

A stunning show

New Mexico influence pervasive, unshakeable in work of 45 artists

BY DONNA TENNANT
Chronicle Staff

NEW MEXICO, the land of enchantment. Taos. Galisteo. Cerrillos. Santa Fe at the base of the Sangre de Cristo ("Blood of Christ") Mountains. The Sandia Mountains, towering to the east of Albuquerque and translating to "watermelon" for their rose color at sunset. The deep blue skies that make clear days in Houston seem hazy by comparison. Jutting mesas. Three cultures: Spanish, Indian and Anglo. An entire state containing fewer people than the city of Houston.

There is no escaping the influence of the New Mexican landscape and culture on the artists represented in *New Works/New Mexico* and *New Mexico Photographers* at Blaffer Gallery on the University of Houston central campus. (The show continues through Feb. 22.) But could we possibly have this whole influence thing backwards?

As Gifford Phillips pointed out in a Fall 1979 article on regional art in *Artspace* (a Southwestern quarterly on contemporary art), perhaps it is not the region that places its characteristic stamp on artists. Perhaps, instead, it is the artists who create the definition of a region.

Artists have been fleeing the doldrums of the East Coast for the majestic expanses of New Mexico for more than a century. Some came for the summer and never left, forming the kernel of the respected Taos School of Painters. There were members of New York's Ashcan School in New Mexico in the early 1900s and of The Ten in the 1930s. There were such painters as Oscar Berninghaus, Ernest Blumenschein, Andrew Dasburg, Peter Hurd and E. Martin Hennings. There were such photographers as Timothy O'Sullivan, Willian Henry Jackson, Edward Curtis, Paul Strand, Edward Weston, Ansel Adams and the late Laura Gilpin.

Looking over the stunning works of art in this show, it becomes obvious that there is no single style that one can call New Mexican. And yet, there is no denying the pervasive presence of certain aspects of the dramatic and expansive landscape and the archetypal cowboy and Indian motifs.

It is to Santa Fe Council for the Arts cura-

tor Jan Ernst Adlmann's credit that Georgia O'Keeffe, Morris Graves, Andrew Dasburg, Agnes Martin, Larry Bell, Ken Price, Charles Mattox, Luis Jimenez, Fritz Scholder, R. C. Gorman and other revered New Mexican masters are not included among the 27 artists in the show. Too often, it seems, they have been added to give credibility to various traveling shows. Perusing this exhibition, it becomes obvious that these artists, most of whom are younger, can hold their own nationally.

John Fincher's electrifying *Big Cactus*, for example. It is another in his series of large, baroque, postcard-vista, tongue-in-cheek views of the Southwest. Using familiar icons such as the cactus as raw material, he takes a new twist on the landscape genre, essentially turning it into a still-life. He heightens the painting's emotional appeal with lurid colors and a painterly manner of applying oil to canvas. There is nothing naive about what Fincher is doing. On the contrary, his pieces exude elegance and sophistication.

Jean Promutico's work is similarly self-assured, but her approach is different. In *Plum*, she places small dots of paint in rows over a large, unstretched canvas. The ground has been washed with subtle earth-colored tonalities and thousands of tiny spots of orange, brown and maroon seem to hover between the surface and the viewer, causing the whole thing to pulsate hypnotically. In more recent works, Promutico has been using metallic colors with an even stronger mesmerizing effect.

The revival of realism is represented by one of Paul Sarkisian's almost unbelievable *trompe l'oeil* (fool-the-eye) paintings on linen. The technical expertise with which he

captures the tattered manila envelopes and cardboard mailers that he has been painting lately will awe you. Sarkisian also does extremely large works, maintaining the same kind of detail on a 15x20-foot scale.

Jim Wood takes a looser, more painterly approach to realism in *That's Showbiz*, overlaying it with a bit of fantasy. His work seems to exist somewhere between that of Sarkisian and Fincher. He avoids Western emblems in favor of small objects associated with the stage: Lipsticks, colorful capsules, crayons and a mysterious headless doll all float on a watery surface that both supports and reflects them.

A painting by Zachariah Rieke does not suggest, alas, the range of the collaborative collage pieces he does with Gail Rieke. *Dark Beauty*, although acrylic on canvas, looks more like an abstract batik. It is somewhat monochromatic and one-dimensional, unlike other fibrous works that include such things as shed snakeskins, Chinese silk, moth wings, banana leaves, feathers, palm fibers, shells, porcupine quills, etc.

Chigger King's *The Virgin of Guadalupe* is a modern twist, via neon tubing, on New Mexico's omnipresent Spanish Mexican Catholicism. His colorful Madonna, described almost sacrilegiously with fluorescent tubes and encased in a plain wooden altar, shines from her niche. One could attribute her glow to the hand of God, but no, it's electrons in motion. King also does outdoor earthworks in mediums other than neon.

Along the same lines, Luis Tapia has carved a tortured figure from wood, an anguished iconic piece that relates heavily to

(Continued on page 36)



Photo by John Everett, Chronicle Staff

Chigger King's *The Virgin of Guadalupe*

New Mexico

(From page 16)

Mexico's propensity for flagellated figures. Entitled *Baile de la Muerte* (Dance of Death), it seems to dance and is theatrically lighted so that its shadow on a purple backdrop becomes an integral part of the piece itself.

Richard Thompson's freakish figures sport flat profiles and fixed smiles in the face of a watery disaster that threatens to wash all away. The work is part of an ongoing series which looks at the Southwest in a comic-strip kind of way.

Other outstanding pieces to look for are works by Bill Shepherd, Ken Saville, Randy Lee Whitehorse, Jaune Quick-to-See Smith, J. Pearson, Rick Dillingham and Woody Gwyn. Space does not, unfortunately, allow well-deserved praise.

Instead of being set apart, the photographs are integrated with the rest of the exhibition and work very well. Many relate to other works of art in the show. Walter Chappell's *Metaflora Series*, *Bleeding Heart Leaf*, for

example, seems related to both Fincher's and King's works. It is a luminous gelatin silver print that glows with an aura of light. Each vein and edge of each leaf exudes a florescent radiance. A large format photograph of a nude woman by Wayne R. Lazorik hangs next to Nick Abdalla's stunning *Kimono Series: Diamond*. Both photograph and painting combine cooler, more formalist concerns with the warmer, seductive curves of the female torso.

The quality of the light in New Mexico has always attracted photographers to the area. Add to this the influence of Van Deren Coke, who came to the University of New Mexico some 18 years ago to build a distinguished photography program, and such distinguished teachers as Lazorik, Richard Rudisill, Betty Hahn (who came to UNM in 1976 and has a piece in the show), Ann Noggle (also represented) and Tom Barrow (who is showing a work from his cryptic *Cancellation Series*).

Of equal or perhaps greater influence is Beaumont Newhall, leading photo-historian who selected the 18 photographers in the show. Newhall retired from direc-

torship of the George Eastman House in Rochester, N.Y., to become the more-or-less permanent visiting professor of photo history at UNM. Newhall included in the show such internationally known photographers as Paul Caponigro and Eliot Porter, along with such rising young stars as Meridel Rubenstein.

And so we both pose and answer this question: "Can artists who live and work outside of New York produce sophisticated, original work that is capable of achieving national and international recognition?"

The answer: a hearty and unqualified "Yes!"