

## ART REVIEW

# QUENCHING ARTISTIC THIRST

Group exhibition celebrates fresh water in the high desert

BY WESLEY PULKKA  
FOR THE JOURNAL

**F**aith and bejabbers! A staggering 100 million years ago, most of New Mexico was covered by a 3,000-foot-deep inland sea that stretched from northern Canada to the Gulf of Mexico.

Fast forward to this year and visit the “Quench: Water in the Desert” group exhibition at the New Mexico Art League celebrating fresh water in its many forms in our modern high desert country.

Among many well-known neo-impressionists like perennial favorite J. Wade Griffin, neo-expressionist Mary Sweet and postmodernist realist Dennis Liberty are several outstanding artists who also are doing excellent work.

I am particularly impressed with several pastels by Janice St. Marie, who is not only a consummate draftsman but also fully uses the virtually unlimited palette available to pastel artists.

In works like “Sing to Me, Autumn,” St. Marie focuses on details, with thousands of tiny strokes of color that add up to a stunning overall capture of land, water, atmosphere and foliage. Her sense of detail borders on the paint-every-leaf 19th century landscapes by several Barbizon painters and the leader of the realism movement, Gustave Courbet.

From the early 20th century’s first brush with modernism springs inspiration for work by Jacqueline Hertel, who paints on top of predominantly red grounds to produce radiant, slightly abstracted landscapes. Hertel offers the kind of painterly vibrancy found in post-impressionist Maurice Prendergast’s landscapes, like his “Central Park, 1901,” filled with



“Placitas Spring” by Jacqueline Hertel takes a stylistic look back to pioneering early 20th century works like Maurice Prendergast’s “Central Park, 1901.”

densely packed brush strokes that layer the scene into visibility.

It is Hertel’s brushwork, bold color and stylization that enliven her paintings and set them apart from more conventional landscapes in much of the show. One of my favorites is “Placitas Spring.” Hertel’s work is not necessarily superior but just different enough to attract the eye.

Speaking of excellent conventional painting, Roger Gathman’s “Spring Runoff” and “Rain’s Coming” offer strong brushwork and a broad palette.

Though not as tightly rendered as St. Marie’s pastels, Gathman’s oils are richly and skillfully applied to manifest water, trees, land and sky in a relaxed but believable style that is both charming and true to life.

Photography is part of the water-themed installation, with several prints on canvas by Theodor Greer that are so softly focused they look just like well-executed paintings. Greer’s best is “Chama River” which has to be the most “painterly” photograph I’ve seen.

In stark contrast is the high-tech and high-gloss super-real “Cathedral Rock,” by Herman Tafoya, that is a truly stunning photograph printed on aluminum. The image of a mesa with its reflection on still water is a knockout. The colors are clear, and the focus is razor-sharp.

To isolate “Cathedral Rock” from



“Sing to Me, Autumn” by Janice St. Marie is a beautifully rendered scene exuding mastery of the pastel medium.



“Dry Wash Tracery” by Melody Sears is a jaw-dropping pastel showstopper beautifully revealing the artist’s prodigious skill set.

its surroundings and the wall itself, Tafoya might want to try presenting this beautiful print in a black shadowbox instead of free-floating sans frame.

Another stunner is “Dry Wash Tracery” a drop-dead-gorgeous pastel by Melody Sears, who sets the benchmark for the absolute lusciousness of the pastel medium as well as brilliant implementation.

## IF YOU GO

**WHAT:** “Quench: Water in the Desert,” contains 87 works by 45 artists

**WHEN:** 10 a.m.-4 p.m. Tuesday-Sunday through Oct. 7. Information, 293-5034.

**WHERE:** New Mexico Art League Gallery, 3409 Juan Tabo NE behind the Juan Tabo Public Library

**HOW MUCH:** Free

Valerie Cordaro offers two contrasting pieces with the highly successful albeit redundant “Rio Chama River,” in beautifully juicy Southwestern earthen hues, and “Treasure,” an overworked and washed-out composition featuring a large cottonwood.

In “Treasure,” Cordaro whitewashed the composition by mixing too much white into every important color. Every artist needs someone to whisk away the painting at its best before the artist is able to have second thoughts.

My advanced-painting instructor had us remove our tubes of white from our paint boxes and hide them in a locked drawer until class was over.

There are many more noteworthy works in “Quench: Water in the Desert,” but we’ve run out of space.

This entire exhibition is a knock-down, drag-out success that should quench most realist art lovers’ thirst for excellent landscapes.