



COURTESY DEBORAH RAE-BUCKLEY

TRANSLATING MEMORY

Artist **Deborah Rael-Buckley** of New Mexico brings the spirit of the past to life in her evocative sculptures.

BY ROSEMARY CARSTENS

There is magic afoot in the studio of Taos ceramic sculptor Deborah Rael-Buckley. It's apparent in her large-scale chair and figurative pieces, which are layered with meaning and symbolism, evoking a sense of contemporary Latino fiction and an echo of magical realism. Each stoneware sculpture features branches, bones, ropes, writings and symbols, intermingled to create a thought-provoking play of light, shadow and story. Beneath the obvious beauty and innovation of her work lies a narrative about culture, religion and family.

"I think the notion of magic, drama, romance, shifts in scale, and juxtapositions of theme and time are factors in my work—somehow magic happens and it is understood by the viewer to be plausible, and even likely, that miracles occur," Rael-Buckley says.

Born in New Mexico to a family whose name has roots reaching back 400 years in the northern part of the state and to Spain long before that, Rael-Buckley did not start out to be an artist. It wasn't until age 35 that she began studying art history and architecture at the university level. Following a

move to Milwaukee, she fell profoundly in love with ceramics and sculpture. She also has lived, studied and worked in Cortona, Italy and in Brussels, Belgium.

Today, her new work has received enthusiastic recognition. In 2005, her first year to participate in the annual Contemporary Hispanic Market in Santa Fe, she won Best of Show and Best in Ceramics. She has continued to win awards yearly since, and the State of New Mexico is considering several of her pieces to be displayed as part of their art in public spaces program. Her work has been exhibited nationally and internation-

ally, is in the permanent collection of the National Museum of Mexican Art in Chicago, and can be seen in numerous other galleries, museums and private collections.

Her work is her passion, her process complex and detailed, and she draws her ideas from a deep well of history and culture.

Rael-Buckley's present work, begun with her return to New Mexico after 13 years away, takes mainly two forms. The first are chairs that evoke the essence of artists such as Frida Kahlo, Remedios Varo, Georgia O'Keefe and others. A second form is figurative, and these are more autobiographical, referring metaphorically to her Hispanic heritage, her family and her roots. Each tells a story through a vocabulary of imagery and symbolism.

The artist's newest work is informed by research into her ancestors, her travels and her journey home to her birthplace. "I love the New Mexican landscape and the state's varied cultures," she says. "My work relates to that and my feeling of being rooted here."

Rael-Buckley begins by using hand-

formed coils to create a piece's base and then works upward. She doesn't use forms, but builds and molds the side walls, working with a collection of text and images at her side. Once the basic form is high enough, she begins sketching, laying out, where images and details will be added or painted. Next she carves out the negative spaces, continuing to build upward. Once the overall form is complete, a gesso-like underglaze is applied to enhance colors, then the piece is fired and cooled. In the next phase, she repeats a series of glazes and washes, laying on and wiping away each again and again, then overfiring to further mute color intensity and create a multi-layered effect that reflects the passage of time. She frequently adds commercial decals at this point, then fires again at a lower temperature. In the final phases, she adjusts hues, adds detail and seals.

The stories behind each of Rael-Buckley's pieces are a large part of what attracts collectors. For example, *Christmas Memory* describes the winter event at Taos Pueblo. The pueblo is lit with tall bonfires and everyone waits in the cold for the arrival of the statue of the Virgin Mary, finally car-

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The artist's website:
www.deborahraelbuckley.com

ried forth from the San Geronimo Church. The men of the pueblo fire rifle shots into the air to announce her presence, and the women follow her around the grounds. *Matachine* dancers reenact the conquest wearing colorful, glimmering costumes. They wear miter-shaped hats—hats of the clergy—and carry trident-shaped wands, referring to the cross, in a syncretic blending of native and Spanish custom.

The award-winning *Visitation* was originally made as a memorial to her grandmother and to pay homage to all grandmothers, who are culturally significant in New Mexico. The front of the dress has a prominent heart, tall flowers, and a Guadalupe figure placed traditionally over a sliver of a moon with a cherub below. The back is illustrated with more rambling flowers, a New Mexico landscape, and a crossword-puzzle cross that includes names of relatives and Spanish words. To the artist's surprise, when it was finished she realized it was a self-portrait: "I am the figure wearing a dress made up of images representing my life. With this dress I can be closest to my grandmother and live her memory." **H**



Christmas Memory
Stoneware, glazes,
acrylics 40" T x
16" W x 12.5" D



Gift
Stoneware, glazes,
acrylics 47" T x
18" W x 13" D



Frida's Dream
Stoneware, glazes, acrylics,
inglaze decals, wooden birds
40" T x 11" W x 10" D