

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.



47 / Beth Ferguson, painter, Youngsville, New Mexico

She relocated from Michigan to New Mexico after leaving a career as a social worker. They did not leave her in peace, though, and she was appointed to be the expert witness in a long-running court case. For years to come she worked on this class action law suit in the defense of people incarcerated in Michigan State prisons who, to use an understatement, were not always treated well. She wrote fat reports and occasionally had to drive north to give testimony in person. I believe it took ten years before they up there in Michigan decided to let her go—not because the case was settled, but because they in the end agreed to appoint another expert in her place. Since then, Beth Ferguson is a full-time New Mexican, although her travels continue, be it in different directions and only for fun.

It is hard to understand why she wants to travel, for she built her home in one of the most exciting landscapes of the American Southwest--the home of creative feminine spirit, as Georgia O'Keeffe already discovered in the 1930s. Beth was one of the first ones who managed to buy land on a mesa near Abiquiu Lake, from where she enjoys vistas not only of the deep-blue waters but also of the eye-blinding red rock formations (roughly 200 million years old) of Ghost Ranch, of the Piedra Lumbre plateau, and the distinctive flat top of 10,000 foot Cerro Pedernal (so often painted by O'Keeffe), the Polvadera mountains and, in the background, the peaks of the Chama Wilderness and the San Pedro Wilderness. I see it as a location that under different circumstances would have been recognized as a world treasure. The house she built is a round adobe with tall and wide windows all around just so she doesn't have to miss any of the magnificent views or any of the dramatic changes of the light moving over the land.

This is also where she created her studio after taking up painting seriously. Her art doesn't take her attention away from her surroundings since practically all her work has the land as a subject. Her paintings were in our Abiquiu gallery, The Tin Moon, and I followed her growth as an artist from up close. It is not easy to portray the multicolored landscape with its powerful geologic formations dating back to the Triassic and Jurassic eras; it is not easy to catch the brilliant and shifty, 350 days a year blazing sunlight on a canvas. Many painters and would-be painters try and often they create merely kitschy forms and overly bright color schemes that refuse to convince and that are, in effect, adding nothing to the natural landscape, nor are they honoring it; my stance is that these painters are abusing the natural beauty by being satisfied with producing cheap copy art. I noticed a different quality in Beth's approach; her studies and later her paintings took on a character of their own but always remained respectful of the land. Beth kept studying, kept searching for different approaches including more abstract interpretations—but I continue to highly admire her early landscapes (which, when said by someone like me who isn't into landscapes at all, really means something).

Last year, Beth came to visit us in Kansas; we were her first stop on a long road trip to visit family and old friends also in Missouri, Michigan, Ohio and Kentucky, West Virginia and North Carolina. She stopped at many leading art museums to freshen up her knowledge of "old and inspiring creators" and was most impressed by the Underground Railroad Freedom Center in Cincinnati, of the caliber of the Holocaust Museum in Washington D.C. At Oberlin she attended a piano concerto by eight pianos in various combinations, with at times even 160 "Obie" fingers on the keys.

Yet it is India that has really caught her heart. Twice already she visited the country so abundant of spirit and serenity, and yet so cruelly medieval in certain aspects. With a nephew married to an Indian woman (he a PhD from Columbia, she finishing her PhD at Brown) many doors to Indian homes were thrown open wide for Beth. At a wedding she attended not only Indians assembled, but folks from Great Britain, Haiti, Singapore, Zambia and Kenya, and South Africa, including two supreme court justices. "Meals bountiful and oh so delicious... We danced in the streets as the groom rode a white horse to the bride's home... The ceremony beneath orange-and-marigold-decorated canopies... Vedic mantras chanted in Sanskrit... Fresh flowers to signify beauty, coconuts for fertility, rice for a prosperous life together, *ghee* to feed the sacred fire..." The other side of India: Beth visited the Dharavi slums of Mumbai, one of the 20,000 slum neighborhoods in this overwhelmed city where almost 60% of the huge population are desperately poor and have to battle to find a living, and a life.

Then to Elephanta Island to see 6th century carvings of Hindu deities, to Haj Ali tomb and mosque. On to Ajanta and Ellora caves containing temples, monasteries, enormous sculptures carved into the mountains--breathtaking, and larger than anything to find in New Mexico's monuments and parks. A lounging Buddha statue 24 foot long, frescos more than 30 foot high. "I trekked to the red sandstone tomb of Humayun, the second Mogul (16th century). I wanted to re-experience this place that I remembered from an earlier trip as awe inspiring—a good example of the early Mogul architecture, Persian influenced, that flourished later in the Taj Mahal." India will surely see Beth return. Probably one day she will also visit Vietnam where her dear friend Ann Shea is teaching in Ho Chi Minh City.