

NATIVE NOW

Symposium focuses on pottery-making of the moment

BY ARIN MCKENNA

Misconceptions about American Indian art abound. It is craft, not art. It is ethnographic. It is nothing but curio items. Artists should only create art forms particular to their tribe or pueblo. But — as anyone who has attended the Santa Fe Indian Market can attest to — many of today's Native artists are creating everything from exquisite traditional art to cutting-edge contemporary works.

Visitors to SOFA West 2009 were introduced to the contemporary ceramics of Virgil Ortiz, Christine Nofchissey McHorse and Diego Romero (exhibited by CLARK+DELVECCHIO) and sculptural glass by Preston Singletary and Tammy Garcia (exhibited by Blue Rain Gallery) — all American Indian artists.

This year SOFA West offers collectors an insightful look into the world of contemporary native art with a three-day symposium titled, Historic Bond/Contemporary Spirit: Collecting New Southwest Native Pottery. Highlights include learning the art of pottery making from Emma and Dolores Lewis, (the daughters of Lucy Lewis, one of the most noted Acoma Pueblo potters), panel discussions, visits to the homes of artists and collectors and tours of two major collections.

"We felt that the Santa Fe show, although certainly competing in the international contemporary market with the works being presented, could have an additional very strong feature — this locus of Native American work," said The Art Fair Company President Mark Lyman. "We wanted to make sure that was part not only of the market, but of the educational component, which — with all of our shows — is a very strong feature. It is our mission to not only present a viable marketplace where people can see work and acquire it, but also a very energetic and robust educational forum where they can very actively learn about it from some of the best people in the field."

Bruce Bernstein, executive director of SWAIA — the Southwestern Association of Indian Arts (sponsors

of the Santa Fe Indian Market) and Ellen Bradbury Reid, executive director of Recursos de Santa Fe (which specializes in symposia and tours on Southwest culture) were also helped organize the event.

Education is also crucial to SWAIA's mission. "People toss off Pueblo pottery or Native-made art as just ethnographic or traditional or historic. They really don't know who Native people are today," Bernstein said. "Yes, there may be a traditional basis to the way people make pottery, but these are fully modern people in every single way. They're not historic. Participants will have the opportunity to see the artists face-to-face at their homes, learn from them, interact with them."

Bradbury Reid sees the symposium as an exciting exploration of new developments in indigenous ceramics. "In the traditional world, everyone wanted to look backward, to continue to do the old forms and preserve them. And that's really important. But you have to go forward, too, and here are the people who are really going forward while still acknowledging their traditional sources. They have been recognized widely, but yet, in some ways, they're a little bit under the radar."

One of the presenters, Garth Clark, is a noted ceramic scholar, critic, collector and dealer who has published more than 50 books. Clark and his partner, Mark Del Vecchio, had the successful Garth Clark Gallery in New York City for nearly 30 years.

Clark and Del Vecchio's involvement with American Indian ceramicists began when they organized an exhibit called Free Spirit: The New Native American Potter for the Netherlands Stedelijk Museum. "We went looking for Native artists who, as Virgil Ortiz said it, did not want to be defined by the city limits of Santa Fe," Clark said. "So we put together an exhibition of five artists working in ceramics who were doing work that was groundbreaking." Their involvement with some of those artists continues to this day.

Clark said that his role in the symposium is that of "a contemporary

critic."

"I will be looking at things probably in a slightly more astringent way than maybe some others will be," Clark said. "Because my feeling is that for the Indian pottery to keep life it has to keep growth. My interest is that a very small percentage of artists are using the medium to make contemporary statements."

The symposium emphasizes how both modern influences and ancient heritage infuse contemporary American Indian ceramics. "Take Diego Romero, for instance. There's a very strong element of Mimbres pottery in his work. Therefore, to understand his work you really have to spend a certain amount of time with Mimbres pottery and understand the dynamics of that," Clark said.

Navajo artist Christine Nofchissey McHorse is one of the Native artists participating as panelists and opening their studios. McHorse creates contemporary sculptural forms with the micaceous clay used by New Mexican potters for centuries. She is the only Indian Market artist to win Best of Show for both pottery and sculpture.

"It was an inner drive that had me going down this path. My work is evolving, constantly changing. After I made one piece, there was always a new shape to try, a new combination, and I was always testing the limits of my clay," McHorse said.

McHorse was one of the artists featured by CLARK+DELVECCHIO in last year's SOFA exhibit. "I feel as if I've been catapulted into a new arena," McHorse said. "I have never seen that kind of art come to Santa Fe all under one roof, and to have my pieces be a part of that was a magnificent experience for me. My work has evolved past the point of traditional art and I just needed a whole new venue."

The seminar should prove valuable to both new and seasoned collectors. "Those who are new to the field should be able to get their minds around the strength and vastness of the history of this work and begin to understand how the transition is being made for the contemporary Native Americans artists," Lyman

DETAILS

Historic Bond/Contemporary Spirit runs July 6-8. Cost is \$825 per person without lodging. To register, call Recursos/Royal Road at 215-233-0832 or 800-344-2998, or e-mail tcarlson@royalroadtours.com.

Besides the Santa Fe Indian Market jewelers, CLARK+DELVECCHIO will again be featuring ceramics by Christine Nofchissey McHorse, Diego Romero (Cochiti Pueblo) and Virgil Ortiz (Cochiti Pueblo) and Blue Rain Gallery will show pottery by Les Namingha (Hopi/Zuni), jewelry by Marie Samora (Taos Pueblo) and collaborative glass sculptures by Marcus Amerman (Choctaw) and Preston Singletary (Tlingit).

said. "For those that are already considered connoisseurs, we hope there's enough depth and interest in the presentations to allow them to probe further into detail about not only the historic work, but to see how the new work reflects some of the history of the actual people."

SWAIA AT SOFA

In addition to being a principal organizer of Historic Bond/Contemporary Spirit, Bruce Bernstein was asked to organize a small exhibit on the history of the Santa Fe Indian Market for the SOFA exhibition.

The Southwestern Association for Indian Art also will have a booth this year featuring four of Indian Market's most progressive jewelers: Pat Pruitt (Laguna Pueblo/Chirachaua Apache), Cody Sanderson (Navajo), Kenneth Johnson (Muscogee/Seminole) and Robin Waynee (Saginaw Chippewa).

"What SWAIA is trying to do is develop new markets for people, cross those proverbial boundaries," said Bernstein, executive director of the group. "We want those artists that wish to cross over, and have the technical and aesthetic capabilities, to be able to do that."

SOFA's focus on design resonates with these award-winning artists. "I was asked recently if my jewelry is art, is it fashion, is it sculpture — what is it? It's all of those things," said Waynee, who just received a first place award in the Saul Bell Design Award competition. She is looking forward to exhibiting to collectors who won't be shocked by her innovative designs or use of materials such as gold and fine gemstones.

"I'm excited, because there are different expectations of artists in this show than at Indian Market. People are looking at design: it's less about heritage and more about the art. Your art has to speak for itself," Kenneth Johnson said.

"I think from a personal and artistic point of view, it's a chance to really go into a show that does not have that stereotype overhead, where we can go in just completely as artists, and the fact that we're Native is secondary," Pat Pruitt said.

Cody Sanderson hopes that after seeing their work, collectors realize that the jewelry found at truck stops is not representative of American Indian jewelry. "There are a number of artists out there who can and have competed at a global level — not just nationally, but also internationally," Sanderson said. "I also know a number of amazing Native artists who are phenomenal at what they do, but they just haven't gotten the international recognition."

Ultimately, all are hopeful that this creative work generates new interest in the Santa Fe Indian Market. "I think this is going to be a chance to show collectors that normally don't go to Indian Market what kind of work is available there," Pruitt said. "There is a whole range of artists within SWAIA who are doing some groundbreaking work that the rest of the world doesn't know about. It shows the industry that there are artists of an international caliber who can show at a level like this."

— ARIN MCKENNA