

Exploring New Avenues Of Expression

Artist **Steven Gootgeld** mines the boundaries of creativity in search of cerebral inspiration.



Boneyard Cathedral 11.25 by 14.5 by 10 inches

Steven Gootgeld is the rare artist for whom creative block has no influence, just opportunity. The celebrated sculptor is adept at finding meaning within the insignificant as he pushes the boundaries of creativity, exploring new avenues of expression with an enthusiasm that is remarkable in its breadth.

Yet he sees nothing extraordinary about the diversity he brings either to his craft or to the many projects in which he is engaged. “Early on I made a commitment to embracing an artistic lifestyle all day, every day, and to accepting creativity with

gratitude,” he says. “Even a walk with my dogs is a chance to notice color, texture and patterns, and to carry that inspiration home with me and into my work.”

From this covenant has sprung decades of celebrated ceramic sculptures, distinctive in their innovation and clarity of vision. However, Gootgeld’s commitment to artistic living extends beyond his commercial success. “At some point you start considering what your legacy will be,” he explains, “so I find myself looking beyond my art as a product, feeling free

By **Dena Miller**



Freedom As Sky 17.5 by 10 by 4.75 inches

to instead focus on creativity for creativity's sake, and supporting others—particularly young people—by honoring their innate creativity.”

This year Gootgeld will be spearheading a project of international proportions by facilitating the exchange of stories between Taos youth and those of South America. “Taos may have a far-reaching reputation, but to the kids here it’s just a small town. I want them to realize that kids all over the world have the same stories as they do, and I want to support their creativity in expressing them.”

The project honors Gootgeld’s own artistic journey, one that began in 1990 when he traveled through Central America with a contingent of Native activists. Profoundly affected by their stories and ceremonies, he subsequently settled in Taos where he began playing drums while seeking a way to acknowledge the animal spirits that had pierced his consciousness and populated his dreams. When a friend introduced him to clay, Gootgeld knew he had found a calling. Eagles, hummingbirds, magpies, rabbits and coyotes came to life under his self-taught hands, each iconic spirit-animal sculpture honoring an indigenous medicine ritual.

Ten years later, Gootgeld introduced his groundbreaking abstract sculptural works, the inspirations for which were found this time in the stories of his own life, whether from recollections of his childhood or through his personal and increasingly sophisticated exploration of spiritual and secular philosophies.

The collections, as divergent as they may be, have been consistent in garnering critical acclaim and awards both locally and throughout the country. As early as 1993, Gootgeld’s first one-person show featuring the iconic animals was a sellout. His abstracts have, on many occasions, been deemed “Best of Sculpture” at the renowned Taos Fall Arts Festival. Additionally, he has received the Festival’s prestigious “Living Master” designation from his peers. His recently published book, *Thought Into Form*, chronicles the

development of his craft including the painstaking process through which his resplendent sculptures come to life.

Each piece requires the meticulous crafting of sheets of clay into the components for Gootgeld’s designs. When embellishments and carvings have been added, the pieces are left to dry until they properly harden, a step that may take several weeks. Sanding and wet-sponging prepare the sculptures for the application of underglazes, after which they are bisque fired. Over-glazes, which are typically fired in multiple stages, complete the process and are complemented by the application of acrylics. It is both a time consuming and exacting technique that yields sculptures awash in rich, multidimensional colors and finishes that seem to glow from within.



Hive Dream 9 by 9 by 6 inches

Thought Into Form catalogues the finest examples of Gootgeld's work, its accompanying editorial notes a mirror into the unassuming yet brilliant mind of the artist. *Boneyard Cathedral* interprets objects found along the coastline of California where Gootgeld grew up. Memories of skeletal remnants, rocks, glass, wood and metal combine in a translation that rises above the mundane into a soaring celebration of sun-washed color and golden accents. *Freedom As Sky* is serene and Zen-like, with a crackled, luminescent finish upon simply executed forms accented with celestial blue, inspired by Gootgeld's love of ancient poetry. *Hive Dreams* illustrates his examination of the workings of genetically coded processes that define the patterns of life beyond the realm of human awareness. Through such a primal consideration, he achieves a study which both illuminates life and reveres its mysterious idiosyncrasies.

"My abstracts may not be recognizable forms to others, but I hope each is a challenge to interpret the piece within the context of the viewer's own experiences," he remarks. "That which is *avant garde* penetrates the mind and opens it to change, which is when the flow of creativity is allowed to exist."

Expanding his role as artist into one as teacher, lecturer, graphic and web designer, and video producer, Gootgeld once co-founded an art school.

Known for his standing association with The Harwood Museum of Art, he established the "Messy Art" class there in which children spent four days creating an 80-foot long mural for the museum's exterior wall. "The kids were so excited and energized seeing their art wrap around the front of this venerable institution," he notes with a smile. "It was a stellar accomplishment." Perhaps though, Gootgeld's social consciousness is best defined by the Promo Hobo FreeheART project which galvanized Taos and firmly established his reputation as a force for change in the traditional paradigm of art in this community.

"Promo Hobo was a breakthrough street-art installation born of my own and my project partner's desire to promote artistic diversity, and the purity of art as expression, within a theme of giving," he explains. Targeting abandoned buildings throughout Taos County, the pair installed temporary cardboard art features and left behind free offerings of their own works.

As word of the project spread, more artists turned out to contribute; their final installation attracted over twenty artists. "Whatever Promo Hobo was, it demonstrated both the use of art for powerful transformation and the determination of voices to



Steve Gootgeld with friends Hercules and Aurora



Heart Opening 27.5 by 20 by 5.5 inches

be heard," Gootgeld reflects. The documentary that chronicled the project won the People's Choice Award at the Taos Shortz Film Festival, and can be viewed on YouTube.

Gootgeld is expanding his reach into video production, not just with his international youth project, but with one closer to home. He has created a film festival, the theme of which is Honoring Our Land, and will herald the return of film to Taos's annual Fall Arts Festival. "We will be selecting twenty three-minute films offering uplifting and creative solutions to the problems of trash and illegal dumping in and around Taos," he says. He also will continue his work with Harwood Museum's learning and public programs department, this time heading a workshop for young, fledgling filmmakers on how to produce films using their smart phones. "I hope with this training some of the kids will be inspired to create a film festival entry, but regardless, I expect they will create some really great things."

New works by Steven Gootgeld can be viewed in Taos at Copper Moon Gallery, 105 Kit Carson Road. 575.758.8833. coppermoongallerytaos.com. Additional works are exhibited at Cardona-Hine Gallery in Truchas. 505.689.2253. cardonahinegallery.com.