundation of New Mexico culture, from the great builders of Chaco Canyon to the designers of interactive neon sea urchins at Meow Wolf. The fabric of our culture is sewn, one stitch at a time, by the boot makers, weavers, silversmiths, and potters who dream, design, and create here. The urge to make beautiful things is in our veins.

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MAKER

Ira Lujan

WORKING GLASS HERO **BY ASHLEY M. BIGGERS**

Ira Lujan takes inspiration from cultures all across Native America, but what he yields from molten sand is decidedly Southwestern: an abstract silhouette of a buffalo, a woman's head with Hopi hair whorls, a Pueblo pot. Lujan, who is of Taos and Ohkay Owingeh Pueblo heritage, puts his own twist on each piece of blown glass.

He sandblasts the geometric designs of Cochiti and Acoma onto the shiny surface of a glass pot, then tops it with a stopper shaped like a white-tailed deer. He reimagines the iconic antler chandelier, a ranch-house staple, by crafting individual antlers with tapering forks, creamy striated stems, and knobby bases. (Check out a magnificent one in the lobby of Albuquerque's Hotel Chaco; Lujan's work is also sold there, in Gallery Chaco.) The creations are fragile yet substantial—"like stop-motion," Lujan says of his liquid-to-solid medium.

His ancestors may have reached for clay, but his chosen technique is equally ancient—glass vessels have been found in the foundations of Old Jerusalem and Roman Empire outposts. Those vessels told stories about their makers' lives, and Lujan says he likewise uses glass to carry his peoples' traditions forward. "We've never written our history," he says. "We tell it orally. I'm continuing that through art."

He found his path while living in Oregon, the glassblowing mecca of the Pacific Northwest, where he became enthralled with the process and teamwork of the "hot shop"—what glassblowers call their workshops. He was inspired by classes with prominent Tlingit artist Preston Singletary at the renowned Pilchuck Glass Studio, in Washington. Back in Taos, Lujan took art classes and apprenticed with Tony Jojola, of Isleta Pueblo, a glass master and a pioneer in the material among Native artists. The two built a close working relationship: Jojola joins Lujan in the younger artist's Cuyamungue hot shop a few times a year. Jojola nudged him to evolve from making traditional glass forms, like bowls and vases, to more challenging, abstract forms imbued with Native roots.

A 2007 Santa Fe Indian Market fellowship allowed Lujan to build the shop, and that shift galvanized his career. He's since helped to create a hot shop at Santa Fe's Institute of American Indian Arts, where he plans to guide students on their own journeys—through glassblowing as well as life.

"Everything has to be just right to work—the temperature, the timing," he says. "You can't be upset if it fails, because you're learning something from that. Glass teaches me. It's my discipline, my therapy, my job, and my life."

Albuquerque-based freelance writer **Ashley M. Biggers** *has been an art-glass aficionado since attending University of Puget Sound, Dale Chihuly's alma mater.*

PREVIOUS SPREAD, CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: JAY HEMPHILL, MINESH BACRANIA, STEFAN WACHS

Photographs by **MINESH BACRANIA**

Lujan with three of the "totems," towers of individual glass pieces, he created for Indian Market.

Ira Lujan shows his work at Lyn A. Fox Fine Pueblo Pottery September 21–22, (foxpueblopottery.com). He also teaches workshops at Prairie Dog Glass at Jackalope (find them on Facebook).

Krissy Ramirez handcrafts tile in the Silver City workshop founded by David del Junco and Lee Gruber (facing page).

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Syzygy Tile

FEATS OF CLAY **BY JENNIFER C. OLSON**

At the Syzygy Tile factory, in downtown Silver City, a woman shapes a block of deep-red clay into a three-dimensional rectangle, drops it from eye level to flatten each side, then straightens it into a perfect cube with her gloved hands. She stands in front of the warehouse's large windows, working by natural sunlight and wearing an apron the color of the clay. She slices slabs from the block and presses each deep into a plaster mold, smoothing the back. As moisture migrates into the porous plaster, the clay shrinks and the tile pops out of the mold.

Making decorative tiles this way takes nearly four minutes each and cannot be accelerated. While some tile companies automate this transformation of raw clay into stamped field tile, molded decorative tile, or extruded trim pieces, Syzygy, in its 25th year of business, prefers the hands-on method of producing pieces that hark back to the Arts and Crafts era, as at home in traditional adobes as they are in celebrity mansions.

"You can't produce something that looks like handmade tile if you stamp it out of a machine," says Patrick Hoskins, Syzygy's showroom manager. "It's next to impossible to induce variation into something that's made by machines. And it's impossible to prevent variation when you do it by hand."

Together, 25 employees produce 25,000 square feet—100,000 pounds—of tile every year, from simple colored squares to large, elaborate decorative tiles. Samples ship to 140 showrooms across the country, where designers of hotels, restaurants, and creative homes use them in kitchens, bathrooms, pools, and fireplaces. They are beautiful, versatile, and durable. "Clay has been used as functional artwork in this region for centuries," Hoskins says, "and because of our clay's mechanical features, Syzygy tile is suitable for extreme environments like New Mexico's."

Lee Gruber and her husband, David del Junco, started the company in the early 1990s, and it grew from a family affair to a competitive international business during what Gruber calls "the renaissance of the handmade tile industry in the United States." Syzygy emerged from the 2008 recession as not only one of the few remaining craft tile companies, but one that's growing.

In a 1938 industrial building on the town's main drag, visitors can ask for a tour of the factory and glimpse the possibilities on display in Syzygy Tile's showroom, which Silver City–based interior designer Christine Rickman likens to a candy shop. "Every time I go in, I want to redo my bathroom and kitchen," she says. "There's something new and fun every time." Rickman's house already features Syzygy tile, and she has used it with clients for a dozen years—from high-end homes to budget-wise projects. The tiles are expensive, "but it's worth every penny," she says. "You're buying art."

Shells, flowers, leaves, and snowflakes emerge from the molds. Still pliable, they are gently moved into a cool, dark room where they air-dry under careful watch for more than a week. The maker remains at the counter to shape another sliver of earth into the beginnings of a made-to-order tile. Others apply glazes at a sunlit counter, load kilns with layers of heavy tile, consult customers, develop custom mosaic blends, carve at clay to invent new designs, and meticulously pack boxes that will be shipped around the world. Every job at Syzygy is filled by a person—a Silver City local, a young transplant, a parent, an aspiring artist.

The interaction between the glazes and the red-bodied clay is what makes the tiles special. The key is letting just enough of the red peek through the glaze to highlight decorative reliefs and accentuate the borders of flat field tiles. "If you put our glazes on a white body, they look common," says Syzygy co-founder Lee Gruber. "On this red body, they're highly distinctive."

The only hands-off part of the process is the firing, when Syzygy's electric kilns are cranked to temperatures as high as 2,200 degrees. After the first firing, workers glaze the cooled tiles with earth-tone colors bearing names like Lichen and Fool's Gold. During the second firing, a two- or three-degree temperature variation can change the look of the finished product completely. "If it doesn't come out right," Hoskins says, "you throw it in that seconds pile and start over."

The company is thriving because of that commitment to craftsmanship, and perhaps some divine help. It was founded on the night of a lunar eclipse, when the sun, moon, and earth all aligned—a rare celestial phenomenon known as a syzygy.

See a sample of handmade Syzygy tile at syzygytile.com, where you can also look for a distributor near you. Visit the company's main showroom in Silver City.

Jennifer Olson *designed her home around a custom Syzygy Tile backsplash.*

Photographs by **JAY HEMPHILL**

MAKER

Thomas Vigil

FROM SPRAY PAINT TO HIGH ART

BY GWYNETH DOLAND

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Vigil uses layers of stencils to paint images, such as Frida Kahlo and the Virgin Mary, on found objects.

Thomas Vigil walks through the Museum of Spanish Colonial Art, in Santa Fe, checking out the half-dozen of his pieces included in *GenNext: Future So Bright*, the museum's first comprehensive exhibit of contemporary artists. He talks about his inspirations (Española, graffiti art) and his methods (spray paint, stencils, old road signs).

In this John Gaw Meem–designed temple to tradition, his work stands in stark contrast. A familiar Madonna emblazoned with a fiery sacred heart gazes serenely from a background of rusty license plates and radiates a golden aura of splattered gold spray paint. Vigil's subject matter may be similar to traditional Spanish Colonial art, but his style couldn't be more different. He uses software to manipulate images of, say, Jesus, Mary, Frida Kahlo, or Zozobra, then prints color separations on heavy paper and cuts a series of stencils, one for each color. He uses spray paint almost exclusively, coaxing splashes, fades, feathers, and splatters from cans designed to slather chairs and fenders. Instead of canvas, he uses metal. Beneath Jesus' crown of thorns you can just make out the raised letters warning of an S-curve. He collects signs from a Department of Transportation dump in Alcalde, friends bring him others, and he has developed relationships with like-minded sign collectors, including Johnnie Meier of the Classical Gas Museum, in Embudo.

Vigil's work is genuinely reverent—his parents brought him up a devout Catholic—but it also expresses the rebellious streak of his teenage self, an Española kid with a rattle can, plastering graffiti on any nearby surface. "His work is this unique blend of classic imagery and contemporary materials," says curator Jana Gottshalk. "His piece is one of the first you see when you walk into the exhibit, and it's like *Bam!* We aren't messing around here!" With *GenNext*, she has placed his work among more established artists like Luis Tapia, Marie Romero Cash, and Nicholas Herrera, and precipitated a tipping point in his career. Now 32 years old, Vigil is on the precipice of something big, a transformation from a guy with a day job, who makes art in his shed, into a *serious artist*.

Innately modest, Vigil seems both enthralled and baffled by this possibility. He is stoked to be in the show, happy that his creativity and hard work are recognized, but also slightly embarrassed by the attention. "It's coming to that point where everyone knows who I am and it's pretty surreal," he says. "I just signed with Evoke Contemporary in Santa Fe, and I'm like: How did my favorite gallery approach *me*?"

Evoke promised to raise his national profile and give his work exposure to an elite group of collectors, but they insisted that Vigil no longer show his work at Contemporary Hispanic Market, an annual event that could draw his efforts—and his customers—away from the gallery. As a young man, that market was "the brass ring," a goal, a stamp of approval from peers, and a major source of income. In recent years, he earned more money from art on those two July days than he did the rest of the year. Having his work at Evoke means the very real possibility that he could earn a living just making art, but in order to take the chance, he must jump off a perch he worked so hard to reach.

He's jumping—but not so far that he's quitting his job at Los Alamos National Laboratory, having spent nearly a decade working his way to a well-paid managerial position that allowed him to buy a house south of Española. He grew up in a single-wide trailer in nearby El Guache, helping with farm chores and serving as an assistant to his electrician father, who would awaken him at 4 a.m. to help dig conduit trenches. "It would be midnight and we're still there, but my dad was like 'We can't leave these people without power!' And now I love the fact that he raised me like that."

Which is why, when the director at Evoke told him to start thinking about quitting his job, he was terrified. He works overtime at the lab, raises two kids with his wife, and still tries to paint 20 to 30 hours a week. He spent a year amassing enough work for the museum show, last year's market, and the July opening of his first show at Evoke. "Yesterday I'm finishing up two pieces, and the piece of cardboard I'm using has paint all over it, but I see my two-year-old walking toward these steps, so I go and grab her, then I come back and put the wrong cardboard down. Right on the painting. And I ruined it, this thing I'd been working on for 60 hours." He stayed in the studio late and fixed the painting.

After years of keeping his head down, working full-time, and keeping one hand on the spray can, Vigil is at least getting to enjoy the fruits of his labors a little more. He's still not used to it. "My father taught me if you work hard enough you can have anything you want," he says. And then he gets back to work. NM

Gwyneth Doland *knew Thomas Vigil was for realz when he showed up wearing a T-shirt from Saints and Sinners, Española's iconic liquor store.*

See *GenNext: Future So Bright* through November 25 at the Museum of Spanish Colonial Art (spanishcolonial.org). See more of Thomas Vigil's work at thomasvigil.com and evokecontemporary.com.

BOTTOM RIGHT: COURTESY EVOKE CONTEMPORARY

Photographs by **STEFAN WACHS**