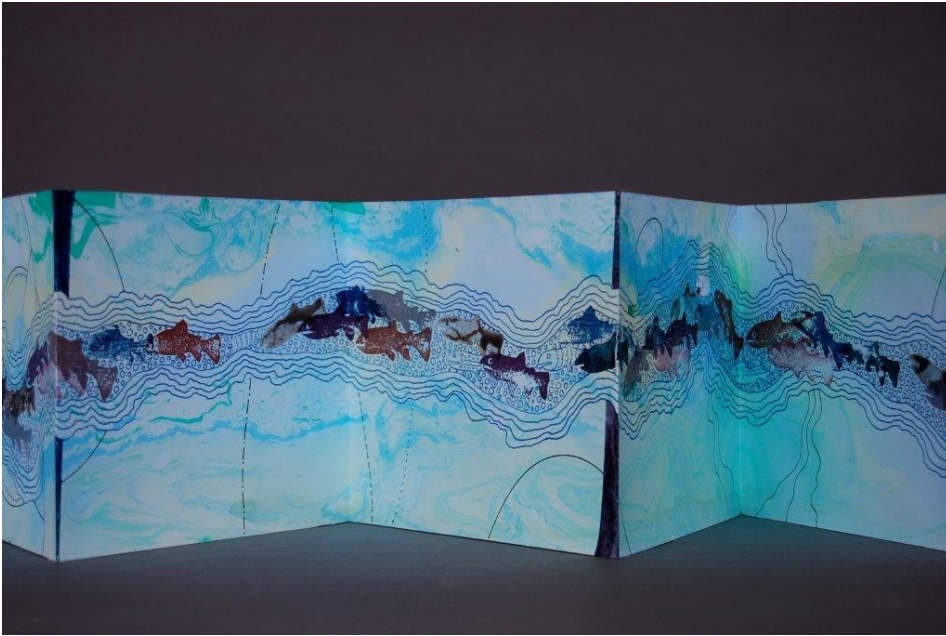


Creative Creatures

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.



31 / Julie Wagner, painter, sculptor, printmaker, bookmaker, El Rito, New Mexico

I do not know when precisely Julie Wagner moved from New York to New Mexico, but it must have been in the days when New Mexico attracted carloads of hippies from all over America who were searching for peace, freedom, low-cost living—for their Shangri-la--in the high desert or in the Sangre de Cristo mountains. Most of them eventually left to become investment bankers, insurance adjusters, if not used car salesmen and the like, but quite a few refused to move away; they are still living in New Mexico either absorbed by small communities or in the hidden mountain refuges they created, or in a town like Taos, which they helped put on the map in those long-lost days of ‘Easy Rider’ and before the place became a much-in-demand ski resort and art town.

Julie Wagner and her husband Michael Hennerty, an Irishman, stayed. Forever. At first they rented in Ojo Caliente, south-west of Taos. But soon they settled a little farther west in El Rito, the sleepy Hispanic settlement where one day the first big hippie parade in New Mexico took place on the main, and almost only, road through town (a young Harrison Ford is said to have been one of the jolly participants).

Michael Hennerty is a joyful guitar playing and Irish ballads singing eighty-year-old whose smart mind hasn’t suffered over the years; he became a singing blacksmith and his traditional workshop, where the iron is red hot above the coal fire, is worth a visit, though not on a summer day. Julie’s mind isn’t less sharp, and her sense of beauty, color, balance of form, dreamlike script, and art and poetry in general is outstanding. She became a visual artist, developing from creating colorful toy-like structures to executing major paintings, fine drawings, truly spectacular artist books, delicate small handmade books, dreamlike sculpture (mostly created from the special papers she also uses for paintings), and note cards reproduced from the pages of her sketchbook. One has only to see these pages to know one is viewing the work of an extremely gifted artist. Her observations of the land, of life in the landscape, in nature in general, are uniquely detailed; her craftsmanship produces sketches better than many artists’ “serious” paintings; and her thoughts, expressed in sober yet poetic words, may hit one hard enough to remain in permanent storage in the memory. Julie is a contemporary artist; most times, she interprets her observations to create abstract imagery.

Julie and Michael's home and studios have a view of the low range towards Ojo Caliente east of El Rito, with the Magote Ridge and Mesa Piñon in the distance in the west. Not far from their house one can find El Farolito, a small family-run New Mexican restaurant to which you bring your own beer or wine; it has delicious local fare on its conventional menu thanks to the benevolent use of "red and green" hot chili peppers. El Farolito made it into the pages of the Rand McNally Road Atlas, The New York Times, and many travel and cuisine magazines including *Gourmet* for its original setting and its food, at very reasonable prices. Michael the Irishman became one of the *hermanos* in this town dominated by Hispanics; he taught blacksmithing and carpentry at the local campus of Northern New Mexico Community College; he, the gringo, is invited to play and sing at Hispanic weddings and funerals and says, "I am so proud they ask me..." Julie co-organizes the El Rito Studio Tour, each year in October. She is to be found in her charming studio on workdays from 9 to 5. "Creating art is like any regular job. You have to go and stay at it, or you don't accomplish anything. And, no, I am not retiring." Fact is the older Julie gets, the more creative, versatile, and prolific an artist she appears to become. By the way, I hate using the word "charming" because so often it means... nothing. But Julie's studio is a place where I will be happy even if forcefully locked up, so charming it is. A magic and inspiring place.

On my dining space wall in Matfield Green, Kansas, one can find a piece by Julie Wagner called 'Rio Grande'. It is an unframed strip of the magnificent paper she uses for many of her art works, about 6' long and 1' wide. She tore the paper then glued it together again; the tear is the river; left and right of it are the names of all towns and counties the Rio Grande meets on its flow from the Rocky Mountains in Colorado through the length of New Mexico and the width of Texas to the Gulf of Mexico. I had longed for this piece for years, but couldn't afford it (rather, Ans assured me we couldn't afford it). Then, after moving to Kansas, Ans' house-warming gift to me was... this magnificent piece by Julie—this unique map of the Rio Grande. It happily joined quite a few other art works by Julie Wagner we had obtained over the years. These include one of her small handmade books, 'A Day in the Bosque', in which the cranes fly from page to page.

Making books has had Julie's loving attention for many years. "I made my first book thirty years ago," she told Robert Eckert of the *Rio Grande Sun* recently. And, "Yes, many pieces I make are related to a map. I've always been interested in maps... It's like taking a two-dimensional representation of something that's totally three-dimensional and even four-dimensional... The maps I draw (such as the one of the Rio Grande) are not totally accurate, but fairly so. And it's almost as if I can feel myself walking along the river, with the ground going up and down." She is in love with paper. It shows in her paintings and in her books, some of which are 14' long, accordion style, and become sculptures. Many are one-of-a-kind; some, such as 'A Day in the Bosque', are limited editions. Julie: "I love books. When you experience a book, you are kind of interacting with it... you become part of it." She paints, draws, prints, carves wood, and sometimes combines all these techniques to create her astonishing pieces. One may find themes in her work, but never repetition; it is truly amazing how year in, year out Julie manages to invent new approaches, fresh views, new applications to old techniques, new interpretations of familiar subjects—and to create new subtle beauty. If I had a house big enough (and a wife who'd let me spend...) I'd live in a Julie Wagner museum.

Above my desk hangs a Julie Wagner. It's a book, a burned book. It has text on each and every page (from a poem?) that is impossible to read. "It's my rendition of an archeological find. When the Olmec conquered a civilization, they burned all books and made new of their own. It fascinates me that people think they can destroy history by burning text." Julie likes the unpredictable—leaving things to chance. She likes to abuse things, put papers into the irrigation ditch and leave them there until they're dry and ready to be approached as a conduit for the never-ending series of visual tales Julie has to tell. "In the end I have made something that I can actually look at is great. That's satisfying, addictive. In a way, it's like cooking a really great meal and eating it."