



Photos of  
Doris Cross  
by Ann Hunkins

# GRANDIOS E

# I D E A S

By LIS BENSLEY

**D**oris Cross has been called a painter, a poet, a visual artist. The real question, however, is how she sees herself. "In this town, I'm referred to as the artist who does the dictionary columns," she said several years ago during an interview. "That drives me mad. I'm also referred to as a conceptualist. I guess that means I'm original."

Original, yes. A maverick, certainly. Fiercely intelligent and, despite her diminutive size, a powerful presence. But Cross also is arguably one of New Mexico's most respected artists and has been a major influence on many artists, particularly in this area.

Two years ago, Cross suffered a stroke while traveling in Paris. It left her partially paralyzed. It also ended her painting career. Even talking is extremely difficult.

Nonetheless, her sophistication, intellect and humor remain evident and even her theatrical manner persists: rolling her eyes and gesturing with her left hand as she tried to communicate during an interview at her Santa Fe home where she lives with a companion.

Cross probably is best known for her Found Word series, a body of work of manipulated dictionary columns that transport words beyond their linguistic territory to create visual/visceral redefinitions.

However, her career has spanned her lifetime, during which she has created a vast body of work, inspired by the Constructivist, Expressionist and Surrealist movements. Painting,

sculpture, photography, film, printmaking and multi-media books comprise a sampling of Cross's multi-dimensional talents.

Cross' work has been exhibited through the years in galleries in Santa Fe and New York. Now, for the first time, a retrospective of her work has been assembled.

*Doris Cross: Reworks, 1968-1993* opens Saturday at the Museum of Fine Arts, as part of a tour through the Southwest. Curator Jim Edwards will give a gallery talk at 2 p.m. Saturday.

Cross herself plans to be present for an artist's reception to be held at the museum from 5:30 to 7:30 p.m. today.

"Despite the fact that her career really covers a period of about 50 years, we've decided to concentrate on her work during the past 25 years," Edwards said. "This was when she came to the West, and, many feel, when her career really blossomed."

A New Yorker by birth, Cross already had become a formidable figure in the East Coast art world by the time she first came to the Southwest in 1968, eventually moving to New Mexico in 1973.

Yet, during her years in New York, "She was a mother trying to raise two children," Edwards said. "This was during the '40s and '50s, and at that time, it was very difficult for women to promote themselves, especially women with children."

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"The book contains the word, and the word, to me, is God."

— Doris Cross

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"Even so, she was part of an inner circle there. Louise Nevelson, especially, really took Cross under her wing. Nevelson was one of the only women during that time who had gotten into the gallery system.

"She took Doris around and tried to get her involved with the galleries. But Doris wasn't interested in riding on the coattails of someone else," Edwards said.

Still, during this time, New York was an exciting melting pot of heady art movements: Dadaism, Surrealism, Abstractionism and German Expressionism. Cross absorbed it all, including the energy.

"Even trying to raise kids, she remained as much a bohemian as she could," recalled her son, Guy Cross, publisher of *THE* magazine. He who moved to Santa Fe last year to help his mother. "She painted all the time, always with a cigarette in one hand. One of my strongest memories of childhood was the persistent smell of turpentine, oils and cigarettes."

After studying at the Art Student's League and Pratt Institute in the 1930s, Cross began working with Hans Hofmann, whom she has called, "The greatest teacher in America."

Cross worked with Hofmann on and off for years. Then, in the mid-'60s, while dusting some old dictionaries, Cross was struck by the power of the word.

"I opened one and for no reason that I know, I saw the whole thing as one," Cross explained several years ago.

"Certain words just came out and they worked.

"I began to get images of presentations — very large columns — related to each other yet not related. I wondered if I was getting grandiose ideas.

"When that happened, I stopped. I didn't look at the dictionary for months. I thought I was having a schizophrenic experience."

The next time she picked up the dictionary, she did so with a vengeance, producing a body of work that won her accolades in the art world.

"The book contains the word, and the word, to me, is God," she later said.

"But sometimes there are too many words. They crowd our pages and produce a visual barrier to thought. Stacked in columns in the dictionary, the endless lines of words have their meaning regimented. They become little more than blocks in an impenetrable wall of language which we only dimly presume to understand."

So Cross instead used the dictionary, a 1913 *Webster's Secondary School Dictionary*, to create multi-sensory works that open unspeakable universal chords. Using specific columns, she partially obliterates some words, and highlights others, creating almost a work of visual poetry.

"These are very heady pieces," Edwards said. "Especially popular among other artists and poets.

"Several years ago, Woody and Steina Vasulka made a video of Doris reading from her columns," Edwards said. "She's very engaging with her mannerisms and sense of timing. Even though she doesn't think of herself as a poet, poets would kill for that sense of presence.

"We've called this show *Reworks*, because everything she did seemed to start out as one thing and turn out as something else. She was always reworking her own work, reworking the dictionary columns, reworking oatmeal boxes."

"For her, it was about the process of doing it," said Guy Cross. "She spent a lot of time doing the work, reconciling it, trying to make it work. She was, essentially, a problem-solver."



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## Pasatiempo

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## DETAILS

**Who:** Doris Cross  
**What:** Retrospective  
**When:** 5:30-7:30 p.m. today  
**Where:** Museum of Fine Arts, 107 W. Palace Ave.  
**Info:** Through Nov. 11