

six modern

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six local artists who have established contemporary

identities in a very traditional

part of the world

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As Albuquerque grows up and shifts from a sleepy little high desert hideout to a more modern and — dare we utter it — more “urban” locale, longtime residents and stubborn natives will have to begin accepting a culture that is likely foreign to them. Contemporary art is one such example. Whereas a couple of decades ago, Southwestern art was at its peak of popularity on an international level. In many ways, it still is, and likely will always be coveted by art collectors worldwide, and for good reason. Given this traditionally rich and financially poor scenario, the question begs to be asked: Why would a contemporary artist choose to work in New Mexico? The obvious answers are anonymity and that ever-present enchantment thing. Oh yeah, we would be remiss in not mentioning that one of the world’s top art destinations lies just a few miles north.

With this question in mind, the Local iQ editorial staff hand-picked a half dozen local artists that have managed to resist the temptation of creating traditional New Mexican art. Rather, they are pushing the boundaries of modern art and receiving national and international accolades for their cutting-edge styles. Along the way, they are helping Albuquerque forge its own identity as a top art destination.

Suzanne Sbarghe

A 20-year resident of New Mexico and the current executive director of 516 Arts, one of ABQ’s most highly regarded contemporary galleries, Suzanne Sbarghe related to Local iQ recently that she has been making art all her life.

With a BA in art history and studio arts from New York's Barnard College and an MA in art education from the University of New Mexico, Sarge's background in photography was likely the impetus for her current focus in collage and mixed media. And though it is safe to say her jocular amalgamations comprised of birds, trees, human figures, maps and medical textbook drawings are certainly unfamiliar to a good number of local art lovers, Sarge related that being located in the heart of Albuquerque is an inspiring place for an artist to be.

"(New Mexico) is a great place to live as an artist," Sarge said. "It is beautiful and affordable and has a greater sense of freedom than the Northeast."

Sarge's work juxtaposes unlikely materials such as photos and paint creating dreamlike spaces featuring strange combinations of images. A lot of her pieces feature disproportional figures that are often part animal and part human. For example, "Outing," is a painting that depicts the body of a woman with the head of a blue bird dressed in a leopard print fur coat, situated next to a flying bird with conversely, the head of a woman. Sarge says she works in mixed media because she enjoys the way the media surprises her, adding that her work is "not planned out ... and opens up the creative process."

The artist lists nature, animals and dreams as influences to her work as well as Mexican surrealist painters Remedios Varo and Leanora Carington. Other influences, said Sarge, include German collage artist Hannah Hoch and local artist Holly Roberts.

Kevin Tolman

Kevin Tolman's art, a spattering of mixed mediums and natural hues, sets the ambiance for local diners at many places in Albuquerque, such as Seasons Rotisserie & Grill and Zinc Wine Bar & Bistro. However, his work has also enjoyed display in a wide range of locations, as the Detroit, Mich., native spent time painting in Ireland, Los Angeles, Fort Worth, and Lawrence, before moving to the Ramah Navajo Reservation in western New Mexico.

"I didn't come here for the arts, but I was surprised by what there is here," he told Local iQ in a recent interview. "I find the number of cultures here invigorating, stimulating."

Tolman said much of his work is based on the observation of nature, adding that the state's easy access to nature, through activities like hiking and camping, played a large part in his decision to reside in New Mexico.

He said he also appreciates New Mexico's numerous public institutions for channeling art and culture, places like the National Hispanic Cultural Center, Site Santa Fe and the Albuquerque Museum, the latter of which recently purchased one of his pieces to place in its permanent collection.

Given a recent exhibit in Santa Fe in June, Tolman currently has a new body of work circulating the local art community. His work can be viewed at among other places, Sarah Smith Contemporary in Albuquerque or the Karan Ruhlen Gallery in Santa Fe.

Jennifer Nehrbass

Originally from New York City, painter Jennifer Nehrbass has been living in New Mexico on and off, since 2000. Having studied at the University of Wisconsin, she currently holds graduate degrees from both New York University and the University of New Mexico. Though Nehrbass began her career in textile design, she started painting in 1997 and has since developed an affinity for photo realism, a medium not often found in local galleries and museums. Nonetheless, Nehrbass said she enjoys living and creating art in New Mexico, "Because of the sense of freedom to do what you want to do."

Having described her style as "representational, figurative work … built on using collage from fashion photography," Nehrbass said she achieves this by photographing and then painting herself as the protagonist in most of her paintings, often depicting herself as different characters. Her work, featuring images that, according to Nehrbass, are "of tastefully dressed women doing distasteful things," is an inventive and playful critique on femininity and female sexuality.

A 2005 portrait, "Laura," depicts a woman from behind in evening wear and a fancy up-do, with a noose around her neck. Another, "Clean as Pauline" (2007), portrays a woman with a perfectly-styled hairdo, naked, save for cellophane wrapped around her body, sensually holding a beach ball in a way that recalls a high-end fashion photograph. Nehrbass counts artists Louise Bourgeois and Cindy Sherman, as well as realism master Rembrandt, as influences on her work.

Rebecca Bluestone

She first came to Santa Fe in 1986 for a Navajo weaving class. Within the span of just a week, Rebecca Bluestone met her future husband, Robert. Soon after, the Oklahoma-born artist decided to move to New Mexico to pursue a career as a fiber artist. Like many artists who have settled here, Bluestone spent a decade on the East Coast, before arriving here to work and live.

“It was just one of those things where I kind of accidentally ended up working in a weaving studio,” Bluestone shared with Local iQ recently, “and I sat down at a loom and went, “Oh, this is what I want to do for the rest of my life.”

Bluestone’s tapestries elegantly combine smooth gradients of bright colors contained in the form of rigid geometric shapes in a modern array of designs. Her work can currently be viewed at the Chiaroscuro Gallery or at her studio, both located in Santa Fe.

Aside from the visual aspects of her art, Bluestone began working on a collaborative art project with her husband about 15 years ago. Dubbed “Woven Harmony,” the collaboration pairs Bluestone’s tapestries with Robert’s music.

“It’s become kind of this metaphor for making connections between things where there doesn’t seem to be any connection,” she said. “Our work is meant to talk about those aspects of the human experience that we don’t have words for.”

Kristin Diener

Silver. Moonstone. Pearls. Buttons. Rough glass from the ‘20s. Mica. Candy wrappers. 1800 Italian mathematical

texts. No, this isn't a litany of heirlooms and keepsakes from your grandmother's attic, rather, these are the materials that make up Kristin Diener's "Sea at Night," a 15-inch-long, handmade necklace that, oddly enough, wasn't meant to be worn. In fact, Diener has created a lot of jewelry that wasn't meant to be fashion accessories. Her most striking example of non-functional art is a pair of eyeglasses that feature completely opaque lenses.

These types of pieces help to illuminate Diener's fascination with the body. A Mennonite with ties to the Midwest, Deep South and Southwest, Diener is also deeply interested in history and lineage. Her work is a playful take on the old maxim, "One man's trash is another man's treasure."

By juxtaposing thrift store finds like toy rabbits, martini glasses and miniature scissors next to fine silver and gold, Diener succeeds in equating the values of those raw materials.

"I think of it as elevating the ordinary to the sacred and often the objects created, allude to reliquaries," Diener declared in an artist's statement. There are those that claim that nothing is sacred. Diener disagrees.

Tom Waldron

Artist Tom Waldron is easy to overlook. His sculptures, looming metal structures that slope in glittering, asymmetrical curves, might, to the hasty viewer, seem like simple creations. However, such viewers may fail to notice the myriad ways that natural light plays off the object and accentuates both the sharpness of its angles and the softness of its turns.

The Minneapolis-born sculptor's work is of gargantuan scale, making it difficult for photographs to capture the minute details that make these elegant pieces come alive. Subtle features such as stamped numbers, miniscule imperfections branded across the metal's surface and other such faint reminders of the industrial birth of his materials, quietly distinguish the contrast in the works of Waldron.

To Waldron, his art is all about contrast. Simplicity and complexity are at once apparent in a single Waldron piece.

These grand and arcane sculptures, too large to be easily moved, are unexpectedly assigned quirky, kinetic names like

“Skid,” “Pounce” and “Dart.” And though Waldron’s objects are most noted for their size — his floor sculptures have an average girth of 55 inches — art enthusiasts will be curiously surprised to discover that they are actually composed of thousands of quarter-inch pieces of steel seamlessly welded together. It’s a technique that has proven to be popular outside of New Mexico, as Waldron’s art has been exhibited at such art savvy locales as New York City, La Jolla, Scottsdale and Dallas. It also has found a home in the largely ignored artist haven of Albuquerque.

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