







Abstract painter stays true to self

When Navajo artist, Jerry Brown, is not getting his hands soiled with his artwork, he spends his

free time admiring the simpler things in life like observing trees and insects, hauling wood, and taking care of his “wild” animals.

Brown spent most of his younger days growing up in Coolidge, Ariz., and later moved to Mariano Lake because having been raised by his grandma, Mary Bitsuie, she thought it was a good place to live. From third to eighth grade Brown attended Crownpoint Boarding School.

“They didn’t really push art in boarding school, mostly sports and field trips,” Brown said.

In between spending time with his family on Christmas, Thanksgiving, and the summer months, he spent a fair amount of time caring for his family’s sheep and goats.

He later enrolled at Bonaventure Indian School in Thoreau, where he graduated in 1991. It was at the St. Bonaventure Indian School that he was motivated by mentor and German artist, Clarence Giese, who pushed him to do abstract artwork and mixed media.

It was during this time, Giese and Brown took a tour to Sante Fe’s historic Army barracks and he discovered the old campus of the Institute of American Indian Arts. Brown realized at that moment that this location was the beginning mecca for aspiring Native American artists.

He attended IAIA for four years even though it was a two-year program because he was busy taking 2D and 3D project courses and independent studies courses that the school had to offer. Brown says that IAIA molded him into the artist that he is today.

“When I was at the Institute, I was afraid to protest, I was afraid to open my mouth, because coming from a sheepherder to art interaction and culture interaction it was tough,” he said. “I couldn’t focus. Everything was all over the place”. “I think that is how I became an abstract painter. When I would go back home, they’d throw me into a ceremony, an all-nighter, and I would try to paint what I was being taught.”

Brown explained that every artist goes through a struggle and admits that at one point, it was hard for him to look at his own background.

“You have to go through it,” he said. “A lot of artists don’t face the truth. I built myself on that. Today, I can stand my own ground and say, yes, I am confident.”

Today, his work has been displayed at local venues such as the Octavia Fellin Library, the Gallup Cultural Center, and Milan Sklenar’s Crashing Thunder Studio Gallery. Other areas he has showcased his artwork include Sante Fe’s Indian Market; Prescott’s Indian Art Market; and at the Arizona State Museum, in an art exhibition titled, “Walking in Two Worlds,” located at the University of Arizona campus.

Locally, Brown has done his share of mural projects such as one mural, located in downtown Gallup, on the south side of the McKinley County Courthouse. The mural is constructed out of glass and tile mosaic, called, “A Window.”

Another mural project that Brown is extremely proud of is the Gallup Veterans Mural, located outside of the Veterans Memorial Plaza. When speaking about past war veterans, Brown commented that they have seen a lot while serving their country.

As for what it is like being an artist on the Navajo reservation, he said that it is hard.

“As far as my painting goes, I made a commitment that I am not going to sell my culture,” he said. “If you ask me why I am not painting baskets, feathers, bundles, paraphernalia, gourds … I am not going to because that stays within the circle and that stays within the hogan.”

However, he said it was good to see Navajo artists today pushing the limits and it is fascinating to see how things are changing and how art is opening numerous doors of opportunities.

He mentions that it is mind-blowing to him what they can do and that they can travel locally and

internationally. He is slowly working towards showing his artwork at the international level.

One of his role models is Navajo artist Shonto Begay. He says that he admires Begay because of his style of work and that he paints what he sees.

When asked where he thinks Navajo artistry originated from, Brown says Navajo artistry dates back to Spider Woman, to the weaving of rugs, traditional stories, and chants. He thinks that it is fascinating how things in the art world are changing and to see young artist going out there and expressing themselves.

His advice to aspiring artists: “Push yourself. You can do anything you want. Don’t be afraid to ask questions. Ask for guidance to your elders. They’ve seen it. If you feel like you are getting lost, ask questions to pave your own road.”

Brown will have his work on display at the Octavia Fellin Library from Nov. 1 - 30 to commemorate Native American Month.

Also, on Nov 14, there will be a special reception during the Artscrawl from 6:30 pm-8:30 pm. ***For more information on Jerry Brown and his artwork, please visit his Facebook page at facebook.com/jerrybrownart***

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