

Art

Ed Sandoval



Artist Ed Sandoval in his Taos gallery.

Taos Original

Equal parts showman and artist, Ed Sandoval conjures a timeless New Mexico.

By Molly Boyle

WHEREVER THE GNARLED OLD man appears, time seems to stand still. Dressed in the same hat and weathered brown coat, he leans his bent figure over a crooked walking stick, lurching down ancient dirt lanes. In serpentine landscapes swirling with chamisa, sagebrush, and the blood-red skyline of the Sangre de Cristo Mountains, he is the frail yet abiding human center. **CONTINUED >**



Taos-based artist Ed Sandoval calls the figure who appears in most of his paintings “El Viejito,” the little old man. El Viejito, who is only ever seen from behind, walking toward the horizon, stands in for the people Sandoval calls “the sacred old ones.” His depiction is rooted in the venerable elders who have lived and worked for generations in the villages along the High Road to Taos.

El Viejito is only a character. But, like the mounded adobe walls, rusted 1950s pickup trucks, and seasonal scenes of rural northern New Mexico that Sandoval paints around the old man, he represents a certain immortality. Sandoval’s brushstrokes capture the enduring lifeways

of Norteño people: Bonfires burn bright at Taos Pueblo every Christmas Eve, majestic cottonwoods glow orange in the fall and are stripped bare in winter, centuries-old adobe churches welcome the faithful every week.

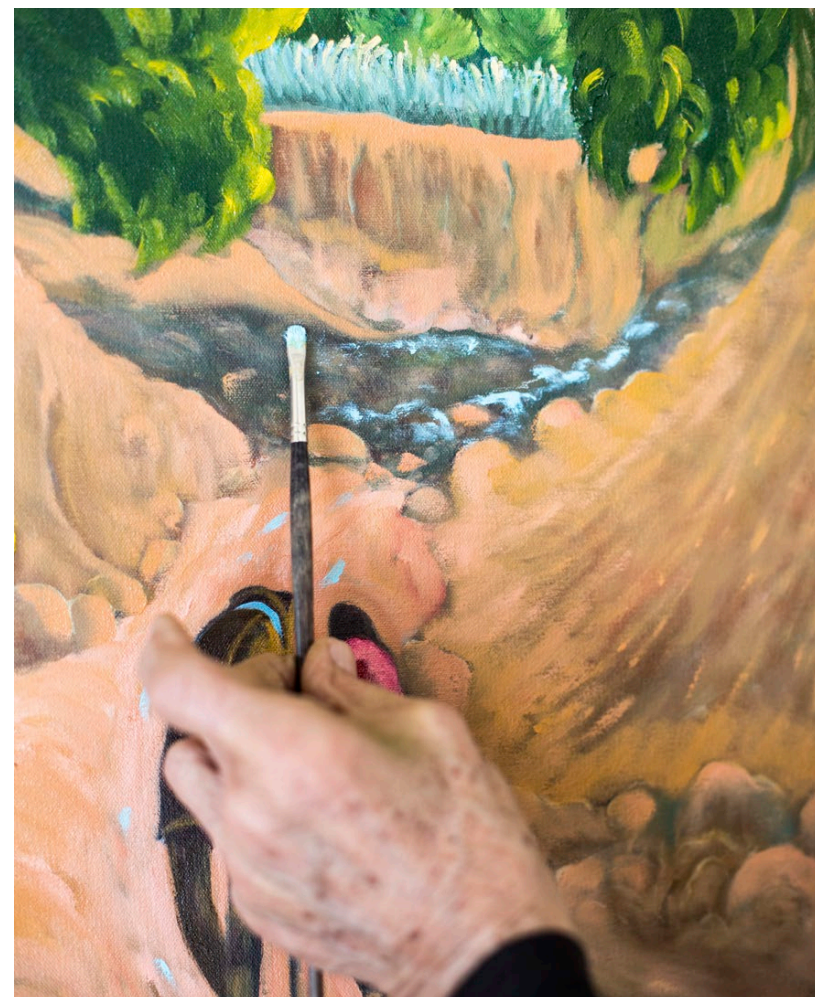
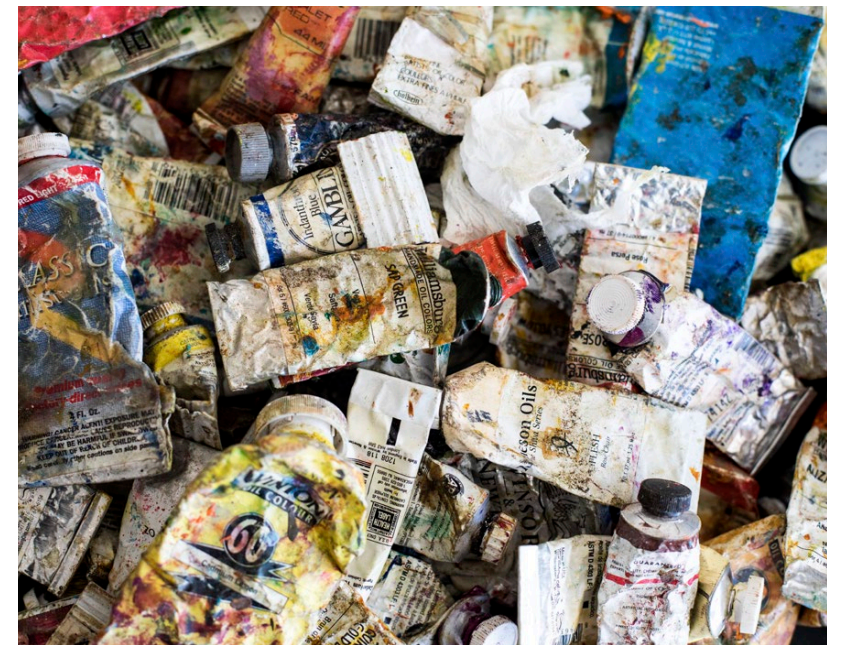
Many of these compositions are done in plein air, teased into existence on an easel set up near Taos Plaza as tourists look on.

Time trickles on, slowly and steadily as spring water through an acequia. Many of these compositions are done in plein air, teased into existence on an easel set up near Taos Plaza as tourists look on. The paintings instill a cozy sense of comfort and belonging, gently placing the viewer in a golden instant along the road home.

“It’s always a moment thing with me,” Sandoval says, standing in his studio and gallery on Quesnel Street in Taos.

Born in 1945, the artist divided his childhood between the family home in Nambé and Los Alamos, where his father worked on the Manhattan Project. He learned the power of a split second at age 6, when he was lying on the side of a road peering down at a ditch with his twin brother and cousins. From up the hill, a car freakishly came out of park and rolled over the children, badly injuring Sandoval. While he recuperated in a full-body cast for the next several months, drawing and painting showed him the way forward—then and for the seven decades that lay ahead.

“HE HAD THE HABIT OF REMEMBERING SCENES, moods, geography, little moments—memory blips—that had occurred yesterday or maybe fifty years ago,” John Nichols writes in *The Milagro Beanfield War* of “the immortal old man” Amarante Córdova.



This and facing page: Ed Sandoval’s expressive range of colors start out as a seeming riot before he melds them in his peaceful paintings. **Above:** A portrait of the artist as a young man—a black-and-white photograph on display in his home studio.



The character of Amarante, too, is an inspiration for El Viejito: During the filming of *The Milagro Beanfield War* in the village of Truchas, Sandoval befriended actor Carlos Riquelme, who played the indelible elder Amarante in the 1988 film. “I was so taken by his character in the movie, his personification, his body language,” Sandoval remembers.

He thought of all the old ones—his grandfather, a Nambé farmer, and grandmother, a *curandera* whose dirt-floor kitchen was lined with dried healing herbs—who had shaped his own life. “I started doing paintings of him,” he says. “It just evolved into a trademark.”

The painter has another signature. In his frames, every mountainous horizon is lined with a thin yet unmistakable stripe of crimson that represents the reddish evening light of the Sangre de Cristos.

“Wherever the sky kisses the mountains, you’ll see it,” says Sandoval. He gets a faraway look on his face, wondering aloud about the

SEE MORE

Learn more about artist Ed Sandoval and sign up for his newsletter at edsandovalgallery.com. Follow him on Facebook (@edsandovalgallery) or visit the gallery at 119 Quesnel St., in Taos. Canyon Road Contemporary Art, at 622 Canyon Road in Santa Fe, also carries his work.

first time Spanish colonists saw what they dubbed the “Blood of Christ” mountain range. Those colonists included Sandoval’s first New Mexico ancestor, cartographer and santero Bernardo Miera y Pacheco, who arrived in the 1740s.

A devoted student of art history (and former Los Alamos High School teacher of the subject), he uses color to draw the viewer’s eye—to pull the mountains forward, push the sky back, and highlight the varicolored hues of the seasons. His rules of composition are rooted in a triangle that unites three elements: the landscape, the architecture, and the people.

“You see those in practically all my work,” says Sandoval, who once owned a construction company. “Adobe just became a part of me. When I see an adobe church I get excited, because I know the work involved in building it.”

SANDOVAL’S PARTNER, GWEN MCFADEN, SAYS Sandoval’s devoted collectors buy his paintings because they depict humble scenes that speak to their values of home, faith, and family. In El Viejito, they see their own elders. A Sandoval painting, she adds, “is just like

Ed. It’s not trying to be something it’s not.”

Large Hispanic families make annual pilgrimages to the Ed Sandoval Gallery to buy his yearly calendar, McFaden says, where they can view their lives represented in his suspended-in-amber moments.

Taoseños and returning visitors know exactly where the artist can be found on any given day of the year: outside his studio, painting in the open air, capturing what he calls “the feeling of New Mexico.” Sandoval explains, “You’ve got to be right there, out in it, without looking at a photo. A photo really disappears the energy and spirit of the place. When you’re outside and painting what you’re seeing, magically it starts taking on a cultural or a spiritual form.”

With the help of McFaden, he also issues a monthly newsletter recounting memories of his Norteño childhood, along with more recent adventures throughout the region.

Taos News publisher Chris Baker, a long-time friend of Sandoval’s, says the painter is as much of a Taos original as his artwork. “He’s out there in the plaza working it in the heat and the cold, bringing people in. He doesn’t sit behind the gallery glass and wait for people to come to him. He goes out and finds the tourists.”

Unlike many artists, Sandoval is an extrovert, often encouraging onlooking children to try out his paintbrush and add a few strokes to his canvases.

Baker says Sandoval has an exhibitionist streak that transcends his art gallery: Occasionally the artist gets a wild hair to dress himself up as Zorro. He rides his Arabian horse, Patrón, through the streets of town, cutting a masked and swashbuckling figure that channels his conquistador ancestors.

“He’s got that mystique, and he works it,” Baker says. “Ed fits in here like a glove. If there was ever an artist made for Taos, it’s Ed Sandoval.” **NM**

Molly Boyle is angling for a story that takes her to Mora County, where her parents raise Angus cattle on 100 acres.



Ed Sandoval at his Taos gallery. **Facing page:** Sandoval’s classic 1951 Chevy bears images of El Viejito, his favorite character.



The adobe-walled Cleveland Roller Mill and a peek at its interior (facing page).



Grinding It Out

The Mora Valley once boasted seven wheat mills within seven miles. The three that remain (plus one wool mill) have history on their side.

By Molly Boyle

TWENTY-FIVE MILES NORTH OF LAS Vegas, a gentle giant of a building welcomes drivers to a pastoral valley where the present keeps close company with the past.

A metal waterwheel straddles the rushing spring waters of the Mora River. Beyond it, a path winds around a wonky complex of adobe buildings with faded blue shutters. Whether you walk the grounds of the La Cueva Mill in the clear light of morning, looking to the high eastern plains, or in the lengthening afternoon shadows of the surrounding mountains, the old gristmill feels like a wannabe time traveler's dream destination.

The 150-year-old former flour mill, near La Cueva Farm's raspberry fields, is more than an architectural tribute to the lasting marriage of Spanish construction and American engineering. Its metal gabled roof and earthen bricks represent the remnants of a densely grouped milling system that once nurtured a wheat-growing region known as "the bread basket of New Mexico."

Along a seven-mile stretch of the river, from La Cueva to Cleveland, three historic flour mills remain: La Cueva Mill, St. Vrain Mill, and the Cleveland Roller Mill, now a museum. Thanks to preservation efforts by local residents, this scenic drive is a journey through the little valley that, at one time, could. Its people built seven mills in as many miles, supported crops that fed people far beyond their mountain borders, and protected the resources and lifeways of a place some New Mexicans call "God's country."

These days, there's a new mill. Built in 2003, the Mora Valley Spinning Mill sits in the heart of downtown Mora, breathing new life into the tradition of local wool spinning and weaving.

"That spirit of self-sufficiency was already there before the mills," says A. Gabriel Meléndez, a Mora Valley native and a University of New Mexico distinguished professor. A vibrancy existed even before Ceran St. Vrain built the valley's oldest standing industrial mill, in 1864, to supply a \$41,000 flour con-



tract with Fort Union, Meléndez says.

"It was remarkably diverse, although on a small scale," he says. "You had Syrian and Lebanese merchants. There were Jewish merchants and Anglo-Americans and Irish soldiers. St. Vrain, coming from back east, arrives in the 1830s and intermarries with the local community."

"It was remarkably diverse ... You had Syrian and Lebanese merchants. There were Jewish merchants and Anglo-Americans and Irish soldiers," says A. Gabriel Meléndez.

The mix was rounded out by French priests who established Christian Brothers schools, Italian Jesuits who came from Las Vegas, and Spanish-speaking farmers, herdsmen, and ranchers. The Mora Valley economy was boosted by booming wheat crops, cattle and sheep ranches, and the increasing consumer demands from nearby forts and cities like

Las Vegas, Taos, and Santa Fe.

All had reason to hail the rise of the local gristmills that processed grain from the 1860s to the 1940s. In *The Book of Archives and Other Stories from the Mora Valley, New Mexico*, Meléndez writes that a local politician gave a speech at the inauguration of the La Cueva Mill, where farmers mingled with priests and politicians, and women dressed in their Sunday best. "People of Mora County,

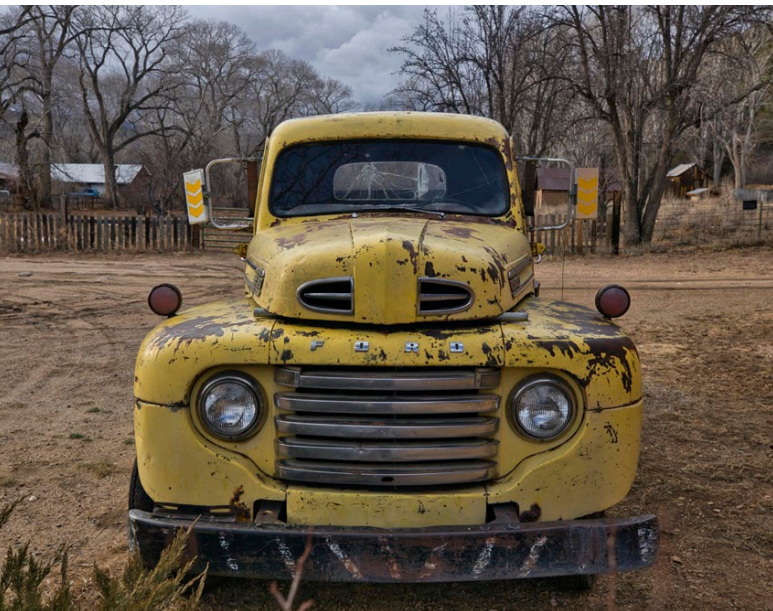
Above: The Mora River once powered the La Cueva Mill. **Facing page, clockwise from top left:** Merlyn Witt at the St. Vrain Mill. Its waterwheel. The interior used to bustle with wheat grinding.

here before you are the fruits of American genius," the tax assessor proclaimed, before referencing a traditional hand-grinding tool. "The metate," he said, "gives way to Yankee ingenuity."

INSIDE THE THREE-STORY ST. VRAIN MILL, TRACES of that ingenuity abound. Merlyn Witt, president of the St. Vrain Mill Preservation and Historical Foundation, points to a column on the first floor. The wood bears old scratches revealing decades of milling calculations as well as "I was here" inscriptions. "Guadalupe Romero, May 15, '96—that's not nineteen ninety-six," Witt says. "That's the oldest one I've found."

The foundation, which purchased the mill in 2015, has made considerable headway in restoring windows, gables, and the second-story loading platform. Witt says repairs to the walls are the next—and most expensive, at an estimated cost of \$125,000—task of the foundation, which plans to open the first floor





to visitors after Memorial Day. The goal is to repurpose it into the Mora Valley Heritage Center, with a meeting space, and to feature exhibits on the history of generational families in the area. In recent years, the refurbished St. Vrain has hosted quilt shows and a pop-up Christmas arts-and-crafts fair.

Vice President Betsy Bloch says there is no shortage of interest in goings-on at the mill. “People are very proud of their heritage here and they want to revive it,” she says. “If we’re here for more than 20 minutes, someone will stop and get out of their car and come in and say, ‘Oh, I’ve always wanted to go in here.’”

A few miles down NM 518, Cleveland Roller Mill Museum owner Dan Cassidy IV says that although the pandemic has closed the mill for now, he never minds the respectful

road-trippers who get out to take awestruck looks around the grounds. Cassidy’s great-grandfather Dan bought the 1890s-era mill in 1913 and ran it as a family operation into the mid-1940s, after the majority of the more than 200 mills statewide had already closed, victims of advances in milling technology and the Dust Bowl’s pummeling of farmers. (Valencia Flour Mill, in Jarales, and Navajo Pride Flour Mill, in Farmington, appear to be the only operational wheat mills left in New Mexico.)

Cassidy says his family’s mill, which became a private museum in 1989, was a 24-hour operation in the late 1920s and ’30s, producing up to 50 barrels of flour a day. With evident pride, he adds that the Cleveland Roller Mill had state-of-the-art technology for

Above: Preservationists helped save the St. Vrain Mill. **Facing page, clockwise from top left:** An old truck at the Cleveland Roller Mill. Owner Dan Cassidy IV with his dog. A window at La Cueva Mill. An exhibit at the Cleveland Roller Mill and a historical plaque at St. Vrain.

its day. “The other mills have stone-ground wheels,” he says. “They never had all this elaborate sifting machinery, so they could only do the most basic stone-ground flour. But this one could separate all the way down to white and pancake flour, to three or four different products.”

All the original machinery, bought as a

Right: A weathered Mora Valley outbuilding. **Facing page, clockwise from top left:** Pork tamales from Teresa's Tamales. Two views of mill interiors. The wool mill's shop. Theresa Olivas draws national praise for her tamale business.

turnkey operation from industrial manufacturers in Kansas and Pennsylvania, is still installed in the Cleveland Roller Mill. A few wood panels here, too, bear the traces of old production calculations. Since 1987, Cassidy has drawn musicians, craftspeople, and visitors to the Cleveland Millfest every Labor Day weekend to demonstrate the milling process and run the waterwheel. He gestures toward an old yellow Ford truck sitting outside the mill. "This mill is just like a Model T. All the new cars are much fancier, but they have the same basic engine. So does this flour mill."

OVER AT THE MORA VALLEY SPINNING MILL, mill manager Daryll Encinias explains that,



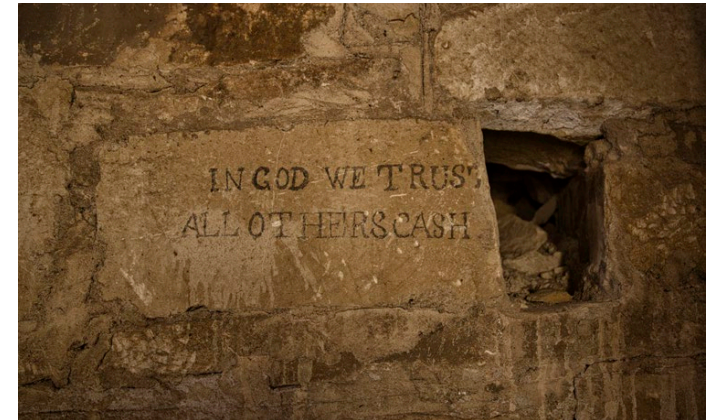
unlike the historic flour mills, "this mill has not been here forever. But the farmers and sheepherders who provide our wool have been working here for a very, very long time." The spinning mill, along with its nonprofit

weavers' gallery, Tapetes de Lana, which features work by dozens of local artisans, was sponsored by economic development grants that aimed to extend spinning and weaving traditions in the Mora Valley. Encinias says the wool mill has grown into one of the largest industrial spinners in the West. He and his team process fibers ranging from churro sheep to alpaca, yak, and camel.

Encinias walks me through the wool mill, explaining the weeklong process that transforms 100 pounds of raw churro wool into 60 pounds of cleaned and finely spun yarn for weavers. Running my hands over the ancient industrial machines and the lanolin-coated puffs of uncleaned fibers, I marvel at the little valley with the uncommonly good memory of its own history.

Meléndez writes that his homeland is filled with a *masa madre*, a regenerative yeast that sustains itself on its own traditions and stories. "Memory is powerful as a means to collect and hold things for other generations, but it is dead if the everlasting yeast of imagination fades and dries up," he explains. An industrious and imaginative hope springs eternal here—powered, it seems, by the Mora River. **NM**

While researching mills in Mora County, Molly Boyle discovered there were once a couple of molinos (mills) upstream from where her parents live on Coyote Creek.



MILL AROUND

Fruits of the valley. Where NM 518 and NM 442 meet, picnic benches and an adobe-walled garden on the La Cueva Mill grounds offer prime real estate for a picnic lunch. In late summer, hit the U-pick raspberry fields at the adjoining La Cueva Farm. The farm's Mill Café serves barbecue, sandwiches, and raspberry sundaes. Seasonal hours. lacuevafarm.com

Fruits of the loom. Tapetes de Lana, at the intersection of NM 518 and NM 434, serves as the unofficial welcome center to Mora. Browse yarns from the Mora Valley Spinning Mill, plus weavings, pottery, quilts, and soaps from more than 90 local makers. moravalleyspinningmill.com

Grist on the mills. Learn about the Cleveland Roller Mill Museum at clevelandrollermillmuseum.org, and the St. Vrain Mill's renovation at stvrainmill.org.

Top tamales. Even *The New York Times* couldn't resist the siren song of Teresa's Tamales, which have been rightfully famous across the Mora Valley since the 1990s. Don't miss the red-chile-and-pork masa missiles at this low-ceilinged shack right off the highway; order a day in advance for green-chile-chicken or calabacitas tamales. 3296 NM 518, Cleveland; 575-387-2754, on Facebook [@teresastamales](https://www.facebook.com/teresastamales)

Farm stay. Find off-grid serenity in the guest cabins at Los Vallecitos, a working ranch at the base of the Sangre de Cristo Mountains. Certified grass-fed beef and lamb are for sale here and at Los de Mora Local Growers' Cooperative, in Mora. From \$55 a night. airbnb.com



Art

Paula Wilson



Playfulness is Paula Wilson's hallmark, typified by the swing in her studio, handmade clothes and accessories, and (facing page) fanciful journal.



Zozo's Petals

In the heart of Carrizozo, Paula Wilson cultivates her art and life. **By Molly Boyle**

IF YOU MEET PAULA Wilson at her studio during the weekly art event known as MoMAZoZo, you might not actually see her for a while. Art tends to get in the way, along with history, a growing artistic community, and the gorgeously decrepit streetscape in downtown Carrizozo, where US 54 meets US 380, midway between Socorro and Roswell.

Though I can't immediately find the artist when I come to visit one scorching day in June, I can follow her trail. Wilson's bold brushstrokes decorate the outside of a three-building suite on the former railroad town's historic 12th Street. On the rear facade, zagging, free-form designs and a few mysterious, all-seeing eyes overlook the train tracks. Repurposed wire-and-metal sculptures hang jauntily from the empty window frames of a sagging second-story porch. Across from a

sunken auto bay filled with glittering broken glass, spiky bushes of Siberian elm, and jimson weed, two large female silhouettes flank the garage-door entrance to Wilson's studio. Everything in sight adds depth, atmosphere, and a bombed-out kind of beauty.

Wilson is a mixed-media artist, and the sum of her work can't be reduced to its parts. Through sculpture, collage, printmaking, painting, fashion, and video art, she creates layered pieces that weave narratives across time, space, cultures, art history, and natural landscapes.

Amid the crumbling century-old complex Wilson bought with her partner, Mike Lagg, in 2015, thousands of square feet are filled with creative possibilities. Every morning, the couple walks the half mile from their midcentury adobe home to the space they have also named MoMAZoZo. It spans the

falling-down El Cibola Hotel, where Lagg keeps his woodworking studio, an open-air chicken and pigeon coop in a part where the roof is missing, and an artists' residency studio on the second floor. The adjoining building, once home to a Ford garage, is where Wilson constructs her works. Next door, the Lyric Theater is an old-time movie palace (the last picture shown there was *The Exorcist*) that the couple has repurposed for community performances and artist talks.

I eventually locate Wilson in her studio

Paula Wilson makes art in a former Ford garage. **Facing page:** The artist with *Yucca Rising*, a sculpture of a powerful, towering Black woman whose garments reflect the elements of Wilson's environment.





“It’s not just that the landscape becomes a subject. It’s this potential, and the sense of time and timelessness out here,” Paula Wilson says of how she views her Carrizozo home.

amid a small crowd of artists, art lovers, and artworks. She’s pressing woodblock prints onto T-shirts for the visitors swirling around her at the printing press. In an arts district that is home to four other galleries, the vibe of the gathering is casual, with a touch of post-COVID giddiness. But an electric current of chance also hangs in the air. “You never know who or what might happen by,” someone says to me.

They might have meant Wilson herself. In 2007, she moved from the warehouses of

Bushwick, Brooklyn, to the semi-abandoned outposts of Carrizozo after earning an MFA from Columbia University and working as a studio assistant to painter and printmaker Kara Walker. Raised in Hyde Park, Chicago, Wilson first came to Lincoln County in the 1990s, where her mother, a copy editor and bookbinder, had moved for a slower and more creative pace of life.

After she fell in love with Lagg, who took her on a mountain drive for their first date, Wilson decided to carve out her own artistic space in this town of around 900 residents.

Self-portraiture is a hallmark of her work. In the studio, several large-scale depictions of Black women, like the figures standing sentry outside the building, powerfully oc-

cupy space among busy backgrounds strewn with patterns and color. Muslin, canvas, and slatted wooden screens are sutured together to create monumental works that reference a multicultural stew of influences.

“I’m particularly interested in this idea that we become the things that we turn our attention to,” Wilson says. As I ask her about the gently clanking wooden tool belt she wears around her waist—a gift from Lagg that carries items ranging from a phone to scissors—I realize that Wilson’s outfit is its own art installation. A spindly homemade hair pick hangs around her neck, a self-described “symbol of protection” that recurs in her prints, along with the vaguely flowery yet definitely phallic forms of her



Art spills into the outdoor areas of Paula Wilson’s workspace. **Facing page:** In-progress and completed artworks fill the Carrizozo studio that Wilson shares with her partner, woodworker Mike Lagg (top right).

dangly two-tone wooden earrings. The artist is also the art.

Over the course of the pandemic, Wilson has been constructing a massive blue muslin figure on one wall with the help of local sewing artist Molly Sheahan. Commissioned by the Tufts University Art Galleries, the imposing, as-yet-unnamed woman wears a draped garment that pays tribute to the New Mexico state flower, the yucca, as well as its sole pollinator, the yucca moth. The layered work is made up of dried yucca woodblock prints along with relief and ghost prints, reflecting the muted mood of a starry evening.

“A lot of activity happens between the moth and the yucca at night,” the artist muses. “I feel like she almost builds herself.”

By “she” Wilson characteristically means more than one subject: Both the woman and the yucca rise from the ground. She mentions regeneration more than once. “New Mexico

is so amenable to that kind of energy. I feel like a lot of people come out here to reinvent themselves. There’s an openness in the landscape. It gives you permission.”

Other personal images appear in Wilson’s work in the exhibition *Eye to I: Self-Portraits from the National Portrait Gallery*, at the Albuquerque Museum through September 12. As the 2021 Frederick Hammersley Visiting Artist at the University of New Mexico, Wilson created prints that “are also all about moths,” she says. She finds inspiration in the jimson weed outside, which is pollinated by night-flying hawk moths. The organic, vining patterns in her prints often mimic the invasive plants of her environment.

We chat while munching on popcorn that Lagg has coaxed from the old-fashioned machine in the Lyric. References fly from the intertextuality of Wilson’s creative brain. The jimson weed, or datura, is “medicine

that is also poison,” she says, a plant sacred to the nearby Mescalero Apache, with an intoxicating nocturnal scent. There’s also a theory that some abstract Mimbres pottery designs were based on it. “She can rehabilitate soil tainted by plutonium,” Wilson says wonderingly, layering on the atomic histories contained in the local landscape.

In one of her best-known works, the 2014 video *Salty & Fresh*, an oversize version of the artist emerges from the sea wielding an extra-large palette, painting a series of female faces onto the nude backsides of three smaller figures standing in the water, dressed up as ornamental vessels. Beach picnickers look on and murmur, recording the occasion from behind iPhone screens. It’s a weird, hypnotic meditation on the figure of the artist, the art-making landscape, and the way an audience perceives the entire practice.

“Her life is an extension of her work,”



Chicago native Paula Wilson lived in Brooklyn before finding her muse in Carrizozo.

says Frank Rose, owner of Santa Fe’s Hecho a Mano gallery, which shows a selection of Wilson’s prints. “You can’t really tease them apart.” That is reflected in the falling-down structures she owns and inhabits, he adds. “There’s a clear relationship between the way she inserts herself into the work and the landscape. It feels reverent, like she is always

in relationship to it.”

Wilson says she and Lagg see themselves as gentle stewards of the ramshackle buildings, leaving some parts alone to the elements while teasing resources (like a greenhouse made from discarded windows) and art projects out of others. “It’s not just that the landscape becomes a subject,” she explains. “It’s this potential, and the sense of time and timelessness out here.”

As if on cue, a freight train whistle blasts. Through the open garage door, the din of pastel-colored cars drowns our conversation. As they pass, Wilson laughs at my reverent expression.

“It’s like this colorful snake, isn’t it? And a connection point. There’s just something about Carrizozo, the receptivity to strangers. And the legacy of the railroad here.” She’s building layers again. At this moment, all the touchstones of the artist’s world are visible—living, breathing, growing, blowing a horn. **NM**

Molly Boyle’s new favorite dress is the blue cotton one with wood-grain motifs that Paula Wilson block-printed during this interview.

ART HOPS

Keep up on Carrizozo’s art galleries and cultural events at carrizozoarts.com.

Visit Paula Wilson’s MoMAZoZo every Friday between noon and 1 p.m. 503 13th St., Carrizozo; paulajwilson.com; on Instagram (@momazozo)

See her work through September 12 in *Eye to I: Self-Portraits from the National Portrait Gallery*, at the Albuquerque Museum, 2000 Mountain Road NW, Albuquerque, cabq.com/arts/culture/albuquerque-museum

Peruse her prints at Hecho a Mano, 830 Canyon Road, Santa Fe, hechoamano.org

Take time to create

From an early age, Georgia O’Keeffe shaped a life filled with art. From her paintings, to her daily drawing practice, to her homes and personal style, she exercised her creativity every day. Seek your own inspiration in everything you do.

CLOCKWISE FROM LOWER LEFT: 1. Child’s drawing. 2. Child’s sculpture. 3. Georgia O’Keeffe. *Ram’s Head, Blue Morning Glory*, 1938. Oil on canvas, 20 x 30 in. Georgia O’Keeffe Museum. Gift of The Burnett Foundation. © Georgia O’Keeffe Museum. [2007.1.24]. 4. Alfred Stieglitz. Georgia O’Keeffe, 1918. Gelatin silver print, 3 1/2 x 4 1/2 in. Georgia O’Keeffe Museum. Museum Purchase. © Georgia O’Keeffe Museum. [2014.3.78].

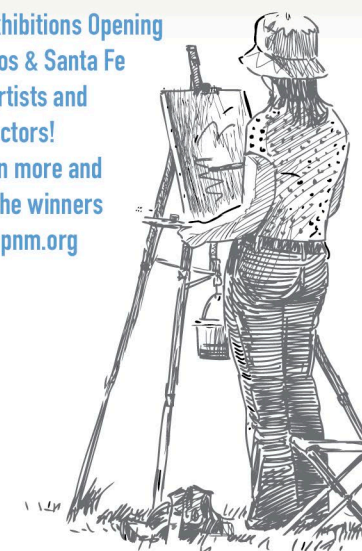


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Art

Susan Contreras

Masquerade Ball

Susan Contreras cartwheels into the heady community of Governor's Arts Award winners with paintings that celebrate the carnival of life—behind a mask.

By Molly Boyle

Inspired by masks and her Mexican heritage, artist Susan Contreras has risen to national fame.



IF YOU WALK INTO Susan Contreras's home and studio in Santa Fe, prepare to don a mask—and not the pandemic kind. “Look at these masks,” the painter enthuses, carrying a box to the porch. “They’re fabulous.”

She thrusts a Venetian commedia dell'arte visage at me and sets a makeup mirror on the table. “See what you look like,” she urges. I hold the checkered harlequin mask to my face and peer at the rigid, imposing stranger in the mirror. I’m a bit frightened.

“Now,” she says, masterfully twirling the mask up to her own face, “look at the difference in what *I* look like.”

She puts a hand on her hip and cocks her body jauntily, complementing the whimsical expression on the painted wooden face. She commands attention.

The moment is filled with possibility. Just as in her kinetic, circus-like paintings of both surreal and everyday events, the mask somehow changes the particles in the air. Anything could happen.

To stand in front of one of Contreras's large-scale canvases is to go down a weird rabbit hole—one teeming with color, mysticism, and human drama. In her paintings, the absurd keeps close company with both the vulgar and the mundane. Clowns bob for apples in the air, a motley crew of masked figures belly up to a bar, a pack of sleek greyhounds watch a jester eat pasta. As has been her trademark for decades, nearly every figure wears a mask, elevating the everyday actions in each canvas to new dramatic possibilities.

“Masks are my vehicle in the process of painting,” she says, “and now the world has a realization of what it’s like to be behind a mask.” This fall, Contreras's signature vision won her a 2021 Governor's Award for Excellence in the Arts, placing her in a select club of the state's most esteemed artists, philanthropists, and arts organizations.

A week or so after that honor was announced, we sit at her outdoor table, sifting through the flotsam and jetsam of an artist's life filled with travel, adventures, friends, and, most of all, fun.

“I am *back!*” she tells me. Over a short period this summer, Contreras garnered both the Governor's Award and a large commission.

Her painting *Los Trabajadores* was also selected for the prestigious Bennett Collection of Women Realists, based in San Antonio, Texas. It's not a bad run for a career painter who spent the past several years caring for her husband, acclaimed artist Elias Rivera, who won a Governor's Arts Award in 2004. He died of complications from Parkinson's disease in 2019.

“I said, ‘Why are they giving this award to someone who hasn't been painting for

Just as in her kinetic, circus-like paintings of both surreal and everyday events, the mask somehow changes the particles in the air.

years?’” she says wryly. You wouldn't know it, given the creative dross that surrounds us. Her studio, back up and running, is crowded with jars full of Rivera's brushes and two works in progress. Masks obtained from travels to Mexico, Guatemala, Europe, and a West Coast shop run by the artisans who made the carnival masks for Stanley Kubrick's *Eyes Wide Shut* line the walls.

A collection of pizza boxes holds years of quirky inspiration for paintings both

completed and not yet begun. One, marked “Chickens,” holds a trove of photographs from a long-ago county fair show of backyard chickens. Contreras reveals the result of that venture: a painting of a youth cradling a prize hen, an innocent occasion made more complex by the youngster's masked face.

“I had wanted to go to the Deming duck races for the longest time,” she says, opening another box, her mind ping-ponging through her inspirations. “My imagination of them was 10 times better than what actually happened. I got the biggest duck, and it fell

asleep in my arms before the race started.” Penny Spring, her friend and a multimedia artist, says that in any given setting, Contreras likes to latch on to the weirdest possible people. “In Sue's paintings, things are always just about to get a little bit out of hand,” she says. On Contreras's canvases, there's often a party, or a raucous bar scene with wildly different carousing characters. Even in a study of a solitary figure, strains of intoxication, mystery, and madness creep in.

Contreras attributes her preoccupation with masks to a long-ago suggestion by a gal-

lerist that she devote an exhibition to them. “When I did that show, it was like, *wow*,” she says, looking around wonderingly. “I don't have to paint people's faces or look for my characters anymore.”

Born in Mexico City in 1952, Contreras inherited a heady artistic legacy. Her grandfather Jesús Fructuoso Contreras (1866–1902) was a sculptor whose statues lined the Paseo de Reforma, in the heart of the city. Mary, her American-born mother, was a portrait painter who also collaborated with Contreras's father, Baudelio, on jewelry

In her Santa Fe studio, Susan Contreras prepares to add finishing touches to a new painting.



designs featured in *Vogue* magazine. When Susan was four, Mary moved the family to Santa Barbara, California. Susan and her siblings subsequently spent a nomadic childhood in Europe and Canada before landing in Santa Fe in 1968.

After Contreras spent years studying photography and illustration, both of which

form the basis for her paintings, two books on circus life sparked her inspiration: *Step Right Up!*, by Dan Mannix, and Jill Freedman's *Circus Days*. "I've always loved clowns," she admits, "probably from being a kid at circuses in Mexico."

As a child, she also frequently dressed up and engaged in mime artistry with her sister

Patsy, who was born deaf.

Intrigued by the photojournalistic possibilities of circus life, Contreras traveled for a time with small itinerant family circuses, including the Hoxie Brothers and Big John Strong Circus. On the circuit, she took pictures of "clowns having parties on boats and hanging showgirls upside down."

When she realized that painting meant she could further manipulate such a moment, adding her own dimensions of light, positioning, and color, she began chronicling the funky array of carnival life—and circus-like aspects of the humdrum.

"I was attracted to her colors. They're bright and fun," says contemporary santero Arthur López, a 20-year acquaintance of Contreras and Rivera. "Her paintings invoke a kind of playful joy."

Contreras takes more wooden and papier-mâché masks down from the corners of her home. "They really start to paint themselves," she says. Contreras insists that her best work is done when intuition takes over, "when you're unconscious of what you're painting." The masks take on a life of their own, dominating the scene and altering the mood with the slightest tweak of expression.

I study the spectrum of faces before us, then peer down at the scattered prints of Contreras's paintings on the table. The equal measures of darkness and light on every canvas come from a place of pure delight: Contreras says she is unable to paint when she is unhappy.

Even in the most frightening scenes—a grinning witch, a masked figure running from a flock of ravens—a timeless sense of humor twines with the absurdity of life.

"I think I have great empathy with humanity," Contreras says quietly. "I've been part of the deaf world, the Parkinson's world, the circus world. And I've been with clowns, who really are as weird as you think they are. I see exaggerations. It's all the extremes. My paintings just kind of hit you over the head."

She stands in the doorway of her studio, an impish expression on her face. She looks just like a jester. **nm**

Senior Editor **Molly Boyle** is featured in "Storytellers," p. 8.

STAR POWER

THE 2021 GOVERNOR'S ARTS AWARDS CROWN A NEW SET OF ACHIEVERS.

What's the smallest degree of separation between N. Scott Momaday, Maria Martinez, Georgia O'Keeffe, and George R.R. Martin? All are past recipients of the Governor's Award for Excellence in the Arts. For 47 years, a luminous lineup of writers, potters, painters, storytellers, philanthropists, and other dream weavers have received the honor, which affirms the foundational role of art in New Mexico. The ceremony returns this fall with a virtual celebration of the 2021 class of arts stars. See it at nmararts.org/governors-arts-awards.

THE HONOREES:

Individual Supporter of the Arts

Edward "Gus" Foster is an art collector and philanthropist in Taos whose accomplishments include donating nearly 400 works of art by 80 artists to the Harwood Museum of Art. (And he's still collecting!)

Individual Artists

Ricardo Caté (Santo Domingo Pueblo) drops equal doses of Indigenous wit and wisdom into the colorful panels of *Without Reservations*, the country's only Native-authored comic strip in a mainstream newspaper.

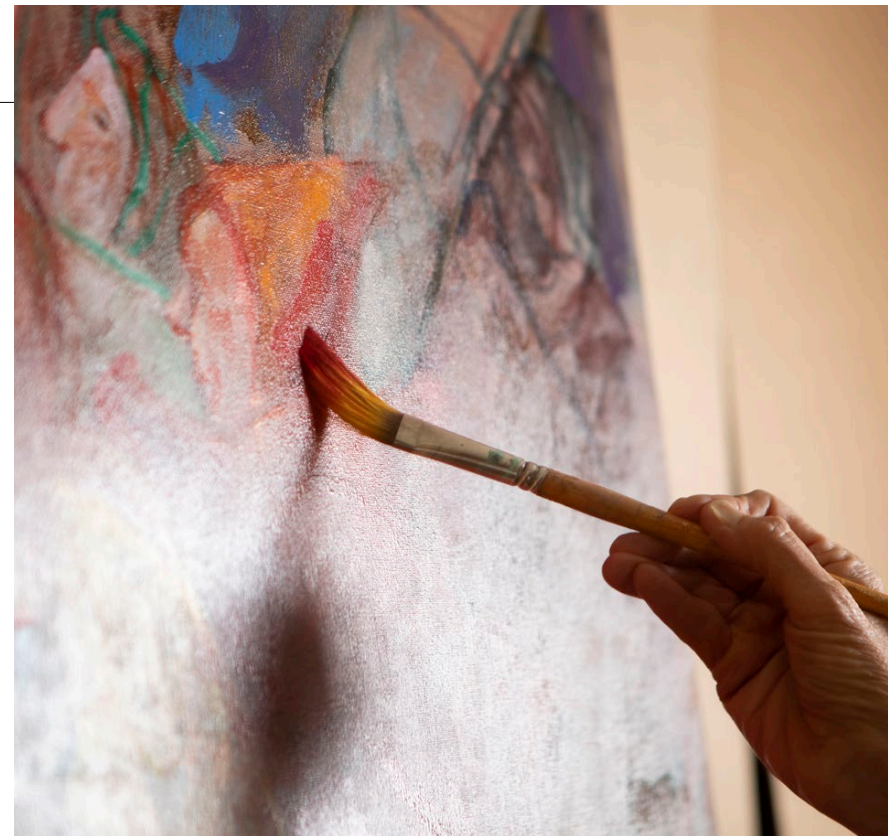
Composer **Dave Grusin** is beloved by New Mexicans for his score for the 1988 film *The Milagro Beanfield War*, but his extraordinary career spans eight Oscar nominations, ten Grammy wins, and hummable themes for *Tootsie*, *The Goonies*, and *On Golden Pond*.

Ceramic artist **Kathleen Wall** has advanced the clay traditions of Jemez Pueblo. Her whimsical figurative forms and mixed-media works put Pueblo pottery in simultaneous conversation with the past and the future.

Major Contributors to the Arts

Through art galleries, festivals, classes, exhibitions, and public projects, **gallupARTS** fires creative pulses throughout McKinley County. Over the past year, the organization has featured pandemic-stricken artists and organizations, helping to showcase artworks via social media and virtual presentations.

Designed by architect Antoine Predock and adorned with glass installations by Dale Chihuly, the **Spencer Theater for the Performing Arts**, in Alto, is a crown jewel of New Mexico venues. Known for its gorgeous acoustics and intimate seating, the theater hosts performances year-round.



"I was attracted to her colors. They're bright and fun," santero Arthur López says of Susan Contreras's work.