



Paul Weideman | The New Mexican

Abiquiú on his mind



The scene in Richard C. Sandoval's painting *New Mexico Big Sky* is starkly dramatic. The colors — including a yellowish line of sky just above distant blue mountains — are almost psychedelic. But the dominant feature is a huge, jagged, purple-gray cloud that must be a million miles across and has the most outrageously strange shape. It's an example of the crazy, spectacular cloud tableaux that routinely appear in Northern New Mexico and that no one from elsewhere would quite believe in a painting.

"In the old days we used to say it always rains in Tesuque, because it used to," Sandoval said during a recent visit to his home studio off Hyde Park Road in Santa Fe. "I was coming from Nambe one time and there was a shower in Tesuque and there were all these turquoises and golds in the sky and I said, if I were to paint that... But somebody said, no, it's not right." Many observers wouldn't believe that the scene was realistic.

"They wouldn't. They'd say that painter must be an amateur."

Sandoval is not that. He has been painting Northern New Mexico landscapes for most of his life, and he is 70 now. That's a weird cloud in *New Mexico Big Sky*, but he pulls it off. It's one of the many paintings in *Art From the Mountains*, a Sandoval retrospective show opening Friday, Feb. 10, at McLarry Fine Art.

Born and raised in Sandoval, where his family has lived for three centuries, Sandoval prides himself on being "a true New Mexican." Those deep roots are at the foundation of his great love for this place and or the beauty of the landscape: its sunny, piñon-studded hills that are sometimes interrupted by jutting sandstone formations; its rare, meandering rivers; the chamiso shrubs and giant old cottonwood

trees that turn golden in the autumn; and its soaring, jet-black ravens.

Sandoval is known to many, especially in this state, for his long employment at *New Mexico Magazine*. He joined the state publication in 1968 and worked over the next 29 years as art director, associate editor, editor, and special-projects coordinator.

The first step into what would turn out to be a career in art came with tracing animals from a science book. This was during a period in his childhood when he was in bed for much of seven months, recovering from a severe leg injury after being hit by a drunk driver. Sandoval used his evolving art mind to do illustrations for his yearbook at Pojoaque High School. When he entered university, he had engineering in mind, but he ended up graduating from the University of New Mexico in commercial art. He went on to work in graphic design in Albuquerque and in Santa Monica, California, before landing at *New Mexico Magazine*.

Sandoval's creative output includes furniture and carved figures. When he was laid up as a youngster, that tracing pad came from his father — who was also his inspiration in woodcarving. "I've always worked in wood. My father was a craftsman, and I always wanted to emulate him. When my kids were small, I wanted to make the indestructible wooden toy, so that evolved into doing those airplanes." One or two of the hefty pine airships hang from his ceiling.

The artist also has carved-wood ravens, trout, and a roadrunner in the McLarry exhibition. He brought out a carved brook trout, mounted on a piece of wood that he found in an arroyo near the Monastery of

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Richard C. Sandoval paints Northern New Mexico



Richard C. Sandoval: left, *Georgia O'Keeffe Country, Abiquiá, NM*, 2010, triptych, watercolor on canvas, 24 x 18 inch panel
Below, *Winter Chamiso*, 1995, watercolor on paper, 34 x 26 inches

Bottom, *Rio Grande Reflections at Embudo Station*, 2000, watercolor on paper, 23 x 15 inches

Opposite page, *Raven*, 2011, sugar pine





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Christ in the Desert, a Benedictine retreat northwest of Abiquiú. His affection for native New Mexico fish does not mean he's an angler. "I used to be, growing up, but then I thought it was more fun to take a camera," he said about his excursions to the Río Chama, Río Grande, and other local waters. "But being a Pisces, I like to carve them."

Then there are the ravens. Carved versions are all over the place in his house, and flying versions turn up in many of his landscape paintings. "In about 1968, we were living on Washington Avenue near Scottish Rite [the Masonic Scottish Rite Center]. It had snowed and I was walking to work and I found the most beautiful dead bird on the sidewalk. I must have pondered over this gorgeous raven for 20 minutes. I really wanted to take it home, but I didn't know if it had a disease. Then, at *New Mexico Magazine*, my editor would give me books about ravens."

Sandoval is the author of *One of Our Fifty Is Missing* (An Ongoing Saga) and *Explore New Mexico: Insider's Guide: Getaways in the Land of Enchantment*. He illustrated Rudolfo Anaya's *The Farolitos of Christmas: A New Mexico Christmas Story* and Sandra E. Guzzo's *Miguel and the Santero*. He is a past member of the Society of Santa Fe Artists. He was a longtime exhibitor at Spanish Market, and is now a board member and exhibitor in Contemporary Hispanic Market.

This winter Sandoval has been dealing with some medical issues. "I've been trying to get healthy, and mostly I've done been doing waxes for bronzes of birds, which I have cast in Colorado." Some of those small, metal ravens are on a shelf in his home, which is really like a museum full of his paintings, carved and painted trout and ravens, and other objects. He painted one wall next to the winding staircase in dusky colors with pictographs.

During the interview, he began bringing down a few of his many paintings from a lofty upstairs

room. "What's neat about this show is that all my big work is going to be together, in one place." Sandoval pointed to one and said, "This is new. I discovered this: doing watercolor on canvas. It acts a little like watercolor paper, but it becomes more like a glazing process. You have to keep working it and working it, because the paint stays on the surface. I really like it."

Among the subjects of his paintings are Enchanted Mesa near Acoma, the Pedernal near Abiquiú, and brilliant cottonwoods at Embudo. *On the Road to Chimayó* captures a scene with a dominant sandstone feature. "We always called that Teacup Mesa. As little kids we used to play cowboys and Indians there."

One of his "all-time favorite paintings" is titled *Jacoma Afternoon*. It shows a lovely lane with a giant cottonwood tree, mailboxes, and a dog — his dog, Sitka, who passed away. "I think I hit that tree very well," said the artist, who then brought out an even more amazing tree piece: *Ancient Cottonwood, Rancho de las Golondrinas*. He pictured a glorious tangle of dead cottonwood branches, and — if you look closely — a raven, a chicken, and a roadrunner. "It must be 400 years old, no sweat, and it's sad that half that tree is gone now. Rancho de las Golondrinas is one of my favorite places, and I was just back there last summer."

Somewhat of a variation on his landscape theme is *Wood Seller, Santa Fe Plaza*. In this one, Sandoval worked from a historic photograph of the Palace of the Governors (taken before Jesse Nusbaum's 1913 remodel) and a pair of burros in front of a *carreta* full of firewood.

Another standout in the exhibit at McLarry Fine art is a triptych titled *Georgia O'Keeffe Country, Abiquiú, NM*. "For some reason, I was in an Abiquiú mood. I love that place. If I want to relax, I just drive up there, go to the lake, and photograph the hills. This triptych is where Georgia O'Keeffe's house was, basically. I'm totally thrilled with how it came out." ◀

details

- ▼ Richard C. Sandoval: *Art From the Mountains*
- ▼ Opening reception 5 to 7 p.m. Friday, Feb. 10; through Feb. 24
- ▼ McLarry Fine Art, 225 Canyon Road, 988-1161



Brook Trout, 2006, painted sugar pine, 14 inches high
Top, New Mexico Big Sky, 2009, watercolor on paper, 46 x 18 inches