

Personal Expressions

BY BONNIE GANGELHOFF

Elizabeth Sandia's paintings reflect an intimacy with the southwestern landscape



Crisp, Fresh Air, pastel, 16 x 15.

ELIZABETH SANDIA isn't afraid to take a leap of faith in order to reinvent her life or her art. Over the years, Sandia has changed careers, moved from city to city, and gracefully switched back and forth between pastels, oils, and watercolors. She even reinvented her name when the spirit moved her: She was born Joyce Kunsch, but one day in 1989 she was visiting New Mexico from her home in Key West, FL, when she saw a fateful roadside sign. Driving along between Albuquerque and Santa Fe, she passed a sign for Sandia Pueblo. At the time, she was on the verge of a divorce and contemplating a rebirth of sorts, so she decided to co-opt Sandia as her new last name. "I had no idea it meant 'watermelon' in Spanish," she says. Next she decided to take her middle name, Elizabeth, as her first name. When asked about borrowing Sandia from Native American culture, Sandia replies that she hopes Native peoples will understand and not be offended by her actions. "I didn't think about stealing Sandia from them, but rather I thought about honoring them," she says.

Six years after changing her name, Sandia closed her thriving architectural design practice in Key West, packed her bags, and moved to Santa Fe permanently. Time for reinvention. Then again, she didn't have much choice but to move on, she says. While living in the humid climate of Key West, she had developed a severe allergic reaction to mold. Sandia spent a year or more visiting different places where she might make her new home, including Boston, Tucson, and



Hollyhocks' Greeting, pastel, 10 x 12.

Providence, RI. In the end, the dry northern New Mexico climate and the beauty of the landscape made Santa Fe the winner. By then she also knew that she wanted to devote herself to a full-time career in fine art, and Santa Fe had a thriving arts community.

And so, in 1995, Sandia arrived in the City Different with not much of a plan, no job, and no car. For several years she rode around town on a bicycle and lived on her credit cards. But she was determined to follow a dream that had started to take shape back in Key West. Every time she visited galleries and museums there, she kept thinking that she could be showing her own art. She had been drawing since childhood, and as an architectural designer, she had sketched plans and designed many homes in black and white.

But she remembers reading *The Artist's Way* by Julia Cameron and realizing that what she was missing was working in color.

Not long after arriving in Santa Fe, she met well-known, Taos-based painter Albert Handell while visiting a gallery. Sandia immediately expressed interest in taking a class with him, and Handell invited her to attend a class taking place that very night. "When I make a decision, the doors seem to open," she says.

Eventually she followed up Handell's sessions with workshops conducted by highly regarded landscape painters Scott Christensen and Matt Smith at the Scottsdale Artists' School. Meanwhile in Santa Fe, she met two fellow artists, Joseph Breza and Richard Guzman, and the threesome began painting together regularly in various scenic locations, such

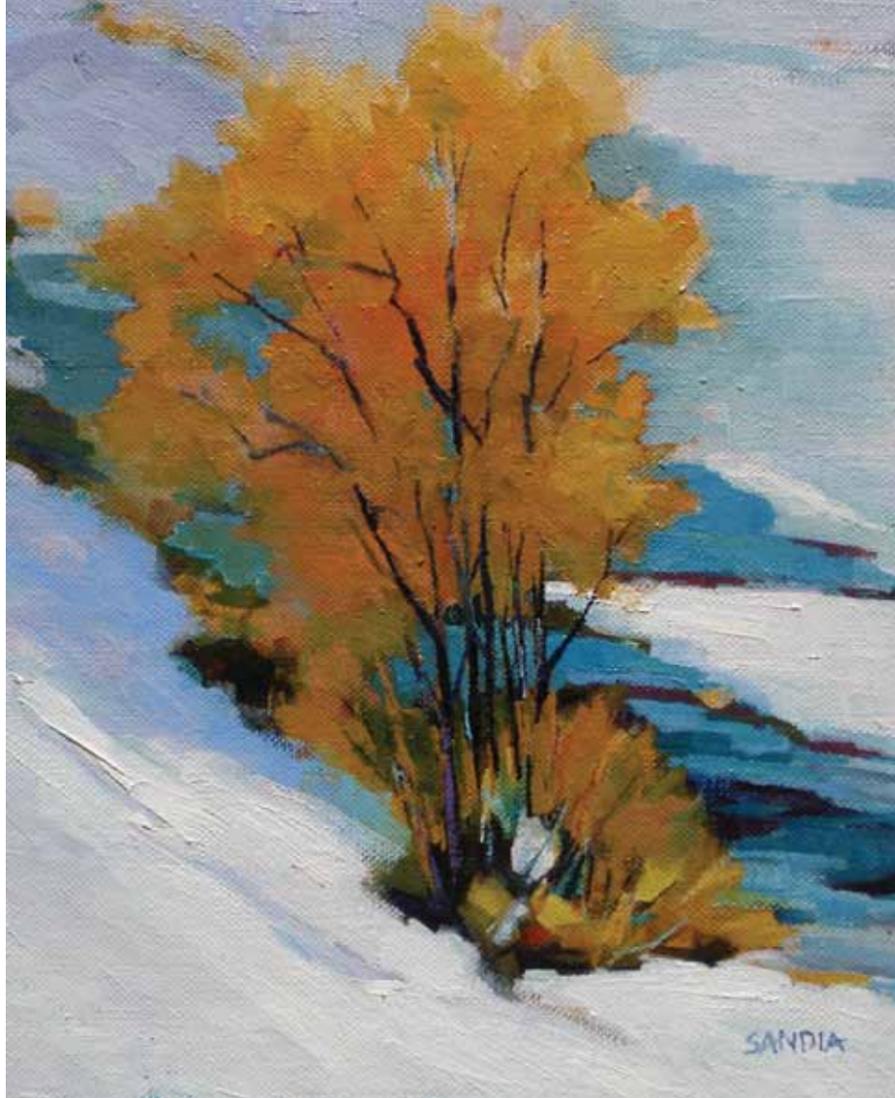


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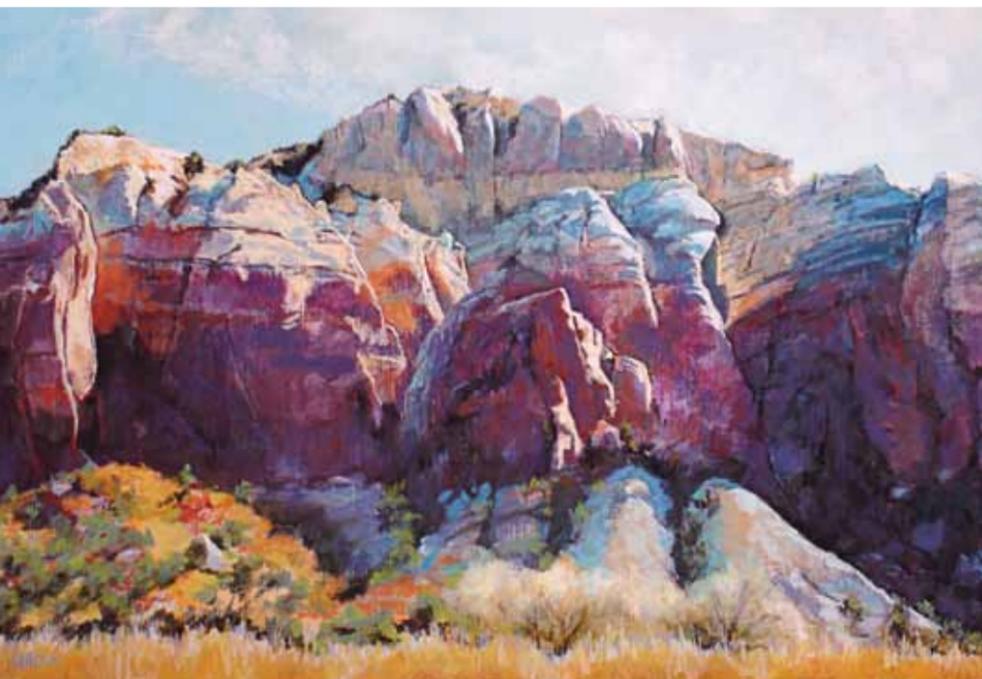
Ann Korologos Gallery, Basalt, CO;
Abend Gallery, Denver, CO.

upcoming show

Solo show, Ann Korologos Gallery,
November 10-28.



Icy Creek and Willows, oil, 10 x 8.



Incredible Allure, pastel, 27 x 40.

as Abiquiu, Truchas, and near the Monastery of Christ in the Desert.

Fast-forward to 2014. With miles of canvas and endless painting excursions behind her, Sandia is known for her rich color harmonies and her classic depictions of the scenic southwestern landscape. Her work has been juried into prestigious shows, such as the annual Coors Western Art Exhibit & Sale in Denver, CO, and she is a signature member of the Pastel Society of America. Her paintings have also been featured in numerous solo shows, including one that opens this month at Ann Korologos Gallery in Basalt, CO. Says gallery owner Ann Korologos, “Clients love Elizabeth’s work. Her vibrant pastels and oils reflect an intimacy with the southwestern landscape and the details that make a scene come alive. Seeing Elizabeth’s work for the first time many years ago, I was immediately moved by the clarity of the colors and her way of drawing the viewer into the frame.”

FOR THE PAST year Sandia has been working on a series of paintings of the Pecos Wilderness area, which is home to the Sangre de Cristo Mountains, the southernmost range in the Rocky Mountains. Recently she has been drawn specifically to wintry scenes along the Pecos River, such as DALTON COUNTRY. The sight of the small waterfall inspired and captivated her, she says. “I wanted to express the variety of textures—the hard rocks, moving water, spindly trees, and the frozen water versus the melted areas with reflections,” Sandia explains. “I also wanted to capture the colors of the scene—the gray rocks in sunshine and shadow and the bright, leafless trees. I wanted to be free to push those colors to express energy and excitement beyond what could have been just a tonal recreation of nature.”

Sandia is just as likely to become attached to scenes closer to her home. For example, she admits a special affection for a Santa Fe street named Calle La Pena, a quiet road with “lyrical tree limbs” and low adobe walls. It’s an oasis in the city that she has visited many times—a place she can paint slowly and uninterrupted,



Dalton Country, oil, 27 x 40.

depicting the shadow and sunlight patterns that grace the surfaces. Since arriving in Santa Fe 20 years ago, Sandia estimates she has painted nearly 100 scenes showcasing adobe walls and gates. “I’m drawn to adobe walls with gates because of the unknown, the mystery, behind the closed doors,” she says. “I paint the public side and next to never get into the private area beyond.” She has also painted 42 of the 85 churches that dot the northern New Mexico landscape, returning to favorites many times.

Sandia’s attraction to churches and architectural design traces back to her younger days. She grew up in Albany, NY, the daughter of a Lutheran minister. When she was 10, her father was building a new church for his congregation; as soon as Sandia saw the architectural drawings and plans, they immediately struck a chord with her, she says. To this day she is not sure why they resonated

so strongly, but she soon started asking her young classmates if she could design dream homes for them.

By the time Sandia entered ninth grade, her family had moved to Brooklyn, and she was one of the few students at her school who actually liked her art classes. A teacher, seeing her interest and talent, helped her put together a portfolio that secured her entrance to New York’s High School of Art & Design; after graduation, Sandia entered the Fashion Institute of Technology to study illustration. At the time, she had no idea that she could make a living as a fine artist. For financial security, she pursued a career in commercial illustration for 12 years. Eventually Sandia married and moved to Canada, during which time she studied interior and architectural design at Algonquin College in Ottawa. She later taught drafting there before her move to Key West.

As this story was going to press, Sandia was contemplating her next creative adventure. Even when she isn’t painting, she says, she is often thinking about art and what interests her in terms of subject, color, and composition. Whatever she decides to focus on next, she’ll be guided by her overall goals: “In my work I want to convey what I feel—a personal expression that is not a formula,” she says. “And I want viewers to see my sense of exploration and the idea that I am always trying new things.” ❖

Bonnie Gangelhoff is senior editor at Southwest Art.

See more of Sandia’s paintings at www.southwestart.com/featured/sandia-e-nov2014.