



The Dragonfly Effect

The 10th annual Native Treasures: Indian Arts Festival honors a couple of Placitas artists who share a transformative passion for their work, and one another.

A January drive to the Placitas home studio of artists Joe and Althea Cajero provides the first stunning work of art I'll see today: The afternoon sun casts a coral-orange glow onto the imposing spine of the Sandía Mountains, the crest made slightly opaque by the soft rise of piñon smoke from adobes nestled into the valley below.

Joe, originally from Jemez Pueblo, is a sculptor who works in bronze and clay, and Althea (from Santo Domingo and Acoma Pueblos), crafts jewelry using cuttlefish bone castings. They're busy preparing pieces for the 10th anniversary of the Native Treasures: Indian Arts Festival, which will take place in Santa Fe on Memorial Day weekend, May 24–25.

The invitational show began in 2004 as a small event on Museum Hill, with the goal of raising money to benefit the Museum of Indian Arts and Culture (MIAC). It has since matured into one of the most popular Native-arts festivals in the Southwest, featuring museum-quality work. Drawing serious collectors from around the world, the festival bestows the honor of MIAC Living Treasure on a particular artist each year. For the first time in the festival's history, two artists will share the title: the Cajeros.

Stepping into the Cajero studio, more stunning views quickly pile up. On a wooden work surface sits Joe's large clay figure of a corn maiden, its smooth con-

tours and elaborate floral designs awaiting a final once-over before being shipped off to Phoenix for bronze casting. At Althea's workstation sit her tools and a variety of intricately designed jewelry pieces, including a silver, cuttlefish-cast bracelet topped with a silver dragonfly (a popular Native American symbol for transformation) sculpted by her husband. The piece was created especially for this year's Native Treasures preview party, the theme of which is "Journey."

"A married couple sharing a studio isn't very common, I don't think," Joe says, Althea nodding in agreement. "But I think the way we met and grew as a couple, and the way we approach our art, make it

possible for us to embrace the situation and make it work for us." The Cajeros' relationship and their trajectories as celebrated New Mexico artists are intertwined, and have as much to do with personal metamorphosis as they do with their generosity within the New Mexico arts community.

What began as a chance encounter at a fitness center blossomed into an eight-year friendship, but Joe eventually became too smitten to stay silent. "I told her I loved her and, yes, it was awkward," Joe says, laughing. "And it didn't go my way. After that I took about a week off from seeing her. But then the next time we saw each other, she sort of gazed into me a little bit."

"No, Joe. I flirted," Althea recalls. "And I'm glad I did. It felt like the decisions we were making together were flowing. And we've been best friends ever since."

Married in 2005 at the Allan Houser Sculpture Garden, the Cajeros weren't both artists when they met. Prior to their engagement, Althea, who is the daughter of silversmith Dorothy Tortalita and lapidary jeweler and Kewa Pueblo tribal leader Tony Tortalita, worked for the Indian Health Service (IHS). She spent a total of 20 years with the agency. "When we started seeing each other romantically," Althea says, "I would come out here to Placitas to see Joe, and to express my feelings about work, and life in general. Things were changing. I was changing. I was in a place where I had lost my connection to artists, especially after my mother passed away 18 years ago. I missed it."

In Joe's studio, Althea's creative urges began to percolate once more. "She would come in after work, and she would talk about her day," Joe recalls. "And while I was in the studio working, I thought, 'Well, while we're talking, she could be helping me.' So I asked her if she wanted to take some sandpaper and smooth out the rough edges of one of my sculptures. As I watched her, I realized how incredibly mindful she was being. She was very intent about how she moved her hand around the clay." As time passed, Joe offered Althea more tasks in the studio. "Brushing some of



Joe Cajero's clay corn maiden sculpture, prior to bronze casting and painting. The piece was created especially for Native Treasures. Above: Althea Cajero's unique style of cuttlefish-bone casting sets her work apart from many New Mexico jewelry artists. Facing page: The Cajeros outside their Placitas home studio.

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my clay pieces with white paint was another step into that meticulousness that seemed to calm her and fulfill something in her heart," he says. "When I observed how thorough and clean she was being with her brush, I said, 'Man, you're really good!' And then I gave her yet another task." After Althea assisted Joe with the inlay for a bronze cross, he couldn't keep quiet any longer. "I said, 'You know what? That's it. You're an artist. Now you just have to figure out what medium you want to explore.'"

THE MARKET DIFFERENT

Event cochair Karen Freeman and the Cajeros agree that while the Santa Fe Indian Market draws over 100,000 collectors, art lovers, and artists every year, and remains the heart of Santa Fe's peak-season Indian-arts market, Native Treasures brings a more intimate atmosphere to the table, for artists and collectors alike.

"Because of the time of year, this show has an aura of growth and rejuvenation," Joe says. "My belief is that people feel this but don't really recognize or acknowledge it. Indian Market is marvelous in its own unique ways, but we enjoy the opportunity to spend a little more time with collectors and art lovers at this show. Santa Fe produces the best Native American art shows in the country, and the work presented here are top-tier, museum-quality pieces. Another plus: We get to have our own lighting, so we can showcase our pieces in a specialized way."

Twenty-five percent of art sales from Native Treasures benefits future exhibitions at the Museum of Indian Arts and Culture. Boasting more than 200 artists from 40 tribes and Pueblos, this year's event also honors all former Living Treasures Award recipients, including Santa Clara Pueblo potter Tammy Garcia, who will present the award to the Cajeros during a special preview dinner on May 23. "Each year the recipient is given a piece of artwork made by the previous year's award winner," Freeman says. "It's a reciprocal act that speaks to the effort these artists make in furthering the museum, and the future of Native art, while continuing to nurture their own bright careers."

Sacrificing job security petrified Althea, but ultimately she couldn't reject the prospect of a more creative life. While still working for IHS, she began stringing together simple, elegant pieces with lapis, turquoise, sugilite, and coral gemstones.

"People at my office started buying the pieces right off my neck," she says. "I realized that if I could do the findings [the cones and clasps used to connect jewelry pieces], I could get into shows—and good ones." She took a jewelry making class led by Diné master jewelry designer Fritz Casuse at the POEH Cultural Center and Museum, in Pojoaque Pueblo. "I watched how a student carved into a delicate cuttlefish bone," Althea says, "and how she melted her metal and poured it. After the metal cooled, she pulled the bone mold apart. I was amazed by the cuttlefish-bone texture and pattern on the cooled metal's surface. Once it was revealed, I knew that's what I wanted to create."

For Joe, watching Althea tap into her creativity in his studio early on was magical. "And it continues to be," he says, "because now we're helping each other and supporting each other to push the envelope of our work even further. Her transformation into an artist has made us both happier people. Working together in the studio is a lot like being in a relationship: Sometimes you know when to say something. And sometimes you know when to not say anything at all."

NEED TO KNOW

The 10th anniversary Native Treasures: Indian Arts Festival will be held 10 a.m.–4 p.m., Sat. and Sun., May 24–25, at Santa Fe Community Convention Center (201 W. Marcy St.; 505-955-6200; communityconventioncenter.com). Sat. admission, \$10; Sun., no charge. Special Sat. early-bird preview, 9–10 a.m., \$20. All tickets available at the door. May 23 Benefit Preview Party and Living Treasure award presentation (\$100) includes an early-bird ticket for Sat. (505) 982-7799; Ext. 3; nativetreasures.org

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EXHIBITIONS

May marks the beginning of the busy studio-tour season in the state, with three time-honored events unfolding in sequential weekends. Now in its 16th year, the **Corrales Studio Tour** (May 3–4) kicks things off with its self-guided tour, featuring work by more than 70 traditional and contemporary local artists. The **Placitas Studio Tour** (May 10–11) has been a Mother’s Day tradition for 16 years in this small community about 25 miles north of Albuquerque, and it continues in 2014 with more than 45 participating artists, including two featured in “The Dragonfly Effect” (see p. 28). The tour is overseen by the Placitas Mountaincraft and Soirée Society, which benefits arts education in and around Placitas. The following weekend, the 23rd annual **Eldorado Studio Tour** (May 17–18) opens with a public artist reception on May 16 at the La Tienda Exhibit Space. To get an early peek at the work of participating artists, a preview gallery at La Tienda will be open to the public 11 a.m.–4 p.m., May 3–16.

The Fuller Lodge in Los Alamos opens an exhibit of work by emerging and established artists titled *Things With Wings*, which encourages artists to “just wing it” and take their work in new and compelling directions, while depicting things that soar, buzz, and flutter (May 2–June 14).

At **Chiaroscuro** in Santa Fe, photographer Walter Nelson celebrates The Black Place in northern New Mexico, a region that inspired many of Georgia O’Keeffe’s paintings, with an exhibit of photographs taken there over the past 20 years. A book of Nelson’s work will be published in conjunction with the exhibit (May 2–31). An artist’s reception and book signing will take place Friday, May 9, 5–7 p.m., at the gallery. Also in Santa Fe, the **Museum of Contemporary Native Arts** opens an exhibit of paper baskets and other work by Eastern Band of Cherokee contemporary weaver Shan Goshorn. Combining copies of historical documents, such as the Indian Removal Act, and photographs with traditional weaving techniques and patterns, Goshorn educates viewers about Native American history and indigenous sovereignty (May 24–July 31). At the **New Mexico History Museum**, *Toys and Games: A New Mexico Childhood* explores how children played during the late 19th and early 20th centuries. From spinning tops to dolls and snow sleds, the exhibition encourages play, as well as contemplation on how much it has changed over the years (May 25, 2014–February 1, 2015). *Turquoise, Water, Sky: The Stone and Its Meaning*, which examines the geology, mining, and history of the gemstone, continues at the **Museum of Indian Arts and Culture** (through March 2016). See our related feature, “The Spirit in the Stone” on p. 33.

The **Harwood Museum of Art** in Taos hosts *John Connell: Cheap Secrets of the East and Highlights from the Gus Foster Collection* (May 17–September 14). The Connell exhibition includes drawings and sculpture by the Taos/Santa Fe artist, while *Highlights* offers a selection of works gifted to the Harwood by photographer and longtime museum supporter Gus Foster. The collection, which comprises 341 pieces by 86 contemporary artists, includes works by Ken Price, Larry Bell, Earl Stroh, and Emil Bisttram. The Gateway to Imagination juried art competition at the **Farmington Museum and Visitors Center at Gateway Park** draws artists from across the United States, and features more than 90 works in a variety of mediums. The show also includes work by artists from in and around San Juan County (May 10–July 12). ❖



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