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CULTURE

A PULSE CHECK ON ALBUQUERQUE'S ART, MUSIC AND THEATER SCENE



DOWN TO A FINE ART

Local painter Carla Forrest catches eyes and encourages creativity from others with her stunning works that mirror real life—just with a little bit of artistic license (pg. 110).

PHOTO BY DON JAMES/ATM



MORE THAN A PRETTY PICTURE

CARLA FORREST SEEKS TO INSPIRE TRANSFORMATIVE EXPERIENCES THROUGH HER ARTWORK

For several years, a woman has been bringing her two sons to see Carla Forrest's paintings at her gallery and studio in Old Town. Forrest has known the boys since they were babies, and they're 12 and 10 now, she says. "The last time I saw them, one of them was into Pokémon and he was showing me his cards. And I said, 'Why don't you design your own card? That's your assignment: Design a Pokémon card and bring it in next time you come.'"

Forrest recently ran into the mom who said her son went home and designed a card that same day.

"If I can have that kind of influence to motivate someone and create a memorable experience for them no matter what age they are, then maybe, just maybe, it will give them a little different spin on life and be inspired in a different way," Forrest says.

She finds her own inspiration through direct observation of nature and life, she says. "I'm not the type of artist who forms something in my imagination and puts it down on paper. I have to be inspired by what's around me. And there's no place more beautiful than New Mexico, and Albuquerque is a painter's paradise."

Forrest often leads other artists to locations where they set up their easels and paint outdoors. "We go all over," she says. "There's so much all around—nature, churches, missions, people. But the sky! You can't beat the sky here!"

In 2007, she helped found the Plein Air Painters of New Mexico (plein air being the French term for out of doors). She served as first president of the organization, which is now nationally and internationally recognized.

Whether it's leading other painters into the land of enchantment, encouraging children to express themselves creatively, conducting workshops and classes for adults or holding open studios to show her works in progress, Forrest is always seeking to share her passion.

"I want people to walk into my paintings and become transformed and aware of the beauty around them. And learn something about themselves and their relationship with the Earth and their responsibility to respect the land and become a steward of it."

The Carla Forrest Fine Art Studio & Gallery is tucked into a small space off Patio Escondido in Old Town. Forrest usually has a painting underway at her easel, with numerous finished works in oil, acrylic and watercolor along the walls.

Her artwork includes realistic pieces, many painted en plein air such as a bunch







PHOTO BY DON JAMES/ATM

of purple wildflowers, a bosque landscape in subtle hues or the exterior of an old church with a corrugated metal roof. Forrest also displays vibrant abstractionist works including her "sky series" inspired by the aurora borealis.

The subject and style of artwork in the gallery may differ, depending on what Forrest is working on and whether she has paintings exhibited elsewhere. Kickstand Café at 1127 Alameda NW regularly hangs her landscapes, and Forrest has other paintings displayed through June at the Gallery with a Cause at New Mexico Cancer Centers in Gallup.

Something visitors to Forrest's studio will not notice is noxious fumes, which are common in other studios, particularly with oil paint.

"The reason I went into plein air painting is because I have allergies and I could go outside and nothing would bother me except the juniper," she says. "Now I use only environmentally responsible art materials in the studio – no solvents, heavy metals or toxic chemicals," she says.

Forrest is environmentally conscious in other ways, including donating 10 percent of her profits to organizations such as the New Mexico Wilderness Society.

Born and raised in a tiny town in the Catskills of New York, Forrest got her master's degree in art education from Rochester Institute of Technology. "I always kept up my artwork, but you have to make money so I did a number of different things," she says, including teaching art and working as an art director for a manufacturer.

Seeking to utilize all her experience and creativity in a new career, she decided to pursue a doctorate degree. The University of New Mexico was among her choices. "I knew that if I went to school in some place, I'd end up living there, so I had some criteria: culture, art and no flying insects. So, Albuquerque won out."

While pursuing her doctorate and afterward, she worked in corporate training and adult education at Los Alamos and Sandia National Laboratories. "Then I retired, got a pension and, thank God, I was able to go back to being an artist full time again!"

Since then, she's noticed the students who take her classes and workshops tend to be retired. "Every single one has said, 'I've always wanted to do this and now I have the time, money and energy to do it,'" she says. "When it comes to creating art, I think career people tend to postpone it."

That's why she was pleased to see lots of teenagers in the gallery during the last Old Town Holiday Stroll. "My posting on Instagram went viral, I think, and it hit all these young people. They stayed a half hour to 45 minutes talking to me. And they'd say, 'I did this when I was a sophomore.' And I'd say, 'Keep it up! You can do it.' I've told some to come back, and they do." —**LISA OCKER**