

Creative Creatures

The ideas and the work of the American and European painters, songwriters, photographers, fiction and non-fiction authors, musicians, film makers, architects, designers, poets, and dreamers I met during my 20 years in America.



13 / Anna Patricia Keller, painter, Santa Fe, New Mexico

Ten, eleven years ago I acquired my first painting by Anna Patricia Keller. It differs from most of her later work in that it has a human figure in it. Younger work became even more abstract, more minimal, with sometimes just a “horizon” dividing a foreground and background of contrasting colors and differently worked oil paint or acrylic. This first piece is still a favorite—I notice it daily as soon as I open my eyes.

Anna was a close neighbor in the Silvestres area near Abiquiu, where we ourselves rented an old adobe near the Chama River before we built our own house in the northern foothills at Frijoles Creek. I stepped often into her magnificent studio where the lights were on day and night. Anna is a prolific artist and never done with creating. We discovered she and I share the same “eye”—we both admire Cy Twombly, Agnes Martin, Donald Judd, Ellsworth Kelly, and other quite minimalist artists.

Anna is married to Dick, the only likeable policeman I ever acquainted, who, having spent a tour at the U.S. embassy in Brussels, Belgium, has a taste for excellent beer and an aversion to mussels and who became a good friend. He worked for the Drug Enforcement Agency DEA. In the period we were neighbors he was something like the DEA intelligence chief for the state of New Mexico and especially

the U.S.-Mexico border. He did not gossip much, but what I learned between sentences clearly indicated there is a whole lot of interagency competition going on amongst federal law enforcement agencies as well as between de Feds and state and local police forces: a war within the war against drugs. One day, when we were out together exploring the desert near the New Mexico-Arizona state line, Dick introduced me to two young Navajo Nation cops he knew, who told me stories about the effects of Mexicans using the Reservation as a conduit for drug trafficking that were bad enough to bring tears to one's eyes. Afterwards we had—and needed—the “drunken steak” that's on the menu of the brewery restaurant in Farmington's East Main Street to come to our senses. But enough about Dick.

Anna, now living and working just outside Santa Fe, says: “I build my paintings with many layers of oil paint, wax and natural materials such as pigment and marble dust. The markings in my paintings are reminiscent of those I may see in my environment. Over the years I have developed a personal language of symbols that I incorporate in my work, though they may be barely discernible and often appear simply as markings within the layers of the paintings.” Many of her more recent pieces are inspired by the stark, dramatic openness of the desert and the eastern grasslands in New Mexico, the prairie landscape in Kansas, and the Dust Bowl area in the Oklahoma Panhandle. “Raw beauty is what I encounter there, beauty that is both desolate and majestic.”

You could say these landscapes bear the residual marks of what must have been before, as the earth worked away on itself for long periods of time, building up and scraping away with fire, wind and water. “Endlessness is not just measured in distance and time, it has depths. Such a layering also takes place in the mind, as memories true or false, sensations, sounds, dreams, witnessing, symbolic associations, all settle on top of each other.” Anna, who once studied geology, works her paintings in the same vein. Painting, scraping, inscribing, and imbedding symbols, drawings, numbers and words, as well as actual bits taken from her journal and sketchbook—they all leave their “psychological imprint” or become partially unearthed in later, even in the finishing, stages of the work in progress. “My paintings breathe deep, just as the prairie does, just as the desert does.”

Many of Anna's paintings include autobiographical elements and refer to events in her life that have shaped her work. As a “southern belle” (she still is) she studied painting in Georgia and in Virginia. Her husband's job-related travels took her all over the U.S., to California and Hawaii, before they settled in New Mexico. Hawaii or the Pacific Northwest may be where they will settle next, the proximity of the ocean being what both Anna and Dick are longing for. I hope to be able to visit them. They will create, without doubt, a splendid home and a sensational studio for Anna to work in, as they did in Abiquiu and in Santa Fe. Not often have I seen a studio so well laid out to meet the artist's material and atmospheric needs as the one in Abiquiu; it perfectly reflected Anna's sense of beauty, her mindset, and her temper.

“I've learned to stay clear of too much interpretation,” she says. “Intuition is always in play and the possibilities are endless. Whether they concern my art or the environment I live and work in, questions present themselves. The answers are not necessarily clear but living in balance, playing with esthetics, and painting with devotion, is how I find my solutions.”