

For years, Jesus Payan Jr. spent long nights in the Tularosa Basin, peering into the darkest corners of the desert sky and watching for lights that evaded explanation.

One night, while he and some friends were stargazing by his house on five acres near La Luz, they heard footsteps crunching on gravel. Payan's skin prickled. The group gathered fistfuls of rocks and threw them toward the noise. The first volley missed, but Payan's second throw landed. "It went, 'Wwraaaaahhhh!'" Payan roars. "We went, 'Aaagghh!'" and ran toward the house."

As he sprinted toward his porch, the creature kept pace behind him. He reached the house at a sliding glass door. "A sliding glass door should be easy to open, but at that time it was like a combination lock," he says, mimicking fingers fumbling the handle. Finally, he flung it open and they threw themselves inside.

What had chased them? Payan thinks it was Bigfoot, an apelike creature most commonly associated with the Pacific Northwest's rainforests, renowned in tribal lore and campfire tales, and stubbornly unwilling to show its face for any camera. Perhaps, Payan speculates, it was venturing out of the mountains to scrounge nearby pecan orchards and cattle ranches for food.

In the two decades since, he's visited the woods routinely to search for more signs of it. Or them. He sees clues everywhere and has knitted together a belief in a Bigfoot that's closer to human than ape, capable of construction and culture, and, of course, possessing the wisdom and wiliness to stay well out of sight. Payan's efforts to document their lives,



JESUS PAYAN JR. is an actor known for his roles on *Breaking Bad* and *Better Call Saul*. He spends the time between his appearances investigating Bigfoot in New Mexico.

The first time I had any experience was in 2000 in Ruidoso. I was living in a cabin with my family and heard a Bigfoot call, their howl-scream. We'd just pulled up to the cabin when we

heard it. The sound of screeching tires is the same sound. It seemed like forever, but it was a good 25 to 30 seconds. Once it stopped, the whole mountain got quiet. No birds. No bugs. I

asked my mom, "Was that a siren?" And she said, "No, that's not what it was." Then it did it again. I went to the internet and heard other Bigfoot vocalizations, and it was the same thing.

habits, and stories swallow his free time. His goal: to become a noted scholar in the Bigfoot field.

"I'm not out to prove that they're real, because I know they are," he says. "We have found fur, scat, footprints. There's enough evidence that if they were charged with a crime, they'd be convicted. It's more an issue of acceptance of the evidence."

Payan retells the story of that hair-raising encounter with only a hint of the terror that left him gasping and crossing himself inside his house that night. He's made a living out of being a self-described "giant, scary cholo," first as a bouncer, then on film, and notably as Gonzo in the TV series *Breaking Bad* and *Better Call Saul*. Standing six foot three and more than 300 pounds, with a shaved head, a thick black beard, arms covered in ink, and a trio of tears tattooed by his left eye, he's accustomed to being seen a certain way.

"When I'm out there in the forest, I'm not being judged like that by my race, by whatever I look like," he says. "I feel really at home with those guys, because with them, I'm the little guy."

"Bigfoot" joined the lexicon decades ago as a story from spooked loggers in northern California, but tales of a hairy giant date back millennia. Skeptics question how Bigfoot escapes clear documentation in a world where nearly every hiker carries a camera in the form of a smartphone—and the even more pivotal point of why we've never found a body. But from the Four Corners to the Lincoln National Forest, New Mexico believers like Payan insist the truth is out there.

Payan's latest fieldwork recently caught the attention of Christopher Dyer, an anthropology professor who previously taught at the University of New Mexico's Gallup campus. Dyer became intrigued by the Sasquatch-Bigfoot phenomenon during his UNM tenure, when a student approached him asking for help identifying what might be breaking the necks of a relative's cattle. Dyer inspected the site and found footprints nearby that had toes like a human's but were 17 inches long. He's been collecting evidence of Bigfoot roaming the Southwest ever since.

On the spring outing when I join him, Dyer has invited a group to Cloudcroft to visit the site of some of Payan's recent photographs. He's booked a massive cabin outside town, stocked the fridge, and drafted an agenda of discussions and field trips. Dyer says he's smelled Bigfoot (an almost eye-watering scent of rot, death, and skunk) and had one throw a rock at him. But he hasn't seen one—yet. He's eager to change that.

Payan, among the first arrivals for the weekend,

He might play a tough guy on *Breaking Bad* and *Better Call Saul*, but Jesus Payan Jr. has been known to run in fear from what he's certain was Bigfoot.



NEW THREADS

The latest generation of Diné weavers push their tribe's traditional art outside the loom—sometimes throwing it away altogether.

BY ASHLEY M. BIGGERS

Photographs by
MINESH BACRANIA



Diné weaver Kevin Aspaas lives near the Ship Rock formation, a sacred peak to his people.



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 McFadden, 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.



Kevin Aspaas in his Shiprock studio. **Facing page, from top:** Churro sheep—the source of his wool. Weaving a new piece.



“The idea was imposed on weavers to make their rugs perfect,” Kevin Aspaas says. He views resurrecting the design as an “act of rebellion to what is thought of as Navajo weaving.”

transmission, into recording and being cultural bearers. There are rare parts of the weaving tradition that, if we don't work actively, will be lost.”

Aragon has begun subtly incorporating lost designs into his works, which, whether in techniques or styles, are never stereotypical. As he found his artistic voice, he fell in love with dyeing wool and a color spectrum rarely seen in customary rugs. In his hands, natural dyes such as indigo, cochineal, and rabbit brush cozy up with synthetic hues. The results are cascading mosaics that sometimes become even more tactile with the addition of tufted natural fiber from churro sheep, as they do in his piece *Texture and Movement*.

“We're such a colorful people, from our landscape to our culture and our histories. I want my textiles and tapestries to reflect the place I come from,” says the Santa Fe Indian Market 2019 Best of Class Textiles artist. “I weave as I'm moved to and inspired to. The colors and shapes interact and make their own thing.” The 35-year-old often finds inspiration in and meditates on water, always a point of concern for desert-dwelling people. *Polychromatic Refraction*, based on the appearance of light in water, used 85 colors. “Our items don't have to look like they were looking centuries ago,” Aragon says. “I'm creating something from this contemporary moment.”

Aragon doesn't feel fixed in the traditional/contemporary dichotomy, where the former is locked in a time capsule and the latter disregards heri-

tage. He calls his work “neo-contemporary,” a term he feels draws on the past yet challenges ideas of how Diné weavings should look. “There's a great amount of weaving that's being done today that's unclassifiable by the old system,” he says.

IN SHIPROCK, KEVIN ASPAAS RESURRECTS A TRADITIONAL weaving method overlooked even by many of his fellow weavers. The 25-year-old grew up steeped in tales of his maternal grandmother, who herded sheep and supported her family selling rugs. When he was around eight years old, his mother began teaching him to weave simple sash belts. “It provided me a connection to my mom, but also to my grandma, who I had never met,” he remembers. “It carried on her legacy.”

He gravitated to the practice, even though he didn't fit the conventional identity of today's Diné weavers who are usually female. But from the days of Spider Man, men have always had a role in weaving. “Beginning at the time of European contact and colonialism, Indigenous people have been forced to understand rigid gender systems, but in the Diné culture, roles weren't strict. People could do anything they wanted as long as they contributed to the survival of their people,” he says.

In 2014, he began an apprenticeship with master weaver Roy Kady, who invited Aspaas and other promising young weavers to his sheep camp to learn both the art of weaving and the cultural practice of raising sheep and spinning wool.

Aspaas remembers distinctly the day he learned wedge weave, a mid-1800s design that had fallen out of favor. “Once I started, I couldn't stop looking at the design, because it was a zigzag pattern. It was a technique I wasn't aware was in the realm of Navajo weaving,” he says. “Navajo weavers had created it. It's one of the techniques that we can claim as uniquely Navajo because no one else taught us to weave it.”

In wedge weave, the weft yarns are woven diagonally rather than horizontally across the warp, and each row is pulled taut. Instead of straight, even edges, the technique creates scalloped edges, and often the finished rug is wavy instead of lying flat. Trading posts viewed these intentional qualities as imperfections and often refused to buy the rugs. Over time, weavers simply stopped making them because they weren't commercially acceptable. “The idea was imposed on weavers to make their rugs perfect,” Aspaas says. He views resurrecting the design as an “act of rebellion to what is thought of as Navajo weaving.”

As he works, relatives often drop in to his studio to suggest subtly that he straighten the design or “fix” the edges. However, his work has caught the eye of Gallup Inter-Tribal Indian Ceremonial judges, who awarded him a blue ribbon, and Arizona's Heard Museum Guild Indian Fair and Market, which named one of his revival blankets Best of Class in 2018. Many of his rugs have used bright natural dyes like indigo and cochineal, but