

Making the Scene

Taos' State of the Art



Untitled
by Tammy Garcia
Hand-Coiled and Carved Natural Clay
9 1/2" h x 9" dia.

The painter Agnes Martin once said she loved to drive around Taos because the scenery changed every 10 minutes. Early success prodded Martin to leave Taos for New York City, but like many other artists, she couldn't ignore Taos' allure. She moved back and never left.

The northern New Mexico town has been a magnet for artists of all kinds for over 100 years. Although some people only associate Taos with Southwestern art, that's hardly an accurate picture. True, early 20th century artists like Bert Phillips, Ernest Blumenschein and others from the Taos Society of Artists built their reputations by painting Native Americans and landscapes, and there are a number of artists today who make a good living doing it. But since the Taos Moderns – Andrew Dasburg, Louis Ribak, Bea Mandelman, and others – moved to the forefront in the 40s and 50s, the Taos art scene has offered an eclectic mix of styles and media.

Like Martin, Ribak grew tired of the art world in New York and chose Taos as his home. For whatever their reason or where they're from, artists, gallery owners, and art lovers continue to move to Taos to live and be inspired.

The last few years have been difficult for local galleries and a number of them have been forced to close their doors. But the strength of the art scene in Taos – or in any other town – shouldn't be measured by the number of galleries, but by the number of artists.

There are local artists who draw international collectors to Taos; there are local artists who choose not to show in town, but enjoy

tremendous international success; and there are artists who accomplish both. The most important thing they have in common is where they choose to create their work, not where they sell it.

Tammy Garcia, who creates pottery, glass and bronze sculpture, and jewelry, grew up on the Santa Clara Pueblo, which is in between Taos and Santa Fe. When she was 17, Garcia and her sister, Autumn Borts, who herself creates spectacular Santa Clara pottery, wanted to move to a bigger town. The two chose Taos over Santa Fe because the first classified rental ad they answered was in Taos and affordable.

Garcia comes from a long line of highly regarded potters, including her mother, Linda Cain, and her grandmother, Mary Cain. At a young age, Garcia's talent was easy to recognize and she showed at Gallery 10 in Santa Fe and Scottsdale, which at the time was a very important venue for Native American ceramic art. While she's enjoyed more success than many other Taos artists, her thoughts on her adopted home are typical. "I have a great appreciation for the world around me. Taos is not only a beautiful view, but provides a great place to grow, learn, and live life," says Garcia. Ask other artists and they'll agree.

Garcia opened the Blue Rain Gallery on the Taos Plaza – there's also one in Santa Fe – fifteen years ago to try to give other artists a steppingstone. The two locations will consolidate and the one in Taos will close this fall – certainly not for lack of success. Over its 15-year history, Blue Rain Gallery has given opportunities for many local artists, including Tony Abeyta.

One thing about art that never changes is there is always more good art being produced than sold. No matter how well galleries are doing, most visual artists, like actors and writers, will be underrepresented. But for a town its size, Taos has a high percentage of people who make a living as artists. Some – JD Challenger, Larry Bell and Erin Currier – although she recently moved to Santa Fe – are good examples of artists who make a great living. If the gallery business picks up, the number should grow.

Sculptor and gallery owner Terrie Bennett has a good explanation of why the gallery business has been slow lately. "The piece of pie is getting smaller because there are more towns that are becoming art markets," says Bennett, who has friends with galleries in other art towns, like Carmel, California, who are also experiencing a downward trend.

Still there are always galleries in Taos that succeed no matter how well the others are doing.

"I was losing my shirt in the publishing business and some friends encouraged me to open a gallery," says Steve Parks, who has lived in Taos for 33 years and opened the Parks Gallery 15 years ago. Parks hears the complaints of other art dealers and is empathetic, but as owner of one of the most successful galleries in town, Parks doesn't have to worry about his shirt these days.

All of the artists Parks shows are from the area, but his clientele is international. A recent Currier show nearly sold out in a matter of hours. Melissa Zink, who was named New Mexico's "Artist of the Year" by the Albuquerque Journal, is showing

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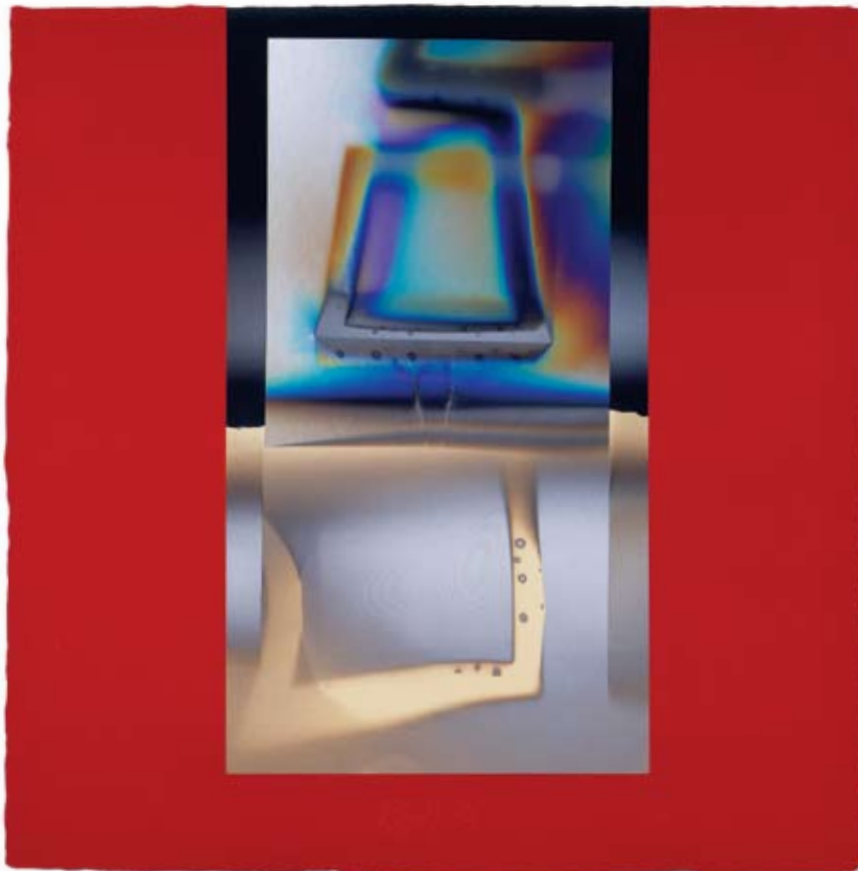
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There are a number of other galleries that do well year after year, but Parks has noticed a shift. "The Harwood Museum has done a terrific job in the last five or six years, and it's become the leading art force in Taos. It used to be the galleries," says Parks.

Michael McCormick of the Michael McCormick Gallery agrees with Parks' opinion of the Harwood Museum, as does Rena Rosequist of the Mission Gallery, which she started in 1962. Rosequist calls the Harwood a "great showcase of a more modern approach to art." The museum has thrived under the direction of Charles Lovell and benefited from a sizeable donation Martin made in the 1990s. No matter what the art market is like in town, the museum will always be there to document history.



Red AAAAA-20, mixed media on red Hiromi paper by Larry Bell

The artists in McCormick's gallery are from the area and around the world. Having Miguel Martinez and Malcolm Furlow on the walls is good for McCormick, but it also helps the other artists. "Furlow and Martinez are magnets. People come from all over the world just to see them, and I would say 50 to 60 percent of those people end up buying other artists' work," McCormick says.

McCormick, who has had a post office box in Taos since 1974, admires Taos for its many levels of art, including world-class, collectable art. But there are some artists who live in Taos who have much more success selling their work elsewhere.

Larry Bell is one of the most well known of all Taos artists. However, he's earned his reputation in other markets. "I don't see any real change of marketability for my stuff in Taos. In the past thirty years, I think I've donated more pieces in Taos than I've sold," says Bell.

The original desire to move to Taos for Bell was different from that of other artists. "I fell in love with a beautiful woman and I wanted to move her away from the competition." Once he got to Taos, Bell decided to make a go of it as an artist in Taos and soon created a studio with photographer Gus Foster that he says was remarkably efficient and productive. He now spends half his time in Venice, California, but he keeps returning to Taos even though he sells more of his work in Los Angeles and London.

Still, Taos will continue to be a magnet for artistic types. The mountains aren't going anywhere. There will always be spectacular sunsets. History won't change. The Harwood and other museums will continue to lead the way. But perhaps Taos' greatest asset as an art town is its size. There are still many galleries that give opportunities to artists who may never have them in a city the size of New York, Los Angeles, or even Santa Fe. Anyone, artist or art lover, can have dinner at a table next to JD Challenger. You could bump into Ed Sandoval at the grocery store or Tammy Garcia and her kids at the pool. Or you could find your work hanging on a wall next to a Malcolm Furlow. ✓

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