

Randi O'Brien brings new ceramics exhibit to UNM-Gallup

Written by By Cody Begaye Sun Correspondent
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Featured artist for March 2019 says pelicans tell the story

Ceramic artist, historian, and educator Randi O'Brien kicked off a new exhibit for the University of New Mexico-Gallup campus by speaking to the public about her background and work.

According to O'Brien, *Cultivating Essentia* focuses attention on viewing the essence of oneself and speaking about cultivating oneself. The exhibit will run from March 4 to April 5 in the Ingham Chapman Gallery.

In an artist lecture at UNM-G March 4, O'Brien explained what she seeks to express through her work. "Storytelling can be functional or sculptural," O'Brien said in the talk. "Storytelling is the number one way I connect to people around me."

BACKGROUND

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O'Brien's connection to storytelling stems from a time when she was dislocated from her family in Montana. Born in Pueblo, Colo., O'Brien attended Fort Lewis College, and then received a Master of Fine Arts in ceramics and Master of Arts in art history from the University of Colorado. She currently works as an assistant professor of ceramics at Montana State University in Billings.

Speaking about her roots and connections to the Southwest, O'Brien told the audience at UNM-G, "Being here is like being back home."

O'Brien talked about her experience as a whitewater rafting guide and how a near-death experience from almost drowning inspired her to capture the moment as a sculptor.

"It was one of the most beautiful, graceful, and scary situations in my life," she said. She talked about creating something to transmit what she was seeing and hearing through form, shape and context.

LEARNING THROUGH STORIES

O'Brien said she is a heavy reader, and that sharing stories with her father has evolved into sharing stories with her daughter. Important life lessons can be transmitted through stories.

In her ceramics work, which consists largely of human figures with numerous markings or other objects on them, she endeavors to capture what she calls a frozen narrative.

"I am always telling my story through metaphors, using shapes and symbols to tell stories."

"People catch a hint or allusion of a moral in the story," O'Brien said. She illustrated with the tale of a fishing trip to Oregon where a pelican stopped close by, and the two of them kept an undisturbed distance until a mischievous boy appeared and tried to shoo the bird away.

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It was part of a longer, transformative experience in which O'Brien took what she thought was her dream job in New York City, only to discover she missed wild landscapes. She left New York to return to Montana. At first, upset with herself, she was reassured when she encountered a pod of pelicans near the Yellowstone River.

"I took that as a sign saying, 'Welcome back, this is where you're supposed to be,'" she said.

ESSENCE WITHIN WORK

Back in Montana, O'Brien said she wanted to tell stories about her melancholy thoughts, of being bonded to life and death and coming home.

Then O'Brien took a trip to Chile where she would see even more pelicans. They became the basis of her next project. She crafted a set of clay pelicans and placed a small cup inside each one. Then she placed each of the clay pelicans into the water, where they would eventually crack open to reveal the cup inside.

O'Brien says, "I don't want my work to be perfect because the cracks and scars make them beautiful. That is where their essences and stories come from. They are what makes us whole."

She says, the pelicans that crumbled to reveal cups and her ceramics work that depicts either markings or imperfections on either people or objects is intentional. These creations imply that there is life within death.

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