Art Review

Figures are absent from "New Mexico Landscape," a lower-key, yet effective evocation of the ties between Catholicism and American Indian culture, in a desolate Southwestern desert setting.

"Ceremony, Ritual & Magic: The Paintings of Paul Pletka" is accompanied by a full-color poster and a catalog with an essay written by Dr. Evan Maurer, Director of the Minneapolis Institute of Arts.

The show is organized by the University of Oklahoma's Fred Jones Jr. Museum of Art. 410 W Boyd.

---

Norman — A show of "The Paintings of Paul Pletka" reveals an almost voyeuristic fascination with Indians and their artifacts, which is visually stunning but also may make your skin crawl.

Assisted by the State Arts Council, the "Ceremony, Ritual & Magic" show of 22 large acrylic paintings by the Santa Fe artist is on view at the Fred Jones Jr. Museum of Art, whose director, Thomas Topzerer, organized it.

In addition to focusing on details of Indian apparel and paraphernalia, Pletka tends to give his subjects scowling or faraway looks and magnify the size of their raw-boned hands and moccasin feet dramatically.

Striking three-quarter or full portraits of stoic, solitary figures (including one on horseback) dominate one room of the museum's gallery space.

Red body paint and a fierce sidelong glare at the viewer helps underline the warlike calling of a Plains Indian Dog Soldier in "Sings the Dog Song," one of Pletka's most forceful efforts.

Large, loosely clasped hands help communicate the visionary vocation of a Tlingit "Soul Catcher" wearing a button-decorated blanket and an ornate, inlaid bird headdress.

In "Iron Ghost," a warrior wearing a red military frock coat holds a carved horse stick. His face is divided by black and white paint, slightly encrusted and starting to flake off.

Feathers and beads are highly focused, making a Kalispell chieftain look weirdly apparitional atop his ghostly appaloosa pony in Pletka's "Pend d'Oreille."

Gripping, grotesque elements in these expressionistic but relatively straightforward portraits are taken even further and made more hair-raising in one-, two- and multiple-figure compositions.

In "Pagonotch," a warrior holding a giant round shield, decorated with a line-dot pattern, is shown in a partly mumified state, one arm raised in a stiff gesture of salute to the prehistoric people of the Fremont culture.

An image based on the 1862 Dakota Uprising in Minnesota called "Spirit Lake" offers for a different visual strategy, starkly contrasting the body language of a frozen man with his fancy, beaded, new-looking clothes.

A half-wooden, half-human figure of a bleeding Christ resembling a bulto (carved statue) and three representations of the Angel of Death inhabit a desert wasteland in a three-canvas work called "Las Muertas (The Dead)." One of Pletka's most ambitious, disquieting works, "Las Muertas" is described in a statement as an homage to the Penitente tradition.

More horrific than sentimental is "Bonds of Antiquity," a painting of figures with birds strapped to them, listening to what an even stranger figure, more bird than human, more dead than alive, is trying to tell them.