
NORMAN, OKLA. – A first-of-its-kind exhibition honoring three generations of Pueblo artists opens this month at the Fred Jones Jr. Museum of Art at the University of Oklahoma. Generations in Modern Pueblo Painting: The Art of Tonita Peña and Joe Herrera spans 65 years and reveals how a mother and son broke tradition and influenced generations of modern painters.

The exhibition opens with a public lecture and reception from 7 to 9 p.m. Thursday, Jan. 25. The exhibition officially opens to museum visitors the following day at 10 a.m. The opening events, as well as valet parking, are complimentary.

Generations in Modern Pueblo Painting documents and celebrates in particular the art of Tonita Peña (San Ildefonso/Cochiti, 1893-1949), the only female Pueblo painter of her generation, as well as the work of her distinguished son, Joe Hilario Herrera (Cochiti, 1920-2001), and their positive influence on a younger generation of artists, including Pablita Velarde (Santa Clara, 1918-2006) and her daughter, Helen Hardin (Santa Clara, 1943-84).

The exhibition, the first significant presentation of Peña’s work since the 1930s and the premiere presentation of many of Herrera’s major late works, is curated by W. Jackson Rushing III, the Eugene B. Adkins Presidential Professor of Art History and Mary Lou Milner Carver Chair in Native American Art, OU School of Visual Arts.
“When Dr. Rushing approached the museum with a proposal for an exhibition examining the careers of mother and son, he presented the ideal opportunity to celebrate the lives of two of the most influential artists in Native American art history,” said Mark White, the museum’s Wylodean and Bill Saxon director. “The resulting exhibition is the first important survey of either artist. Key loans from important public and private collections, and selections from the University of Oklahoma’s James T. Bialac Collection, provide a retrospective of the two artists and their broad influence on other Native artists.”

In the first two decades of the 20th century, a small coterie of enterprising Pueblo Indian artists invented a new kind “secular” art in the form of non-ceremonial watercolor paintings meant for sale to collectors outside the community of origin. Through their works, they sought to communicate Pueblo social and spiritual values even as they participated in a cash economy. Inspired, in part, by pottery designs and murals painted on the walls of kivas (underground ritual chambers), this first generation of modern Pueblo painters was largely self-taught, and virtually all of them are represented in the James T. Bialac Native American Art Collection in the Fred Jones Jr. Museum of Art.

“Access to this important collection was a stimulating factor in the organization of this exhibition,” Rushing said. “In particular, the stellar selection of Joe Hilario Herrera’s late works in the Bialac Collection was key in facilitating new conclusions about his process and motivations.”

*Generations in Modern Pueblo Painting* spans 1915 to the late 1980s. Other featured artists include Julian Martinez (San Ildefonso, 1879-1943) and his grandson Tony Da (San Ildefonso, 1940-2008); Romando Vigil (San Ildefonso, 1902-78) and Geronimo Montoya (San Juan, 1915-2015); as well as younger artists inspired by Herrera, such as Michael Kabotie (Hopi, 1942-2009), Martinez’s nephew, Gilbert Atencio (San Ildefonso, 1930-95), and Charles Lovato (Kewa Pueblo, 1937-87).

“It is my contention that Peña and Herrera were key figures in the development of modern art in the United States and that there is no satisfying explanation for their exclusion from surveys on the subject,” Rushing said. “On the contrary, for several reasons, a critical examination of their aesthetic achievements and legacy reshapes our understanding of American modernism.”

Peña’s emergence as a female Pueblo painter in the 1920s was a radical turn in and of itself, and her refusal to be censored by conservative elements in her community solidified the significance of her participation in, and thus contribution to, the American scene in the 1930s.

According to Rushing, the work of Peña’s son, Joe Herrera, was indebted to Pueblo sources, but he also took inspiration from Art Deco, Cubism, Paul Klee
and the modernist primitivism of both Raymond Jonson and Agnes Sims.

“After 1950, his ‘heritage’ primitivism – an intentionally reductive aesthetic that evokes the prehistoric foundations of culture – incorporated rock art images and other ancient iconographies into a hybrid modernism,” Rushing said.

Rushing’s research enables visitors to see more clearly how cultural traditions, and the deep significance of heritage, played a formative role in the development of modern art.

“Thus, *Generations in Modern Pueblo Painting* demonstrates how the historical temporality of modernism unfolds through heritage as much as through dialectical progress,” Rushing said.

Until now, neither Peña nor Herrera has had the benefit of a museum retrospective. A catalog published in conjunction with the exhibition reveals documentary photographs and excerpts from letters written by Peña, both published for the first time.

*Generations in Modern Pueblo Painting* is on display through April 8 in the museum’s Nancy Johnston Records Gallery. A hands-on space included in the exhibition allows children and families to express gratitude by writing thank-you notes or using a video booth to film a personal message.

A gallery talk presented by the curator is scheduled for 1 p.m. Tuesday, Jan. 30. A Family Day event with an art activity for all ages is scheduled from 1 to 4 p.m. Sunday, Feb. 4, and a discussion about female leadership in the arts with Native artists Holly Wilson, Anita Fields and Molly Murphy-Adams is scheduled from 1 to 3 p.m. Saturday, March 3.

This exhibition is made possible, in part, by a grant from the Norman Arts Council Grant Program.

Opening on the same evening in the adjacent Ellen and Richard L. Sandor Gallery is a small exhibition by contemporary artist Jesse Smalls. In *Space Burial*, Smalls fabricated slivers of the 86-foot diameter satellite dishes from the Very Large Array in New Mexico. Shadows cast from the fabrications allude to the array as an agent of travel through time and space.

More information about these exhibitions and related programs is available on the museum’s website at www.ou.edu/fjma.

The Fred Jones Jr. Museum of Art is located in the OU Arts District on the corner of Elm Avenue and Boyd Street, at 555 Elm Ave., on the OU Norman campus.
Admission to the museum is complimentary to all visitors, thanks to the generosity of the OU Office of the President and the OU Athletics Department. The museum is closed on Mondays. Information and accommodations are available by calling (405) 325-4938 or visiting www.ou.edu/fjjma.

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**IMAGE CREDIT**

A new exhibition at the Fred Jones Jr. Museum of Art examines the influence of two Pueblo painters, a mother and son, on modern art. *Generations in Modern Pueblo Painting: The Art of Tonita Peña and Joe Herrera* opens with a complimentary public lecture and reception 7 p.m. Thursday, Jan. 25, and includes works by numerous artists, including this 1982 watercolor, *Germination*, by Herrera.

Joe Hilario Herrera (See Ru) (U.S., Cochiti Pueblo, 1920–2001)

*Germination*, 1982

Watercolor on paper, 25 1/4 x 30 in.

Fred Jones Jr. Museum of Art, University of Oklahoma, Norman

James T. Bialac Native American Art Collection, 2010