

Navajo tradition, culture influences artist

Written by By Dee Velasco For the Sun
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Artist Eric-Paul Riege tells his story

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Gallup local Eric-Paul Riege, 23, artistic talents have caught the attention of the art world with his larger-than-life installations that spotlight Diné traditions with a bit of a twist, and contemporary appeal.

Riege currently has a few installations hanging at Art123 in Gallup.

Riege who is half Dineh and Anglo, was influenced at an early age while living on the reservation in Iyanbito. Asking how he got into art, Riege said he came from a family of artists. His grandmother was a master weaver from Burntwater, Ariz., his mother made quilts and sewed his clothes, and later taught Riege how to sew. In high school he took art classes to fuel his creative passion.

Recently graduating from the University of New Mexico with a Bachelors of Fine Arts, Riege returned to his roots to showcase his art. He calls his art “inter-disciplinary,” as his pieces are created by using textiles, weaving, and installation/performance art.

He says it was a tedious project, but it paid off.

“It was a lot, but it definitely did pay off. I was always a creative thinker and problem solver,” he said. “When it came to that point of my life, I wanted to do something that I knew I was good at and that I would be happy at doing for the rest of my life, so I continued and pursued it.”

Art123 Gallery Executive Director Rose Eason says his art has such an unique appeal, one cannot help but stare at it.

“I think it’s really exciting ... I’m super happy that he’s back in Gallup and we’re able to share his work here,” she said. “He’s a really interesting artist, taking old techniques and fiber art and doing something completely new with it, and expressing a really unique vision that I’m actually proud to have here showcased in Gallup.”

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One piece in particular is a pair of jumbo turquoise earrings displayed in the window. It's made of fabric that's sewn and stuffed.

Riege calls this, "Yoo 4 Yé'íitsoh (necklace for the Big God)."

According to Riege, there's no word for earrings in Navajo, so he gave it an alternative title. It's part of a series of pieces that represents the grandfather and grandmother in his Diné culture, and the ties of his family.

Eason says this piece really grabs *your* attention and that in itself is a huge plus.

"It's so cool, just something about it and you really can't put your finger on why it's so cool," she said. "Except it's taking something that has such a long history and that it's iconic in a way, and putting a totally whole new spin on it. It's so hyper-creative that grabs you and makes you appreciate it in a different way and ... which it can't be hard to be surprised by something you almost see every day."

Onlooker, Wilmer Lomayaktewa says the earrings piece captivated him as well.

"I thought the earrings were so cool, so simple yet so memorizing to look at," he said. "Almost a childlike toy to look at. I'd pass by it one day and just stared at it."

Another unique piece entitled "Dibe (butchering sheep)" is a sheep that is made up from cloth material, hanging upside down with red beads sprinkling down to resemble blood as it had been butchered.

"From my perspective, it's of the sheep that is taken away by the government and escapes, and it's now searching around the reservation for his grandma. Traditionally, you are not supposed to have empathy for that sheep for its offering for our survival to the Dineh."

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Riege says the sheep have given us textiles for weaving with its wool and food. Part of his thesis in college tells of his family that was affected by the animal reduction plan on the Navajo Reservation and this piece represents that.

His art is a must to see. Having done a couple shows in Albuquerque and Santa Fe, Riege will have a solo show in Gallup Sept. 9, during ArtsCrawl.

Riege hasn't sold any pieces yet – this due to the fact he simply doesn't want to part with his art, he jokingly says.

"It's mainly because I'm way too attach of my art and that's my own downfall," he said. "I reuse my art a lot. I take it apart and make new art from it. Materials can be expensive too, so I recycle and also most of my pieces have a story with it. I redevelop it into a whole new story of what it can be now."

Hoping to continue making his art, and gaining financial support for it, Riege wants to pursue his Masters degree and become an art professor.

"That's my plan, but of course that could change," he said. "I also want to teach workshops and go to different places on the reservation and teach little children weaving workshops."

For more information on Eric-Paul Riege contact the Art123 Gallery at (505) 488-2136.

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