

SANTA FE - ALBUQUERQUE - TAOS

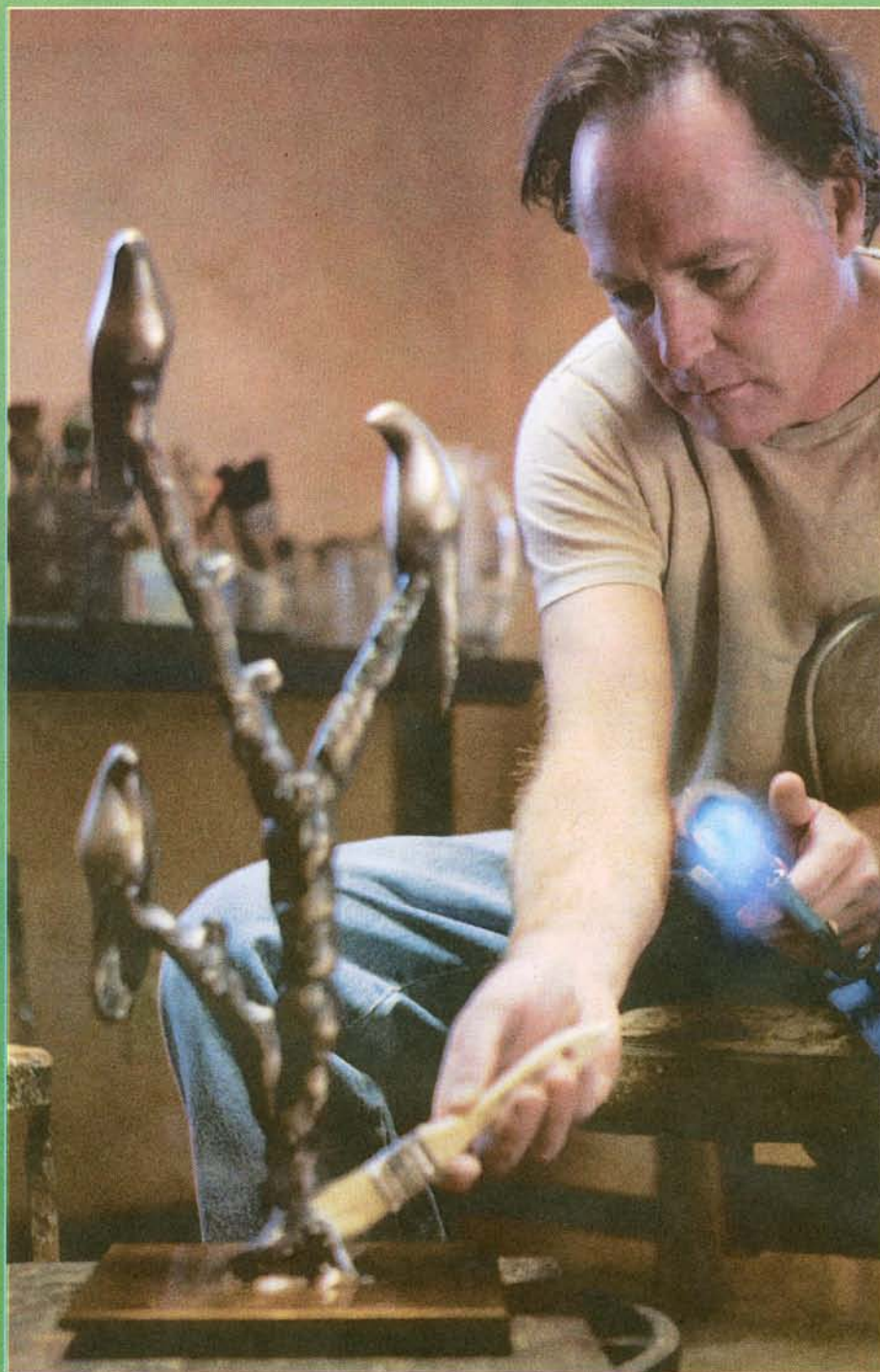
NOVEMBER 2008

sculptor *David*
Pearson

Local Flavor

David Pearson:

the gift of Art



A slice of midmorning sunlight cuts across the courtyard of the Patricia Carlisle Fine Art gallery on Canyon Road. It touches the rich chocolate skin of a young woman, made entirely of bronze, who seems to listen to a gurgling fountain nearby. A few steps away, a life-size figure — perhaps of another woman — stands in shadow. A visitor reaches out to touch the piece, not quite believing that the figure's shroud appears to flow with such impossible fluidity, though it's made of metal as well. These sculptures are the products of a long and spiritual process, born of artist David Pearson's single-minded efforts to translate what lies in his heart into the material world. The results are breathtakingly serene, causing viewers to stop, to slow down, to remember their humanity. New Mexicans are accustomed to beauty. Each day offers its presence in a glance out the window at the strong blue peaks of a distant mountain or a captured moment to admire the searing fuchsia of a stormy sunset.

David Pearson grew up surrounded by these glories, too. Born in Tucumcari, his youngest memories are filled with the majestic openness of the land, of playing under broad skies. When he wasn't chasing lizards or swimming at Conchas Lake, he found beauty in books about ancient civilizations and thought about what was most important to those long-ago people. "I realized that what was left of the civilizations was the art; what was telling was what they left behind," he says.

Pearson's life changed abruptly when the railroad left his hometown in the 1960s. Tucumcari's economy suffered tremendously and Pearson's mother, who worked for the telephone company, was transferred to Santa Fe. The move was difficult at first, especially for a kid with a Texas twang, but it created the opportunity for Pearson to find his life's calling.

One day, when Pearson was sixteen, a friend invited him to come watch the work at the Shidoni

story by PARI NOSKIN TAICHERT

photos by KATE RUSSELL



Foundry. “From the moment I saw it, I was hooked,” he says. “It was a Mad Max kind of dark world with chains hanging from the ceiling, hot metal being poured. Imagine what it was like for a teenage boy. I started working there the next day.” Pearson’s eyes widen and he grins with the memory. The sun is now at its full strength. The artist sits in his studio, a clay model standing in its center, waiting for him to bring it to completion.

Pearson’s years at Shidoni proved critical to his ultimate career. While there, he progressed through all the processes of bronze work, learning each discipline through hands-on experience. Along the way, he created his first sculpture, *The Prudence*. It was a simple, but elegant design with many of the elements that continue to make his art immediately identifiable.

The piece was an elongated, abstract human figure melded around a central shaft. At that time, one of the employee privileges of working at the foundry was that they could display their pieces in its gallery. *The Prudence* sold quickly.

“I thought, ‘this is the way to go,’ ” he says. “I thought I was really on my way then.”

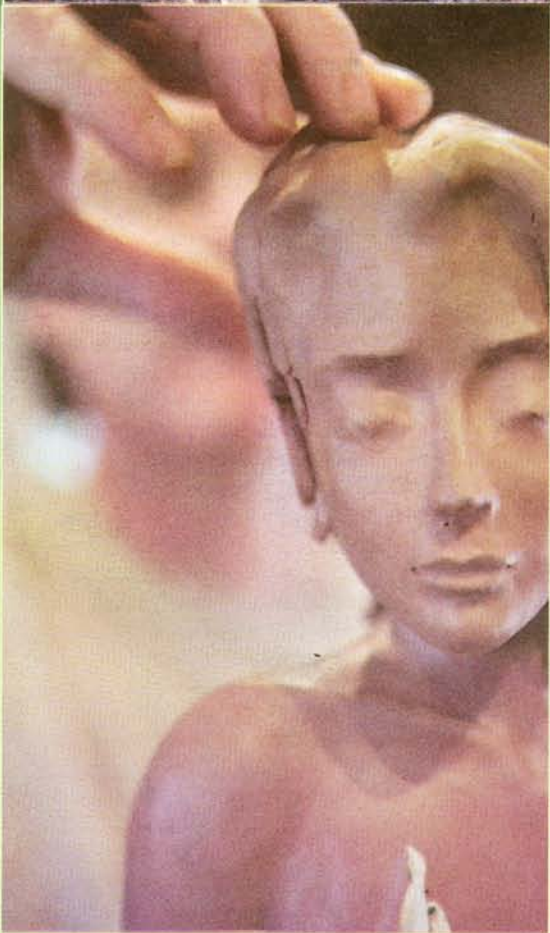
After five years, Pearson decided to leave Shidoni. He thought he’d be making his living as a sculptor in no time. After two years and a lot of odd jobs, his sales dried up.

Though that initial experiment didn’t yield money, it brought invaluable experience. In addition to learning the realities about the business of art, Pearson lived at painter Eli Levin’s home which was a gathering place for many of the Santa Fe artists of the time. Pearson says, “We talked about art twenty-four seven.”

With the wisdom of hindsight, it’s easy to see that Pearson’s formative years as an artist were really a contemporary version of an ancient tradition — apprenticeship. His entire life from adolescence forward seemed destined to put him in contexts where he had to learn more about his craft. Over the years, he worked at the Art Foundry where world-famous sculptors pushed the limits of their materials. He independently helped other successful artists on their commissioned pieces. Ultimately, Pearson was hired to design and set up the foundry on Alan Houser’s property to complete that sculptor’s works, posthumously.

Then, sixteen years after his first attempt at independence, Pearson made the jump again. This time it worked.

Beyond the many aesthetic reasons



for David Pearson's success, gallery owner Patricia Carlisle credits public arts programs with giving him a larger audience.

"In our day-to-day existence, we don't realize how important art is to life. We have our work, kids, chores . . . and forget that there's so much more," she says. But art can change lives in an instant. Carlisle remembers the exact moment for her. When she was twenty years old, she was invited to an artist's home. He had an incredible collection with one-of-a-kind creations everywhere in the house. "I'd never seen anything like it," she says. "It was totally captivating and I realized that I'd never be able to return to a cup of coffee and newspaper on a Sunday morning and think that was satisfactory."

Public art ensures that everyone can have this transformative experience if they only pay attention. Fidel Gutierrez, Senior Vice President of Los Alamos National Bank knows this. "We strive to acquire pieces of quality art so that our customers and employees can enjoy original works that they might not see in other public situations," he says.

The bank is committed to supporting the communities in which it operates and the majority of its Community Art Collection contains works created by New Mexicans and purchased through local galleries. Employees at the bank have lists with information about the works in case anyone asks. Gutierrez laughs about some of his experiences with public art. "Believe me, people will give you their opinions about whether something is good or bad," he says.

Two of David Pearson's sculptures grace the bank's Griffin branch in Santa Fe. *Innocence* stands at the Catron Street entrance. Gutierrez liked it right away and it has been well received. But the Senior VP wasn't sure about the second piece. *Transcend* is now located in the bank's inner courtyard and is the focal point of the sparsely landscaped area. The genderless figure reaches in a graceful arc to the sky. It is mounted on a lazy susan so that it can be rotated and seen from different angles. Rather than the smooth warm brown of many of Pearson's works, this one is completely textured.

"Art can grow on you," Gutierrez says. "The response to *Transcend* was very positive." Gutierrez also notes another effect of the Community Art Collection; it changes the feel of each branch's interior. "We work hard to create a better environment for our employees and customers," he says. "The art we display has a calming effect rather than bombarding people with marketing messages."

New Mexico's First Lady, Barbara Richardson, agrees that art affects the milieu in which it's located. "Whether it's public art

like the large pots and fountains at the Albuquerque airport or art in public places like the Capitol Art Collection in Santa Fe, art defines and changes the environment," she says.

Mrs. Richardson selected one of David Pearson's sculptures for display in a garden at the Governor's mansion. In referring to *Une Danse de Reve*, she says, "The texture and patina of the bronze are particularly nice and are complimented by the plantings as they change through the seasons."

In addition to its role as a celebration of New Mexico's rich traditions, Mrs. Richardson observes that public art serves an additional purpose. "On the most basic level, art in public places lets the public know that the art was put there for them to enjoy. The arts are a reflection of the community and are also a gift to the community," she says.

David Pearson understands this and imbues his works with tremendous heart. "David comes from a core of spirituality and often feels that he didn't make the piece, but that it came through him," says Patricia Carlisle. As a result, his tranquil sculptures can elicit the same feelings of intense gratitude that people experience when they pause to admire New Mexico's unsurpassed natural beauty.

Gratitude is also a constant in Pearson's worldview. Back in his studio on this cloudless day where the blue sky framed through the windows could be a series of paintings itself, the sculptor shifts into a more comfortable position in his chair. "I feel fortunate that I can make my art. That I have the talent to do it and had the life I've had," he says with a look of mild amazement. "Most sixteen-year olds don't fall into something that they can learn and grow in for the rest of their lives. It's really incredible."

Pearson smiles again. Outside a horse whinnies, a single crow caws during its journey over the artist's rural property. "It's a truly blessed life and it keeps getting better."

David Pearson's work can be enjoyed in the serene gardens of the Patricia Carlisle Fine Art Gallery at 554 Canyon Road in Santa Fe. 505.820.0596. www.carlislefa.com.

Pari Noskin Taichert is a two-time Agatha Award finalist for her Sasha Solomon mystery series from the University of New Mexico Press. Her third novel, *THE SOCORRO BLAST*, was released this year.