

SAGE



THE NEW AESTHETIC:  
**Women and  
Public Art**

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# THE NEW AESTHETIC: Women and Public Art

Collaborative, community-focused efforts yield  
a blend of masculine and feminine to the art we all share

**N**orth Valley artist Evelyn Rosenberg's work is large and her process is explosive — literally.

Rosenberg incorporates objects like tree roots, pieces of fabric and even her own body into sculpted molds.

She then places metal sheets onto the molds and brings the piece to explosive experts at the New Mexico Institute of Mining and Technology in Socorro, where they layer plastic explosives onto her work, setting off a blast that creates one finely textured layer of metal.

The explosion creates surprisingly delicate pieces that combine industrial metal with elements of the natural world. In her studio, it is hard not to reach out and touch the textures of the final product.

When she started to compete for public art commissions in the 1990s, Rosenberg was often the only woman who entered competitions. But in 2009 in New Mexico, gender dichotomies have all but disappeared, artists and art administrators say. In the city of Albuquerque and at the state level, public arts managers say equal numbers of men and women apply for and earn commissions for public artwork.

"I think public art is really one of the great places where that equity is there already," says Sherri Brueggemann, manager of Albuquerque's public art program. "It moves us beyond that discussion and into the discussion of art and the public."

Along with an explosion in diverse forms of public art in the

past 30 years came an increase in the number of women and minorities working in public art, says Jack Becker, executive director of the nonprofit Forecast Public Art in Minnesota and publisher of the journal *Public Art Review*.

## Engaging others

The world of public art has shifted dramatically — from art that was plopped down into a location without regard to its community context to an increasingly collaborative model that takes community, location and artistic vision into account.

Becker says he thinks women tend to be more interested in engaging others in the creative process and that means they may be well-suited to the current collaborative nature of public art. Rosenberg, who has created artwork for public places in New Mexico, Minnesota, Washington, D.C., and even for the Serengeti National Park Visitor Center in Tanzania, doesn't believe in censoring her artistic vision. But she does believe in remaining sensitive to how a community will respond when her work ends up in the neighborhood.

When Rosenberg created a carousel honoring San Ysidro in the South Valley in 2002, she asked for suggestions from the community, including high school students, on what would best represent them.

"If I'm putting it in your backyard, then I have to be sensitive to the community, to what the community wants," says Rosenberg. "That's my theory of public art — public art should be



EDDIE MOORE/JOURNAL

**Paula Castillo's sculptures often incorporate tiny pieces of welded steel that harken to detailed women's work like embroidery. Behind her are "Walalata," left, and "I Have Seen Archipelagos in the Stars."**

for the community."

For a project at Expo New Mexico, sculptor Karen Yank asked everyone she met — from a gas station attendant to her daughter's teacher — what they saw as essentially New Mexican.

"Across the board, they love the mountains and the big sky," she says.

Those concepts worked well for Yank, who says much of her own inspiration comes from the New Mexico landscape. A sketch for what will become the Cor-ten and stainless-steel sculpture and concrete base, which now hangs in her studio, incorporates a curving mountain landscape mixed with open spaces that give

the impression of peeking through the mountains toward canyons and sky.

"Instead of making the sculpture look like the mountain, it feels like the mountain," she says.

Even after designing "Rio Grande Colcha," a 20-foot metal piece that climbs the exterior of the New Mexico History Museum in Santa Fe, Cordova artist Paula Castillo continued to collaborate with engineers, contractors and movers to hoist the piece onto the museum's exterior.

While changes in public art may be more conducive to a feminine approach, local artists say gender

**COVER STORY** *By Amanda Schoenberg*



RICHARD PIPES/JOURNAL

Sculptor Karen Yank likes to collect input from everyone – gas station attendants, her daughter's teacher – when she works on a public project. The sculpture pictured here in her studio is "Simple Pleasures," a work in progress.



RICHARD PIPES/JOURNAL

Sculptor Karen Yank sees that women have embraced industrial materials and male artists have connected with a more sensual, rounded aesthetic, which makes public art more invigorating. "Art reflects what's happening in the world," she says. She is pictured here in front of a model of the massive steel sculpture she did at Interstate 40 and Coors.



GREG SORBER/JOURNAL

Artist Evelyn Rosenberg works on a new brass piece called "Women's Armor," which will be in the shape of a kimono. She used explosives and fabric to create the three-dimensional shapes of the metal.

# Women bring collaborative effort to art we all share

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has little to do with their final products.

Rosenberg doesn't like the concept of "women's art" — she points out that there is no such thing as "men's art."

How much does being a woman impact the type of public art produced? Becker says women in public art often work in traditionally male forms, like blacksmithing or iron work.

"The art people do does reflect their gender to some degree," he says. "But artists are not feeling limited in methodology. Gradually these barriers are breaking down."

Brueggemann points out that Rosenberg's explosive technique is not what one imagines of a feminine aesthetic. "She understands the power of that kind of concentrated force and that it can bring out these really beautiful, delicate textures," she says.

The work of Castillo, whose sculptures often incorporate tiny pieces of welded steel, may harken back to detailed women's work like embroidery. But she doesn't necessarily see a feminine perspective in the final product.

Yank, who once worked as Rosenberg's assistant, says the best artists have figured out how to incorporate traditionally male and female approaches. Her own studio in Golden is full of curving scraps of metal amid industrial equipment.

Women have embraced industrial materials just as male public artists, like the late Japanese-American sculptor Isamu Noguchi, connected with a more sensual, rounded aesthetic, Yank says.

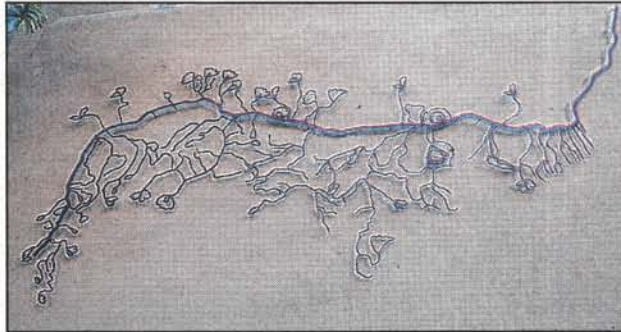
"Certainly some women have changed the way public art has come along but so have some men," she says. "I honestly think we're beyond the gender thing. Art reflects what's happening in the world. I think we're at this point where we're ready to accept a female president, we're OK with stay-at-home dads."

While the number of women in public art is comparable to their male counterparts, Castillo says she sees far fewer Hispanic women competing for public art commissions in New Mexico.



COURTESY PHOTO/JOHN TROTTER PHOTOGRAPHY

**Artist Evelyn Rosenberg creates explosions that imprint designs into metal, working with explosive experts at the Energetic Materials Research and Testing Center at the New Mexico Institute of Mining and Technology in Socorro.**



COURTESY PHOTO

**Paula Castillo's 20-foot "Rio Grande Colcha" crawls up the side of the New Mexico History Museum in Santa Fe.**

And while women may enter and win publicly funded art competitions like male colleagues, Rosenberg says they aren't necessarily getting the same number of commissions from corporate projects.

## Collaborative vision

Even as publicly funded art depends on community input, artists must still negotiate their own vision.

Yank says collaboration doesn't have to mean making concessions. An

artist embarking on a public art piece should never underestimate her audience's ability to understand art, she adds.

"Usually, once you're at that level, whether it's a private or public client, they like your work," she says. "Some of the best interactions are hearing what it is that they respond to about your work. When you talk with the public, they really respond."

Public art is about the possibility of developing relationships, Castillo says.

"That's one of the things I really enjoy about public art, participating with people in different walks of life," she says. "It becomes this collective ability to create something."

Not every public project cultivates those relationships, as Castillo learned from experience. As part of a 2005 federally funded public art project, she was asked to complete a design for a sound barrier wall on Golf Course NW.

But the public never had a chance to weigh in on the design. Community members complained and the design was eventually removed.

Castillo says she learned just how much people want to express their opinions. Even now, just a few years later, she says that kind of lack of public involvement would never happen.

But as they move toward increasingly collaborative

models of public art, artists need to avoid being too polite, Castillo says. Public art should engage with the community but retain its mischievous side, she says.

## Catching their breath

Successful women in public art say they find ways to move back and forth between forms and private and public work.

The intensity of community collaboration also can be exhausting. Twelve years in the making, the publicly funded sculpture memorial to labor leader Cesar Chavez will be installed this month at the intersection of Broadway and Cesar Chavez in Albuquerque.

Yank spent two years on a series of abstract Corten steel sculptures for the Coors and Interstate 40 interchanges. She enjoyed the intensity of the process, but is now working on a lighthearted series she calls "Simple Pleasures" before her next big public project. One shiny steel piece shows two figures leaning into each other; another is of a man happily sinking in a boat.

That kind of shape-shifting is a hallmark of the new generation of public artists, Castillo says.

"We're not so conflicted about that kind of thing," she says. "We can move back and forth between genres. We see opportunities, we make opportunities."