

TAOS

VOL. III

PORTRAITS

PHOTOS BY PAUL O'CONNOR

## JOHN DE PUY (1927-2023)

In 1982, in a chapter titled “My Friend Debris,” in *Down the River*, Ed Abbey opined “that John is the best landscape painter now at work in these United States.”

John De Puy is also notably one of the last of the Ed Abbey-style Luddites, aka the Monkey Wrench Gang. Ed, after all, dedicated *The Monkey Wrench Gang* to King Ludd who was famous for throwing a “monkey wrench” in the form of wooden shoes into a machine. We met John before Christmas in 1962, in Llano Quemado, New Mexico, and many times over the years he told us that he was the prototype for Doc Sarvis in the book. Whatever the truth may be, Ed and John were close friends, certainly beginning in the late 1950s when Ed was editor of a Taos newspaper owned by Craig Vincent. Craig fired Ed for writing an outrageous editorial.

In contrast with Ed, John was always on the side of the Indians. After going AWOL following being wounded in the Korean War, he lived under the great protective shield of Navajo Mountain for a while with Long Salt and his family, where he was inducted into the Navajo understanding of the way things are. Later, having finally settled his legal issues with the Navy, John eventually moved to Taos. About 1969, however, he mysteriously disappeared after he and a friend had vandalized the grave of Kit Carson the night before there was to be a procession to the grave in Carson’s honor. John said he did it because of Carson’s genocide of the Navajos. Other people in Taos disagreed with him about that, and somebody offered a \$10,000 reward to have John killed. John learned about the plot and left. That’s when we lost track of him. Only later did we learn about John and (his then wife) Rini’s political activities and the assault on Kit Carson’s grave that had caused John to go into hiding—for a very long time.

1980: To the steady beat of several large drums and vigorous chanting of the chorus, the crowd of dancers in feathered regalia has just passed us, descending the gentle slope into the Jemez Pueblo Plaza. In its wake, we spot each other amidst the onlookers. He’s been gone for a decade—God knows where! But here he is—John De Puy, with his signature floppy hat and pipe—with the Corn Dance enthusiastically greeting us with a booming voice. Without explanations about his long absence, he invites us to his cabin where he is living up the canyon a bit to meet his new wife Tina, tossing in the offer of dinner as well. We agree, but we wonder about the dinner part of it. Will this new spouse also agree? As it turns out, Tina, who is also smoking a pipe when we arrive, is rather put off about being expected to hustle up a dinner for a couple of strangers on the basis of her husband’s impulsive invitation.

We don’t recall how it all turned out that evening, but John was back in the Southwest, and we remained connected after that.

Throughout his tumultuous life—a life laced with monkey-wrenching, politics, many marriages, and blackberry brandy—his anchor and identity as a painter of the American earth was John’s unwavering path. “*Sur la motif!*” was his motto. It was the land that inspired John’s paintings. On his canvases, simple shapes catch the essence of a mountain, a mesa, or a canyon. Powerful forms carved over eons of time by rain, winds, and sands are replicated in brilliant colors, while borders in sizzling contrast mark the intersection of earth and sky. Lava bubbles beneath the surface. Suns, large and looming or barely visible on the horizon, suggest a wider cosmos, and an “ominous presence” as Ed put it. These juxtapositions create a tectonic tension that appears to be on the brink of a cataclysmic explosion ... perhaps a tension similar to that harbored within John himself (see Ed for details!). His later work also explores the millennia-old rock paintings rendered on the canyon walls by the Ancient Masters. These John recasts even further into their ethereal selves. His watercolors, filled with ambiguous landscape forms, evoke movement of something that cannot be handily identified, stressing the mystery latent in not really knowing.

John said that he painted not what he saw “but what is really there!”

— POLLY and CURT SCHAAF SMA



## ASHA GREER (1935-2022)

Asha Greer had heft. She moved into moments, both empty and full, like a heavily laden ship through calm waters. Silent. Immense. Slow to turn corners, like those of her lips veering into a wry, provocative smile.

This was Asha in her 70s. I met her on the *portàl* of Lama Foundation, the spiritual community of artists she and her husband founded on a beautiful and isolated piece of land north of Taos. By the time I met her, she had already guided thousands of people across the surface of that land, deep into its caverns, and onto a unique expression of personal artistry and spiritual awakening.

She loved this artistry—the ripening of people, land, prayer, and life. It was a creative movement of international significance—something she helped bring about both at Lama Foundation and in *Be Here Now*, the influential book she and her husband Steve Durkee published at the foundation with Ram Dass in 1971. On the surface, *Be Here Now* is Dass's journey from Harvard professor to Hindu yogi, but the drawings and composition were all done by hand by Steve, Asha, and the then residents at Lama.

That wasn't new for them. Years prior, when Dass was still Richard Alpert and teamed up with Timothy Leary at Harvard, he mingled with Asha and Steve at US Company (USCO), their New York artist collective, staging some of the first light shows for psychedelic rock 'n' roll bands in the 1960s.

That's the transformative shift in which Asha, then Barbara Durkee, was shaped from a young woman into a mother of four, then spiritual mother to many. It took grit. Raising a family at Lama, amid the sweat and severity of those early years, required constant negotiations as the community crafted and refined spiritual practice and buildings by hand.

Asha later moved away from Lama Foundation, with some strain, but one of her daughters moved back for two years as an adult; later, her grandson, granddaughter, and a niece moved back. That always stuck with me, because children often have a way of resisting their parents' dreams. Something of substance obviously took root at Lama, and within Asha.

That was the woman I met on the *portàl*, which is just a fancy word for porch—though it's a big porch. I was in my 20s, cheerful, a little naïve. Asha had this dangerous and lovely way of gluing me, like most people, to the spot. That was her heft, this slow movement of memory and time. But she didn't romanticize it. She was as straight and purposeful as a rake, a rugged simplicity in her tone and posture. She took time for people. There was genuine care in her words. Sharpness too. She meant what she said. A rake has teeth for a reason.

Asha was comfortable like this. You could feel it in her bearing, not just her body but her mind. She was not afraid. She welcomed curiosity and judgement alike for all the stupid things that make people lie, laugh uncomfortably, or tell stories that are a little too neat. For her, everything was on the table—that's how she survived. It was the flood of life and thought, even vanity and ego, that provided the background upon which her calm certainty was raised like a tender white flag over a stormy sea of gray.

Because misfortune did come. Asha's marriage ended tragically. Lama's interspiritual quest did, at least on occasion, become spiritual competition. The roots and tangles of love, children, land, and prayer—they had their wounds.

It was the heft she carried. If you knew her, you felt it. Whether you disliked or adored her, or merely tolerated her, she welcomed that. She let you think and feel, even if that meant distaste. It was this full bearing of her weight, her knowing, that moved into the space when she entered.

She exited in 2022, dying quietly beside loved ones at her home in Virginia, which by then had become her real community. Lama was a hotbed, a kitchen, a testing ground she would visit continually throughout her life. Virginia became her sanctuary.

There are many people buried at Lama Foundation, some with elaborate shrines and a spiritual immensity that draws visitors. Asha, the founding mother of Lama and a worldwide movement, would inevitably draw more than a few people. That is what's precious about Asha—she chose to be buried discretely elsewhere. The heft that she had wasn't something she pressed upon others. She used it to tug at a person's center of gravity and ask them to see not her but themselves.

— JOSEPH SAROSY



## JANE MINGENBACH (1937-2021)

A strange choice Paul made for this portrait, showing one of my mother Jane Mingenbach's diagrams as the background. It's a stark deviation from her usual busy, flamboyant work. "Why this?" I asked him, with a studio full of seas and forests, wolves, gods, and wild babies. "Why the diagrams?" He explained that both he and my mother went to Catholic school, and this difficult diagramming exercise was also foisted upon him, some 30 years later. So when he saw these simple diagrams among my mother's piles of art, he fished them out and tacked them up, tickled by my mother's improbable reconsideration of this tedious exercise as a good thing.

My mother was an almost entirely visual person. So, she explained, actually drawing the connection between nouns/adjectives and subjects/objects was a great revelation to her. The confused little dyslexic girl at the back of the class became the expert in diagramming. She felt that she suddenly "grasped language on this deep level, oh, as such a wonder!" and she retained this practice of diagramming as a way of calming and ordering her world, much in the way Agnes Martin relied on her own linear works, which my mother once suggested could also be used as an exercise—perhaps an interesting addition to a catechism book? Needless to say, this wacky and no doubt purposely naïve comment got no traction with Aggie.

But many local artists appreciated my mother's sense of play, and certainly her boundless hospitality. From old-timers like Andrew Dasburg to latecomers like Larry Bell, Janet Webb, Ken and Happy Price, and our neighbor Dennis Hopper, they all spent many hours in our big crazy house. My mother was deeply imbued with the midcentury belief that artists were special. It bothered me at the time; they alone seemed above the law with her. Now, I do admit that—although artists are certainly no more moral than other people (God knows!)—they have each created an interior doorway out of mundane everyday life which they use regularly, and that seems to lighten them, and often makes them a whole lot of fun.

As to my mother's own art, I didn't want to portray her as an empty nester who suddenly put down the dishrag and picked up the paintbrush, but in truth that seems to be what happened. Judy Kendall says she remembers the exact moment. They were both taking a rather genteel watercolor class ca. 1990, and my mother chatted and mixed colors for a great while. "Then, without any fear or hesitation, Jane took a couple big brushes loaded with adverse pigments and scudded them onto dry paper, roughing in this big, beautiful painting—just immediately!" Judy sat back, and told her old friend that she was clearly an artist in her own right, and if she got serious, Judy would show her at the Fenix Gallery. And that's what happened. For the next 20 years, my mother wasn't happy unless she was at her worktable.

She had an amazing support group of artists, including Sandra Lerner, Jane Burke, Mark Adair, and most particularly the great print master Jennifer Lynch, who was then teaching at UNM-Taos. All these women took it on as a personal mission to make my mother an artist. It was a collection of the most intelligent and patient mentors possible, and between them they understood art printmaking down to the bone. So my mother worked at UNM-Taos as often as they'd unlock the door for her, and she tried every possible process. For the first five years, it was a wild whirlwind of sloppy experimentation. She once told me, rather proudly, that she'd made such a vast painted smear of the studio that classmates had to flee to other rooms. But being Taos, nobody said an unkind word.

Eventually, she arrived at a very distinctive style, layering multiple colored wood-block prints on canvas. The block images are predominantly stylized botanical forms which she printed in multiple arrangements, painting under and over them until the whole piece was literally quite heavy. Some of these pieces took years to dry. The effect is a tangle of rough textures and earthy colors that achieve an extraordinary range of abstract variation. The viewer can always discover something new in them.

But at times, such as in her Perils of Childhood series, this abstraction and surface interest give way to decidedly un-Modernist scenes. Here babies sleep (let us hope they are sleeping) among wolves in great forests or are tossed high by beautiful clawlike waves. Bears rear up at their own shadows. And a few human larvae and protective devils float by. There is something of William Blake about this world, befitting the work of a lapsed Catholic; these are archetypes, evoking the terrible glory of the natural world, which is a wonder and a joy if you happen to be the artist and in control of the wolves.

The one scrap of nontechnical writing I found among her works was this common quote by Blake: "what is Man! the Sun's Light, when he unfolds it, depends on the Organ that beholds it." She'd underlined the heretical capitalization.

— LEAH SLATOR



## ANITA RODRIGUEZ

### THESE ARE THE FORCES THAT SHAPED ME AND MY ART

I was born on the cusp of cataclysmic change in the Taos of 1941, where not a hundred years had passed since the signing of the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo. Half of Mexico, Taos included, had been conquered by the United States. Still living were eyewitnesses to hangings in the plaza, cannon balls that destroyed the Pueblo church, confiscation of land grants and their transformation into Bureau of Land Management property and Carson National Forest, and dispossession that gave rise to the *dicho* “*Cuando vino el hambre, vino el hambre.*” (With barbed wire came hunger.)

Pueblo and Mexican elders had spoken Tiwa and Spanish for centuries, but my generation was punished for not speaking English. Taoseños were still adjusting to new laws, another culture, and strangers with a different version of history. They began to trickle into and then flood the plaza, my mother among them, where my father had a drugstore. We had a ringside seat and were participants in a theater of cultural conflict and confluence.

My father, Alfredo Antonio Rodriguez, had roots four and a quarter centuries deep into this land. It was just before World War II when my mother Grace Graham King, my grandmother in tow, drove their Model T to Taos, stopping at times to remove rocks from the road, all so my mother could study art with Walter Ufer. They booked a room at Hotel La Fonda, the only hotel. Evening came and Mother went out to have a cigarette and take in what to her must have been exotic, foreign, and strikingly different from Austin. A reeking drunkard staggered down the sidewalk, fell at her feet, and spilled the contents of his stomach. She was not to learn until later that one of the men who carried the bloody victim to Doc Martin’s, helped sew him up, and sent him home was her future husband, or that she was to stay in Taos forever.

My mother had polio as an infant and had the use of only one arm. But she drew perfectly with her left hand, and Joseph Fleck was alleged to have said, “I wish I could do a head like Grace.” My childhood was littered with art materials; art was everywhere and we knew all the painters, Mabel Dodge, and a roster of eccentric characters. I think it was Bert Phillips who laid his palette near me while he chatted with my mother, leaving a dollop of cadmium orange inches from my nose. I must have been about 3 and knew I mustn’t eat it, but I passionately vowed that when I grew up, I would buy all the paint I wanted.

Daddy, notoriously generous, rendered first aid and gave free medicine to locals, tourists, and family. He also collaborated with an old *curandero* named Pete, who peddled love potions, anti-witchcraft talismans, Spanish gold detectors, and herbal remedies from his horse-drawn wagon. Daddy probably knew everyone in Taos County by name, and their medical history.

Sunday cruises in our 1941 Studebaker through the surrounding villages were thickly peppered with friendly invitations. We stopped at moradas, private houses, *santuarios*, *descansos*, chapels, and churches—where the powerful Penitente art indelibly engraved my impressionable child’s imagination with shapes, forms, and the intense passion of our religious art.

The European esthetic behind the art of the famous Taos Art Colony was strikingly different from that of the Indo-Hispano *santeros*. A third cultural esthetic—Native dances, jewelry, beadwork, and pottery—was different from the other two. I remember sitting on my father’s shoulders at Los Matachines dances at the Pueblo, being terrified at Las Tiñablas on First Friday, watching painters paint, and spying on the bohemian parties my parents threw in the adobe house my mother designed.

These are the cultural influences that nourish my imagery and the stories that feed my visual narratives. My work is full of Jungian, Catholic, Native, and personal symbolism. I have developed a personal iconography, a vocabulary, of visual metaphors. The complexity of the authentic Taos cultural experience (as opposed to the artificially choreographed tourist fantasy)—the presence of subtle nuances, secrets, and profound depths—inspires me to expand traditional forms to express my experience.

An example are my *nichos*, a Mexican folk art form—essentially boxes with doors on them, originally intended to hold statues of the saints. I paint one narrative on the closed doors, and another on the open doors and interior. The crypto-Judaic *nichos* might have a family celebrating First Holy Communion in a Catholic church on the outside, and the same family and a bar mitzvah on the inside. I paint a line of humorous erotic *nichos*, spoofing courtship from flirtation to consummation. I make some with two versions of history—evocative of the parallel universes that coexist in New Mexico. *Nichos* enable me to mirror the intricacy of my environment. *Nichos* also gratify the builder in me. I was a licensed contractor/adobe specialist before I became a painter at 47. I practiced *enjarrando*—traditional adobe finishing—the techniques shared among women through oral tradition in New Mexico, where America’s oldest architecture still stands and shelters the original peoples.

To paraphrase what Jung says about artists: Art is a kind of innate drive that seizes a human being and makes them its instrument ... artists are vehicles and molders of the psychic life of the community.

Art is an antidote to violence; it brings social change through beauty.

— ANITA RODRIGUEZ



## JAN MARIE SESSLER

Jan Sessler sees beauty and potential in the discarded. She rejoices in the discovery of found objects that catch her eye, softened in some way by nature and the passing of time, collected for what she calls “later intuitive contemplation.” Her artistic expressions manifest in multiple mediums from painting, collage, and printmaking to assemblage, sculpture, and photography, often combining mediums and incorporating found objects and other ephemera. Jan grew up with several strong female role models, including her great aunt Jessie Dedrick, born in 1880, who lived and painted in Europe in the 1920s and whose creative and bold undertakings offered an undercurrent of belief of what can be possible.

In the summer of 1993, after a cross-country trek and lengthy sojourn in the Berkshires for a film industry stint, far from fast-paced Los Angeles, Jan suddenly found herself living in an adobe house in a small village in Northern New Mexico. Before heading back to California, her then boyfriend had suggested a two-month pause in Taos. In the Berkshires, Jan found time to paint and in Taos realized that maybe now was the time—and Taos was the place—to embark on a new artistic chapter.

In an adventure worthy of an essay of its own, Jan bought a beat-up 1951 International Harvester truck and headed west to spring her belongings from storage. She, the truck, and her belongings somehow made it back to Taos, and she got down to painting. Jan took inspirational painting and life-drawing courses with Michelle Cooke and began years of printmaking studies under the insightful guidance of Gary Cook and Jennifer Lynch.

I first met Jan at a yard sale in the late 1990s. We were living across from each other on La Lomita Road, having both landed in Taos from Southern California—Jan from Venice, and me from West Hollywood. At that time, covert creativity was rampant in our neighborhood. At the top of street, Larry Bell and Gus Foster (who Jan worked for in the late 1990s) were busy creating their respective custom-made contraptions in a former commercial laundry building. A short stroll down La Lomita, tucked inside a home studio, artist/musician George Chacon might be playing bongo drums while waiting for paint to dry. Across a back meadow lived Jan’s friend and hiking buddy author John Nichols who notoriously slept by day and pecked away at typewriter keys by night. Occasional chanting and shrieking peacock sounds escaped from the nearby Hanuman Temple, and on a nearby dirt lane, master painter Julian Robles of the Taos Seven fame occupied a cavernous fortress along with, according to Julian, several ghostly apparitions.

Jan and cat Zuma lived in an old hacienda on lower La Lomita in a space vacated by artist Rod Hubble. A mature mulberry tree stood guard at the entrance that led to a circular drive with a fountain and a prolific old apple tree in the center. An exotic catalpa with fragrant orchidlike blossoms shaded a stone grotto out back. Also living in the compound during those early years was Claire Libin who painted reverse florals on glass, Steve Storz—a manipulator of discarded electronic debris, and Ron Davis’s son Basil.

One Saturday morning, Jan walked across the road to my yard sale. Sifting through a stack of miscellaneous papers, she spotted a black-and-white photo of a prim white-haired woman posing on a wicker porch chair. I mentioned that I discovered the snapshot of “Aunt Agnes,” as I’d come to think of her, at the Pasadena Rose Bowl Flea Market. As I relayed a narrative I’d concocted about her, I began to wonder why I’d been so keen to unload “Aunt Agnes” in the first place. Over the next few years, Jan and I swapped that photo back and forth like shared kin.

Later, Jan and I became friends through the Harwood Museum of Art after I was hired to coordinate the 2002 Agnes Martin Symposium and later organize the Harwood’s Contemporary Art/Taos selection process, where Jan made the cut. In 2005, Olga Torres-Reid and Charlie Strong cocurated a show of Jan’s works on paper. I am especially partial to the pieces in this series, about which Charlie wrote:

*Jan Sessler, through the collecting of fragments of discarded stuff of twentieth century cultures creates elegant, hauntingly beautiful work. A bottle cap, rusted, crumpled, flattened; a pressed dried flower; the pages, spine or cover violently torn from a book; cloth, string, wire, recycled art are all part of her visual language. The pencil is used with the compressed intensity of the unconscious; wire and other materials are elegantly “drawn” with. Inscriptions, children’s scribbles, stamps and labels contribute the marks of previous lives. All of this adds up to lost worlds—revived, reincarnated—letting us feel through these fragments the relentlessness of time.*

Early experiences as an exchange student and a junior year in Europe prepped Jan for her multicultural life of adventure. A semester in Aix-en-Provence led to her discovery of the Postimpressionists and to the beginning of a creative practice. She continues to spend time in other lands, gathering both foreign inspiration and delectable discards for later intuitive contemplation in her “Art Chapel”—a light-filled studio, tucked away on forested land north of Taos, with canvases, buckets of cement, reams of paper, and a veritable cabinet of curiosities.

— LYN BLEILER



## THE PORTRAITS II

The characters reproduced in *Taos Portraits II* represent a slice of Paul O'Connor's work in Taos. Chance acquaintances, long-term friendships, and professional commissions have all played a role in the selection of the subjects. The names are nationally famous, regionally known, and occasionally obscure; yet, all made their mark in the community. Paul can vouch for the extraordinary personalities and the work. He saw the conventional and unmentionable with his own eyes while recording these images for posterity.

Bareiss, Philip	Hearne, Michael	Reynolds, Mike
Bell, Larry	Huston, Tony	Rodriguez, Anita
Benjamin, Alexandra	Leustig, Jack	Ryneer, Joseph
Chavez, Agnes	Long, Debbie	Saltzman, Mimi
Chen Ting, Mimi	Love, Afton	Scott, Joyce
Chinni, Peter	Manville, Desiree	Sessler, Jan Marie
Cochran, Jeff	Marquez, c	Shorty, Robert
Cooke, Michelle	Martin, Agnes	Sporrong, Christina
Currier, Erin	Masolive, Cristina	Suazo, John
Dillistone, Dora	McIntosh, Bruce	Thomas, J. Matthew
Dixon, Tom	Michaels, Patricia	Track, Bernadette
De Puy, John	Mingenbach, Jane	Vanella, Ray
Michael Fitzgerald	Navé, James	Vom Dorp, Sasha
Foster, Lenny	Nero, Timothy	Walker, Bobby
Frank, Larry	O'Connor, Paul	Warm Day Coming, Jonathan
Garcia, Lydia	O'Connor, Tizia	Whaley, Bill
Goler, Victor	Oliver, Marsha	Wright, Lyle
Greer, Asha	Ortiz, Johnny	Yazzi, Angie
Healy, Edmund	Packer, Allan	Yokoyama, Izumi
Healy, Trudy	Price, Ken	Zimmerman, Zoe

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