

Faith in Art in a Time of Scarcity

June 24, 2010 By Steve Fox – Taos Horse Fly

Steven Gootgeld—Existential Sculptor

Through the end of June, you have a chance to see the deeply realized, path-breaking sculpture of Steven Gootgeld at the Taos Gallery, 133 Bent Street, near the west end of the street.

His sculptures are mostly in the 12 to 18 inches tall range, with beautiful glazes in complex, deep colors and surfaces with textures that rival fired glass and metal.

A searching man who has sought and refined a synthesis within himself of feeling and precision, of devotion to detail and passion for ideas, Gootgeld's pieces radiate the fusions that animate his life. "I'm inspired by my personal international experiences, existential psychology, the cosmic connectedness of us all, architecture and the natural world," says his artist statement.

Example: the sculpture of a rabbit icon that Steve calls "Courage." As a mesa-dweller who watches daily the dance between rabbits and my pursuing dogs (they never come close to catching one), I was drawn immediately to this piece with its familiar, vulnerable prey-animal head and its wizard-warrior robe and proud, vertical stance. It is a rabbit worthy of the Elf-Kingdom of Tolkien or planet Pandora.



I asked Steve how he came to name this piece Courage. He said, "I've spent some time among North American and Central American native people, and there's a common belief among them that the rabbit signifies fear becoming an ally. Rather than being an enemy, the fear that drives all prey animals to their utmost effort of escaping predators turns into the courage to survive, to continue. This rabbit I've sculpted is a female protecting her babies. What courage it takes to bring helpless little ones into a world where predators await."

The Courage piece also unites three of the themes of Gootgeld's work: animal icons in the 1990s and, since 2001, a more abstract project of sculpting ideas into shapes and colors. In Courage, we see these two streams united in a third passion—meticulous process that takes glazed ceramics beyond the accepted norms today. He hand-builds his pieces, dries them for several weeks, then sands and sponges them into the form and textures he wants, then fires them repeatedly until the glazes gleam like glass. "Glass is actually my competition," he says.

The Gootgeld pieces I'm drawn to are the ones with cobalt blue and turquoise colors. Some of them are velvety in gloss and some have an iridescence that breaks light into spectra.

"Outpost" is one of his cobalt and turquoise pieces. Four layers, wide at the bottom and tapering at the top, lean in against each other —like four facets of the self? Architectural stability, like the buttresses of the Ranchos church? The piece is barred with gold at the middle (chevrons?) and top (barred windows, combat headgear?). Its beauty is a paradox; he sees the piece as "a bit of sci-fi" embodying our common human tendency to draw ourselves into an outpost of solitude "when we've separated ourselves from the Divine."

A tall piece called "Sacred Places" starts with a hexagonal pedestal of granite-looking stony material tapering upward. From this rises a widening hex column of ivory white, and emerging from the top of the column like an internal bloom is a Pueblo-like cluster of seven red intersecting walls, each with a small gold window. "To me, there are people behind each window," Steven says. "They've had to elevate their sacred place above the busy earth surface to protect it."

There are stories and crystallized ideas within all of Gootgeld's abstract work. You must see this show!

Jan Mellor's Widening Outreach

When you see Gootgeld's show, you'll be at the Taos Gallery on Bent Street and you'll see the very strong group of artists Jan Mellor has chosen for the gallery's new home (since late 2009). Six of her artists have been recognized as Taos Living Masters: Gootgeld, Jeffrey Hills, Carlos Barela, James Rannefeld, Richard Hawley and Tupper Hawley. Always one to invite community to use her space, and to work long hours at many collective projects, Jan has revived the Taos Institute of Arts (TIA), reincarnating it as Taos Art Experiences. "I had a dinner at my home last Christmas with friends and artists from the gallery. The talk curled around what was missing in town, and it turned out that everyone at the table had been active in the TIA. That was the seed, and I went round and talked with everybody I could find in town who had been involved in TIA, and they all said, 'Do it!'"

So Jan has recast it as "specializing in unique customized experiences for the group or individual, through the arts and culture of beautiful historic Taos, N.M." Genres will include clay and ceramics, folk art, mixed media, writing, jewelry, photography, painting, sculpture, creativity, art history, the digital studio, process painting, and events. Stay tuned for news of the revival of Art D'vine and Toast of Taos, also.